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Reading 'orality' in French-language novels from sub-Saharan Africa

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Il y avait une semaine qu'avait fini dans la capitale Koné Ibrahima, de race malinké, ou disons-le en malinké: il n'avait pas soutenu un petit rhume ...

One week had passed since Ibrahima Kone, of the Malinke race, had met his end in the capital city, or to put it in Malinke: he'd been defeated by a mere cold ...

(Kourouma 1981 [1968], 3)

The question of orality and its place in French-language texts from Africa is aesthetic and cultural, and it is also political. Because fluency in French is correlated generally to wealth and social standing in the countries where it is spoken, because oral traditions and African languages are the means of expression of people who typically exercise little international socio-economic or political power, the representation of these historically devalued forms and languages in Euro-language literatures, be they English or French, has everything to do with the fault lines of power – the international order, class, race and even gender.

A word about African oral traditions

For centuries the oral traditions of Africa, in Amharic, Bambara, Hausa, Lingala, Poular, Swahili, Twi, Wolof, Xhosa, Yoruba, Zulu and hundreds of other indigenous languages, have thrived in the form of proverbs, tales, epics, riddles and poetry – religious, ceremonial, political, occasional, personal. Now more than ever, thanks in part to new critical perspectives on

performance and increasing recognition of the singular importance of African languages in the cultural and political life of the continent, there is a burgeoning scholarship on these varied and complex traditions, both historical and contemporary. In the West African context, for example, Karin Barber (1991) has written an important study of 'oriki', a form of praise poetry among the Yoruba of Nigeria; Stephen Belcher (1999), Bassirou Dieng and Lilyan Kesteloot (1997), and other researchers have over the years explored the contexts and meanings of Bambara, Fulbe, Mande, Songhay-Zarma, Soninke and Wolof epic cycles; Biodun Jeyifo (1984) has written about Yoruba theatre; Karin Barber, Alain Ricard and John Collins (1997) have published an anthology of popular plays performed in the coastal cities of West Africa – Accra, Lomé and Lagos; Lisa McNee (2000) has contrasted the autobiographical discourses of Senegalese women in Wolof and French.

Far from unchanging immemorial traditions handed down word for word from father to son, oral artistic forms are and have always been supple and absolutely contemporaneous. Professional and occasional performers are immersed in the political dynamics and social life of the communities in which they perform. Moreover the oral text is created in the moment of its enunciation and reception, the moment when an audience invests the narrative fabric with meaning. The oral text, writes Senegalese historian Mamadou Diouf, takes shape 'dans le décodage' [in its decoding] (Diouf 1991, 36). For this reason, oral traditions are, above all, of their time.

Traditions of writing existed historically alongside the oral traditions in several contexts. Early literary genres, as in the case of Amharic or Swahili, included hagiography or praise poetry for warriors or rulers. With colonization from the late nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth century, Africans took up the pen to write 'literature' in European languages also.

Intertextualities

What then is the relationship between the new French-language texts from Senegal, Ivory Coast, Cameroon and other 'Francophone' localities and the ancient oral traditions in African languages or contemporary traditions evolved from them? (This chapter focuses on the perception of 'orality' in French-language literature, but it is important to note that there are appropriations and allusions across modes and that oral traditions, print and audio-visual media have reciprocal impacts on one another.) In asking this question, we are not referring to transcriptions and translations of oral epics and stories, such as *Kaïdara*, the bilingual edition of the Fulbe initiation story (Bâ and Kesteloot 1969) or the Fulbe heroic narrative, *Silâmaka et Poullori* (Seydou 1972). Nor will we focus on texts that relate stories of oral tradition: Djibril Tamsir Niane's *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* (1970 [1960]), which narrates the creation of the ancient empire of Mali in the

thirteenth century under Sundiata, as told to Niane by Mamadou Kouyaté; Camara Laye's *Guardian of the Word* (1980 [1978]), a historical novel about Sundiata's birth and triumph; or Birago Diop's *Tales of Amadou Koumba* (1985 [1947]) that names in its title the performer-historian ('gévèl' in Wolof; 'griot' in French) of the Diop family and that narrates stories widely known in West Africa. In this remarkable collection, Diop also constructs stories of his own in an 'oral' mode. It is in fact his skill as a writer – his digressive prologues, his portraiture, his humour and wit – that brings the stories alive and makes Diop a revered writer among Senegalese readers.

