

# **African Oral Literature and Education. Interactions and Intersections**

Edited by Daniela Merolla  
*Leiden University, the Netherlands*

## INTRODUCTION

The studies of oral literature are countless, and the educational function of storytelling is certainly one of recurring topics.<sup>1</sup> However, there continue to be opportunities for researching and reflecting on the “education” created and transmitted by oral genres. The authors of this issue of the *Nordic Journal of African Studies* have accepted the challenge to write about teaching/learning processes through oral literatures in African communities. The articles presented in this volume are a selection that were submitted to a double peer review of the papers presented at the ISOLA Conference (International Society for the Oral Literatures of Africa) that was held in Abidjan in 2014.<sup>2</sup>

Defining “education” in oral contexts and practices is challenging. Several authors in this collection remark that the demarcation between education and other domains of society is ambiguous. Such a remark is well in accordance with broader approaches to oral literature. Since the last century, folklore and literary studies as well as the history of religions, anthropology, sociology, and linguistics have focused on orality for a broad array of reasons and aims. These disciplines attempted to “compartmentalize” the holistic character of oral performances but, conversely, a multidisciplinary approach is meaningful because oral genres pertain to the diverse but interacting domains of entertainment, art, religion, politics, and economy, among others. Furthermore, defining “education” in oral contexts raises issues of paradigmatic models and ethnocentrism when, directly or indirectly, the comparison is made with European practices and intellectual discussions of “education” which have affected school and academic systems nowadays diffused at national level everywhere in Africa. One of the critical points is whether such a form of comparison leads to the enforcement of the value judgement deriving from the

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<sup>1</sup> Asimeng-Boahene and Baffoe 2014, Bauman and Sherzer 1974, Belanus 1985, Bowman 2006, Cohen 1969, Dundes 2005, Finnegan 2007, Okpewho 1992, Sutton - Smith 1992. See also bibliographies in Coulet Western 1975, Foley 1985, Görög-Karady 1981, Hansen 2006, Jason and Segal 1977, MacDowell 1987, Mieder 1982, Sebeok 1955, Tonkin 1992, Vansina 1961, Zumthor 1983.

<sup>2</sup> The convenor was Leon Kofi (University of Cocody – Abidjan, Ivory Coast) assisted by ISOLA Organizing Committee: Chiji Akoma, Antoinette Tidjani Alou, Rose Opondo, Bob Cancel and Jean Derive. See <http://www.africaisola.org/archives/>. I would like to thank Chiji Akoma for his comments on this introduction.

school/academic systems or to a more relativistic (and relativizing) understanding of the functioning of teaching/learning in oral contexts.<sup>3</sup> All the authors in this collection grapple with such issues and with the complex processes of imposition, appropriation and adaptation of European educational models.

Belonging to multiple domains, oral genres construct and express knowledge that is transmitted within communities through both “diffuse” and “professional” learning and teaching practices. “Diffuse” education occurs through “immersion” during the daily practice of children - and adults as well - who observe, listen to and imitate peers and elders. As indicated in the case of the Gbaya of Central Africa by Paulette Roulon-Doko, “knowledge transfer does not go through a specialized discourse addressed to the apprentice, but it is primarily based on the observation that he/she can do”. The long-term training provided by griot masters to apprentices as described by Toulou (2008) can be considered as an example of “professional” learning processes. The difference, however, remains minimal as professional training also builds on immersion which includes learning by listening to proverbs, poems, and storytelling that often enforce socially accepted behaviours. However, education through oral literature is not only training or “dressage” - as expressed quite well by Jean Derive in this collection - but it embraces the cumulative acquisition of models (enculturation) and forms of knowledge that individuals are able to reproduce and implement as well as adapt and contest in daily changing situations.

The articles in the first part of this volume address forms of education by immersion - highly localized in language, practices, and knowledge - and translate them into an accessible academic discourse through analysis and interpretation.

In the opening article, Cécile Leguy together with Alexis Dembele, Joseph Tanden Diarra, and Pierre Dia address the question of “who is educating whom” in the parent-child relationships narrated in a corpus of Bwa Folktales from Mali. The selected stories, which were broadcasted on radio and sold on audio cassettes, continue to belong to a classical repertoire, according to the authors, because the folktales were recorded in everyday village settings with storytellers addressing “their usual audiences”. The stories suggest that both obedient and disobedient children must endure unreasonable parents’ commands which lead to the children’s extreme behaviours no matter if the solutions to the initial dilemma are positive or negative for the children and for their community. Such an analysis shows that the adult role in education is restrained by selfishness and equalled by child self-education.