Rather, our focus will be on French-language texts that draw inspiration from, adapt or rework performance practices, oral stories or genres. Yambo Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence* (1971 [1968]) is the chronicle of a fictive West African empire and is recounted in a style reminiscent of the griot; Hampâté Bâ's novel *L'Étrange destin de Wangrin* (1973) elevates to epic grandeur his protagonist, an interpreter in the service of the French colonial administration in West Africa; Jean-Marie Adiaffi's *La Carte d'identité* (1980) reworks the initiation story in a neocolonial context to denounce cultural alienation; Aminata Sow Fall's *Le Jujubier du patriarce* (1993b) reveals the centrality of history and oral traditions in contemporary identities; Boubacar Boris Diop's *Le Cavalier et son ombre* (1997) is a meta-fiction on the nature of oral storytelling and the novel. It is these types of intertextual relationship, which blur or marry genres, that have been of greatest interest to readers and critics, because form is ultimately the most powerful vehicle of ideas.

Let us draw a distinction at this point between what writers do and the assessments that we – readers, teachers and scholars – make of what they do. This chapter is primarily about the latter, the interpretation of 'orality' in French-language texts specifically and Euro-language texts more broadly. What we will examine, then, is the critical discourse on the 'traces' of oral traditions and national languages in the novel which, for reasons that shall become apparent, is the genre at the heart of a debate around oral traditions and Euro-language writing. What I shall outline are the problems associated with two interpretations of indigenous resources in Euro-language novels. Each amounts to an investment in the notion of an essential African difference. Before addressing these issues, we should consider a brief history of the novel in its relationship to the colonized world.

A theory of the novel

Standard literary historiography holds that the novel arose in modern Europe, especially eighteenth-century England, as the literary complement to the rise of the middle class, Protestantism and an ethos of individualism. Not coincidentally, according to Edward Said (1993), the novel appears at

the moment of colonial expansion. Many of the early British and European novels – *Manon Lescaut* (1731), *Atala* (1801), *Wuthering Heights* (1847), *Jane Eyre* (1847) – have ties to the colonies. The colonial space is more literary convention in this early period than reality, a place to which personalities troublesome to the social order may be sent off and from which they return, often having made their fortunes.

Later novels and travel writing such as Pierre Loti's *Le Roman d'un spahi* (1881), Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), André Gide's *L'Immoraliste* (1902) and *Voyage au Tchad* (1928), E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932), Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* (1948) – all written at a time when Europeans had actually travelled to or lived in North and sub-Saharan Africa, Indochina and India – are more concrete than their predecessors in their depictions of local topographies and populations, and of expatriate life in the empire.

But contact with Arabs, Asians and Africans in the empire or colonies did not mean, of course, that writers necessarily left their ideological lenses at home. The European novel, as perhaps the most powerful and far-reaching literary form over the last one hundred and fifty years, was central to the creation of ambivalent representations of Africa as the primitive 'other' of European modernity – both as welcome supplement to European culture, an antidote to an aging bourgeois civilization, and as the measure of how far Europe, thankfully, had come. Standard literary history and theory hold that from its place of origin in Europe, the 'centre' of what is often called 'the world system', the novel travels to the colonial empires themselves, the 'periphery', where it becomes the primary means through which imperial and colonial subjects 'write back' to the centre to counter these misrepresentations.

There may be more illuminating ways to think about the novel's origins and global presence (Julien 2003). But what is important to note at this point is that there was a degree of compulsion in novel writing from the 1940s to the 1960s, the heyday of decolonization. Not only did the first African novelists take up the challenge to demonstrate, as Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe declared, that African life was not one long saga of barbarism before the coming of Europe, but, as Deidre Lynch and William Warner claim, 'the new nations emerging out of empires [were] required to produce novels in order to certify their distinct and modern nationhood' (1996, 5). The novel was seen and is still seen as the quintessential literary genre of modernity. Like the nation state, development, democracy, the multi-party system, free speech, technology – all those institutions and forms associated with Western modernity, which most of us (Western, African or other) have come to view as the only modernity – the novel would have to be emulated in newly independent African, Asian and American nations. Thus the novel became one of several yardsticks that could attest to African modernity.

In fact, the genre arguably has been the most important vehicle for African self-representation beyond the continent and probably across the continent as well. Simon Gikandi argues that Chinua Achebe was the first to realize the 'archaeological' and 'utopic' possibilities of the novel. A writer can exploit the novel's capacity, on the one hand, to excavate African pasts hidden or invented by what V.Y. Mudimbe and others have called the 'colonial archive' – that is, the novels, travel writing, and reports by colonial administrators or by European tourists to which I referred above – and, on the other, to imagine new communities.

The novel is thus a sign of the universal modern, and, in the African context, the typical story it has told or been asked to tell is the supposed struggle between 'tradition' and 'modernity'. Similarly, there has arisen an aesthetic interest in those features of local indigenous artistic traditions that would give 'specificity' to such novels. For, if the novel – so this argument goes – is unlike poetry and drama, has no indigenous precedent, and is therefore a European form, arising in and belonging to a specific socio-historical context, propagating values of individualism, often advancing aesthetic or formalistic pleasures for their own sake, then how can it be appropriated by an African writer and be authentically African?

As I indicated above, there may be better ways to think about the novel's origins and presence in the world. But in the context of decolonizing nationalism, it is precisely an anxiety on the part of Western and African critics and scholars to demonstrate the authenticity of Euro-language African writing, novels in particular, that has generated a critical preoccupation with 'African orality' and its impact on and representation in texts.

There are in fact two critical discourses making claims from very different locations for the centrality of oral traditions and what are called local or national languages in Euro-language texts. The first is an essentialist – some would say 'nativist' – stance that oral traditions and indigenous languages are the quintessential signs of African identity, and therefore render authentic supposedly alien modern forms, such as the novel. The second emanates from postcolonial theory itself: it is the writer's marginality vis-à-vis the colonial language that is his or her source of creativity. It is thus in subverting that language through the use of orality and mother tongues that the writer effects the defiant postcolonial gesture. Ironically, both stances amount to an investment in the notion of an essential African difference.

Orality as black difference: between mimesis and authenticity

The question of orality and African languages has been central to the study of Euro-language African literatures, from Emmanuel Obiechina (1975) and Mohamadou Kane (1982) to Abiola Irele (2001). Orality in its many

guises (pidgins, African languages, proverbs, tales within novels) has been seen, first, as an inherent and essential 'black difference' which would surface necessarily in Euro-language writing from Africa.

In the 1970s, Mohamadou Kane wrote: 'l'originalité du roman africain doit être cherchée plus particulièrement dans ses rapports avec les formes de la littérature orale' [the originality of the African novel must be found more specifically in its relationship to forms of oral literature] (1974, 537). He expanded on these views in his later work, *Roman africain et tradition* (1982). Alioune Tine similarly asserts that 'la littérature africaine se définit comme une littérature située entre l'oralité et l'écriture. Cette idée a permis la réalisation d'un vaste consensus qui va des critiques africanistes aux écrivains' [African literature can be defined as a literature situated between orality and writing. This idea has given rise to a vast consensus that includes both Africanist critics and authors] (1985, 99).