“The Pedagogic Structure of Igbo Folktale: Lejja Tortoise Tales as a Case Study” by Uchechukwu Evelyn Madu similarly emphasizes the interaction of contrasting perspectives, however this case occurs within a specific genre and is applied to one character, the (male) trickster Tortoise. The moral lesson is taught

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<sup>3</sup> See for example competing approaches to relativism and interculturality in respectively Moore 2007, Reagan 2005 and Aguado Odina and del Olmo 2010.

by opposing wisdom and folly, which may both be impersonated by Tortoise. Madu's interpretation demonstrates that extreme wisdom is positively valued only when functioning to solve social dilemmas; it is sanctioned when applied for responding to "selfish" problems and needs, the latter indicating the strictly individual gains obtained by Tortoise when he believes he is powerful and invincible because of his wisdom. The texts of the stories, contextualized at the beginning of the article, are presented in translation in an appendix.

Education through proverbs is approached in "Poétique du langage initiatique dans la littérature orale : encodage et décodage de la parole sage" by Afankóé Yannick Olivier Bédjo who investigates the educational function of proverbs through the linguistic, literary, and social mechanisms that transform everyday language "in an indirect, initiatic, and symbolic discourse". Bédjo's article tackles such mechanisms by discussing the theories of Jean Cauvin and Bernard Zadi Zaourou. He implements their approaches for analyzing proverbs that passed from the oral to the written form in the texts of poets and novelists such as Hampâté Bâ (Mali), Anicet Kashamura Chambu (Congo Kinshasa), Jean-Mari Adiaffi, and Lord Afankoe (Ivory Coast) who experienced cultural "immersion" as well as "formal schooling".

Jean Derive's article, "La littérature orale traditionnelle, un instrument d'éducation? L'exemple des Dioula de Kong (un groupe manding de Côte-d'Ivoire)", introduces the perspective that education, in Dioula terms, results in a lifelong learning process, a "parcours de sagesse". This process is constructed upon the integration and interaction of diverse genres, i.e. those that can be labelled as "ludic" and are usually performed by and addressed to young people, with the more "serious" genres belonging to the repertoire of mature people. Through the former genres, which are presented as "fàniya kúma" (lies), a contravention of norms creates a catharsis for antisocial and individual desires, while social and moral norms inform the latter genres which are performed in ritualized contexts and are referred to as "kúmaba" (discourse of importance).

The authors included in the second and third parts of the volume explore African oral literature from another angle: the modifications, adaptations, and changes occurring when diverse agents (national and international institutions and NGO's) enforce "formal" school education and transcultural practices and values upon local "diffuse" forms of education.

The second section responds to the following thematic issue that was raised by the convenors of the ISOLA conference: the recourse to oral literature in the practices of diversified actors ranging from oral genres and rituals in NGO health education campaigns to the use of songs and folktales in street and radio advertisements that create forms of "consuming education" by promoting goods as "solutions" to contemporary desires and dilemmas. The second part indeed opens with the fight against HIV-AIDS in Anne-Marie Dauphin-Tinturier's article "Learning to say 'no' in new Chisungu initiation rituals". Dauphin-Tinturier shows that elements of women's initiation rituals are reactivated in the Copperbelt region of Northern Zambia within the framework created by

UNICEF projects for HIV prevention and in the practices of a small number of mistresses of initiation who were active in the township of Kwacha (Kitwe, Copperbelt) in 1998. The study of songs composed in relation to the UNICEF project and the evolution of the ritual conceived by the initiation mistresses reveal the fluid agglomeration of conventional and innovative symbols and rites but also that “the significance of the ritual has been entirely reshaped”. The reference to the extended family, for example, vanishes and is replaced by the integration of girls into a group of women in which hierarchy is established on assistance (rather than supremacy) and the goal of sex education is now to teach girls to be “responsible” and “to say no” to (usually men’s) irresponsible behaviours that contribute to the spread of HIV-AIDS.

Oluwatoyin Olaiya and Adekemi Taiwo addresses the issue of consumerist education in “Electronic Use of Yorùbá Oral Genres in Advertisement and Publicity”. They collected advertisements broadcasted by three Nigerian radio stations. The analysis indicates the utilization of literary forms derived from Yoruba classical repertoires (“apala” songs, “ewi” chants, jingle, proverbs, aphorism and folktales) and that aesthetic language and vocal techniques strengthen the ads’ messages. The topics reflect upon largely diffused preoccupations (unpaid pensions by the government, health issues, malpractice at schools) to finally offer their social “solution”, for example, introducing products such as private pension plans and new drugs or, in the specific case of the Oyo Ministry of Education’s social advertising, appealing to the moral sense of both teachers and parents against malpractices.