Emmanuel Obiechina, a scholar of primarily Anglophone West African literature, makes a concise argument for this view, claiming that the African novel is particularly affected by indigenous orality for two reasons. Firstly, it is because the novel is mimetic (or realist) that it is or must be characterized by orality:

it is impossible to ignore orality in a form that prides itself on a life-like portrayal of reality when exploring the life and experience of people more than seventy per cent of whom at any given moment live within traditional oral societies throughout the varied contexts of pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial history. (1993, 124)

It is true that most novels by Africans in the 1950s, '60s and '70s – Obiechina is referring, of course, to autochthonous Africans and their descendants, not, for example, to South Africans of Afrikaner descent – were mimetic in their intent. And, to the extent that they were, it would be hard to quarrel with his assessment. It seemed self-evident therefore to scholars, critics and perhaps many writers that realism was a natural mode for African writers. The dominance of the realist mode is not unrelated to the largely ethnographic readings that have been the lot of African novels ever since.

Secondly, Obiechina argues that writers strive to write 'authentic' works of literature: 'a return to the roots movement in African literature as a means of giving maximum authenticity to the writing made the writers look to their indigenous poetics to create works that will endure by drawing upon their living oral tradition to enrich forms, techniques, and styles received through literate education' (1993, 124). The 'story within a story' is a particularly common practice in 'the African novel', and Obiechina refers to it as a 'narrative proverb', since the 'African novel is not a sole product of an individual consciousness (even though the novelist is a conscious individual artist), but is mediated by communal consciousness

and impulses arising from group sensibility' (125). The 'narrative proverb', like proverbs in oral communities, draws 'upon group habits of speech and narration as a means of giving shape to experience, drawing upon what could be called the populist impulse in art and life' (125). There are assumptions in Obiechina's claims to which we shall return.

Orality, postcolonial marginality and resistance

While Kane, Obiechina, and others see orality as a defining characteristic of African culture and therefore the quintessential sign of Africanity in Euro-language literatures, postcolonial theory per se has focused largely on the ways in which writers from the formerly colonized zones have sought through their writing to undermine the ideological underpinnings of the former colonial powers. In *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin write that postcolonial literatures have foregrounded 'the tension with the imperial power and [emphasized] their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre' (1989, 2).

Thus to the extent that written English and French have been associated with 'civilizing missions' and 'manifest destinies', based on notions of civilization, progress, rationality, masculinity, individualism, Euro-language writing inflected with oral traditions and indigenous languages has been read as expressive of different sensibilities – populism, communalism – and therefore as a deliberate strategy of resistance vis-à-vis the premises of European or Eurocentric culture and writing.

The trouble with difference and marginality

The problems with these particular readings of oral traces in novels are many. But let it be clear that the critique I outline does not constitute an argument against heteroglossic African novels. On the contrary, such novels constitute one of the most important and exciting dimensions of contemporary writing. I would argue, however, that a text's language is a matter of sensibility and instinct, based on feelings of identity and comfort, rather than a matter of obligation, principle or deliberate choice. 'Francophone Africa' is a set of heterogeneous spaces, shaped by interethnic tensions and global flows, making use of multiple languages (African as well as European) and registers (for an exploration of similar ideas, see Murphy, Chapter 20). Stories within stories, the use of proverbs, variously cadenced and metaphoric language do not constitute a refuge or bulwark within and against a supposedly universal or transcendent cultural form but suggest complexity, dynamism, energy, and creativity. This is what I read in Kourouma's *The Suns of Independence* (1981): a language that effects not two separate cultural spheres or layers, but a world in which French and, in

this instance, Malinke are always positioned vis-à-vis each other. Each always recalls the other since both languages inhabit the same space, even when only one is voiced (or written).

Thus I take issue with the well-known assertion of Frantz Fanon, whereby 'to speak [...] this or that language means above all to assume a culture, [...] to support the weight of a civilization' (1986 [1952], 17–18). Even though it points to power relations embedded in language that we must recognize, this claim ultimately obscures other equally significant aspects of language. Toril Moi reminds us: 'though it is true to say that the dominant power group at any given time will dominate the intertextual production of meaning, this is not to suggest that the opposition has been reduced to total silence. The power struggle *intersects* in the sign' (1994, 158; emphasis in original). We may in fact interpret an Igbo turn of phrase popularized for the non-Igbo by Achebe, 'where one thing stands, another stands beside it', to mean the same thing.

Orality: an imprecise concept

I see several risks in readings of orality as authentic and as subversive. Firstly, as I have argued elsewhere (Julien 1992), the concept of orality is a nebulous, homogenizing notion that has little to do with – in Mamadou Diouf's terms – the enunciation and reception of distinct oral performances. In many critical studies, orality is defined ahistorically and essentially – that is simply as the opposite of writing and the novel. It is sometimes viewed as the source of a novel's strength (Scheub 1985, 56–7) and sometimes as its weakness, as in Kane's remarks on Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy* (Kane 1982, 205–18; Oyono 1966 [1956]). What begins as an explanation in Kane's early work becomes in his later *Roman africain et tradition* an accusation of deficiency (Julien 1992, 35–9). In other instances, oral traditions may be read as an index of a narrative's (or culture's) 'childlikeness' or immaturity – as in the case of Amos Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard* (1952) – or of cultural wholesomeness – Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Given the slipperiness of the concept of orality, criticism's role has often been to identify a Euro-language text's authenticating traces – proverbs, embedded stories, phrases in indigenous languages – naming and cataloguing these elements as though they were ends in themselves or making superficial comparisons that lead to blame or praise.

'African exceptionalism'?

A second problem with the readings of ahistorical 'oral' traces as authentic is that orality becomes a metonymy for 'African'. The binary opposition between 'oral' and 'written' fails to tell the whole truth, which is that

alongside the extraordinary power and presence of spoken words in Africa we find powerful written ones as well. Thus, despite its very own investment in binarism, what can we make of Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* (1972 [1961]), if we succumb to the hunt for authenticating orality? What of Mudimbe's novels, or those of Mariama Bâ? The search for the element that confers African authenticity becomes prescriptive and limiting for African novelists who do not allude to oral traditions or do not reproduce the cadences of indigenous languages. Their novels are not therefore less African.

The view of African language-inflected French, as in *The Suns of Independence*, as a natural and necessary African literary practice is one manifestation of a habit of thought that is sometimes referred to as 'African exceptionalism', a broad and problematic tendency to see Africa as profoundly different from the rest of the world, whereas Quebecois, Breton or Provençal novelists have also experimented with standard French. Neither is writing out of a communal ethos and sensibility unique to African writers; nor is it necessarily the primary impulse of all African writing – see Ahmad's critique (1987) of Jameson's ideas (1986) on this issue. Thus, as Alexie Tcheuyap writes with respect to the Antilles, 'not only is writing without "traces" of one's language *not* a sin [...] neither is it a fatality or a new essentialism to be tracked down absolutely in every literary text' (2001, 57; emphasis in original). Senegalese philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne argues similarly that Africanness may be less a matter of specific things or practices than 'a way of approaching' the world (Diagne 2001).

The recourse to mimesis (or realism) in the majority of African novels has also sustained the ethnographic bias that has guided their reception over time. Of course, African writers of the 1950s and 1960s in particular felt compelled to present African perspectives in response to the representations or misrepresentations, as it were, of African life that were rife in European novels, travel writing, colonialist social science and administrative reports. But their texts are quite precisely perspectives, which emanate from writers' particular experiences and identities. That these writings are positioned and are inquiries (i.e. epistemological statements) tends to be ignored, for many readers in America, at least, read with the expectation that these mostly mimetic narratives by Africans will reveal the 'real' Africa.

Thus one reviewer of *African Novels in the Classroom* (2000), a guide by twenty-four college teachers, all except three of whom are historians and anthropologists, praises the book overall but regrets that 'only two of its essays pay any significant attention to the literariness' of the novels, which therefore have been reduced to 'purely sociological or historical document[s]' (Ogede 2001, 224). Thus the use of novels in social science contexts may be a good thing, may help professors of history, anthropology and other social sciences think beyond narrow theories, provided that the situated, textual nature of novels is not forgotten. In any case, with new generations of novelists, such as Boubacar Boris Diop, Werewere Liking,

Tierno Monénembo, V.Y. Mudimbe and Véronique Tadjo, the longstanding view of mimesis (or realism) as the natural mode of African novels is increasingly challenged.

Ornamentation

Thirdly, the notion of a vast reservoir of indigenous resources available to, if not destined for, the Euro-language writer who will put them to use in modern Euro-language literature is reminiscent of evolutionist paradigms of the nineteenth century that viewed African cultural practices as an initial phase in a process of maturation that would lead to the emergence of true 'Culture'. When readers and critics refer to 'the passage from orality to writing', often enough we find lurking in the background the assumption that traditional oral forms will be superseded and transformed into supposedly modern forms, such as the Euro-language novel. Oral traditions become simple 'ornaments' of the apparently imported Western form. Thus the Kenyan writer, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, who for many years has championed the development of African-language literatures, parodies Léopold Sédar Senghor's poem, 'New York' – from the 1948 collection, *Hosties noires* (Senghor 1990, 115–17) – and complains of the 'lengths to which we were prepared to go in our mission of enriching foreign languages by injecting Senghorian "black blood" into their [Western] rusty joints' (Ngugi 1981, 7). Likewise, Senegalese novelist Boubacar Boris Diop in a recent interview states with regard to the Malinke-inflected French of *The Suns of Independence*:

Aesthetically, it's very interesting, but politically it's very dangerous. [...] It seems to me that African languages are dying into French, enriching it. [...] And I think the French love it. It saves the French language from grayness and monotony. (Sugnet 2001, 158)

There is a conservatism in these remarks that I do not share, but I cite them to indicate that what I have dubbed the ornamentation of the novel with oral forms or African languages or the prescriptive call for such practice can be read as *non*-subversive. Most importantly, it is contexts that matter: Stephanie Newell notes, for example, that South Africans writing for *Drum* magazine in the 1950s 'selected English as their medium as a gesture of defiance against the language and educational policies of the Afrikaner state' (2002, 2). Moreover, the spotlight we have placed on this particular practice risks obscuring several important facts. Firstly, not all texts, Euro- or African-language, arise from the writer's supposed sense of marginality vis-à-vis the 'centre'. Secondly, oral traditions (despite Diop's fears) have their own trajectories as contemporary vehicles of creativity, entertainment, inquiry, dialogue and debate (Ahmad 1987; Barber 1995).

Finally, the view of the happy marriage of local lore and European form reinforces a certain Eurocentric view of the world in which all things modern come from the outside (the so-called centre of the world system located in Western metropolises). What is left to the formerly colonized periphery, then, is imitation and local colour. This critical stance on the aesthetics of African novels seems to me to parallel a political view in which modern institutions and forms – democracy, good government – seen as arising in the West must be imported, while local customs are retained to ornament them and provide cultural continuity. Writing of India, Radakrishnan makes an argument that would apply to African states as well:

Western nationalisms are deemed capable of generating their own models of autonomy from within, whereas Eastern nationalisms have to assimilate something alien to their own cultures before they can become modern nations. [...] [I]n particular 'Third World' nationalisms are forced to choose between 'being themselves' and 'becoming modern nations' as though the universal standards of reason and progress were natural and intrinsic to the West [...]. [T]his divide perpetuates the ideology of a dominant common world where the West leads naturally and the East follows in an eternal game of catch-up where its identity is always in dissonance with itself. (1992, 86)

I have been signalling patterns of essentialist or postcolonial readings of orality in African novels and their implications: the first ties the novel to mimetic, nationalist and ethnographic agendas; the second foregrounds language difference and estrangement from the centre as the writer's source of originality. Both readings hold the novel hostage to the demands or expectations of a hegemonic readership, and serve to confine writers. Moreover, a 'return' to oral traditions of proverbs, tales and epics in the novel as the mainstay of a counter-poetics, affirming an original, authentic identity within supposedly universal forms belies the complex, inventive, and – yes – playful appropriations of life on the ground. The 'French-language' text punctuated with proverbs and tales and refashioned by the cadences of oral speech, creoles and national languages may be read more profitably, in my view, as the inscription of a dynamic reality addressed equally and fully to a range of readers who, with our varying language competencies and differences in power, inhabit one world.