The role of jingling in the advertisement strategies of one specific seller is investigated in “Symbiosis between music and business management control: promotional music and good education in Mrs. Oborakpororo Itedjere’s ‘Cooking made easy’. A small scale business”. Hwerien Rosemary Idamoyibo and Ovaborhene Idamoyibo analyse the jingles that are exploited to promote the concept of “Cooking made easy” developed by Mrs. Itedjere (Delta State, Nigeria) and contextualize it by examining her managerial choices to communicate the idea that her products are already processed which subsequently makes cooking easy. The article indicates that Mrs. Itedjere, having studied music at university, reaches her customers by playing piano and singing her jingles set to Christian tunes.

In the third and final section, we include articles that investigate the revitalization and activation of oral literature in the teaching materials of educational, religious, and academic institutions which also includes forms of what Russell Kaschula terms “technauriture” (or a new form of verbal art developed in a technological and literate configuration including orality) and the reflection on the documentation, display, and educational role of oral literatures in the museum.

The first article, “Quel rôle peut jouer le conte traditionnel dans l’éducation moderne ? Une réflexion à partir de la situation des Gbaya d’Afrique centrale”, addresses “oral” education by immersion as well as the requirements necessary

to employ folktales at school whether using French or a local language. Paulette Roulon-Doko demonstrates that the tales narrated in a village context provide form to the imaginative world of the Gbaya while addressing daily life issues. According to her interpretation, these tales contribute to the creation of “collective memory”. In the formal context of school education, the tales can be used to stimulate such memories. Roulon-Doko suggests that one of the means to achieve this is to use tales collected in the field; this would allow school programs to avoid focusing on the “universal” moral values that tales receive when reworked by writers and poets and make room for the social meaning of - linguistically and locally specific - practices and values that “modernity tends to make disappear”.

Elara Bertho analyses the representations of Sarraounia - the anticolonial heroine of many oral narratives in Niger - in schoolbooks, in a ballet, and on electronic media. In “Nouvelles figures de Sarraounia à l’école et dans les médias : notes sur les usages de la littérature orale à l’ère de la reproductibilité numérique”, Bertho shows that Sarraounia travels “back and forth” among all types of media – oral, written, visual, and electronic - and that, in all of her “voyages”, she is subject to significant modifications. In textbooks as well as in the ballet that was ordered by the Niger Ministry of Culture and Communication, Sarraounia becomes institutionalized and representative of an official “national” unifying narrative. On the other hand, the oppositional nature of her figure (that is derived from both oral and written sources) can be revitalized as well as minimized on the Internet. In the latter case, a marked conservative discourse is assumed that refuses Sarraounia’s interpretation in terms of subversion of women’s sexual autonomy and new forms of land sharing.

“Indigenous Music in a New Roles” presents the study of Atinuke Adenike Idamoyibo on the adaptations and modifications of Yoruba *Èsà* music in the new context of Christian worship. Among the modifications, we find the declaration of the main singer’s conversion to the Christian God and the mixing of drumming bands, previously only active in separate settings. The article points to continuity as well, as elements of the ritual worship in honour of Sango, the Yoruba God of Thunder, are adapted during Christian Pentecostal rituals. In particular, the explicit assertion of the singer’s conversion to the Christian religion at the end of the ritual songs (“Signature”) ensures change and continuity at the same time: the chanting skill acquired during the long process of oral-aural learning are activated to sustain the *èsà* music in the context of the Christian performance. Another musical aspect of continuity is given by the band’s re-use of rhythmic genres with limited melodic function during their performance. The article concludes by stating that “Christian *èsà* has become a new register of Yoruba music”.

How technology contributes to education from the benefit of new forms of orality is analyzed by Russell Kaschula in “Technauriture as an educational tool in South Africa”. Kaschula first discusses the new concept of technauriture as “a

theoretical paradigm for the interface between oral performances” at the intersection of technology, aural and literature. He then explores the context of the reuse of orality in a number of educational instances such as the International Library of African Music (ILAM) in Grahamstown (South Africa) and the 2014 draft guidelines issued by the South African Department of Basic Education. Finally, Kaschula proceeds to present the ways in which four Xhosa storytellers create technauriture, adapting their role of *imbongi* (poets) to contemporary political, economic and educational aims participating in “pedagogic strategies within educational settings”.

The concluding article introduces us to documentation and activation for educational purposes of oral literature in an exhibition which usually focuses on material cultural products.<sup>4</sup> In “Exhibiting intangible heritage in a museum: the *Voices of Africa* experience” Sandra Bornand and Cécile Leguy narrate the design and the realization as well as the challenges and the reflections correlated with the exhibition of oral genres at the Musée d’Ethnographie of Bordeaux (France). The primary issue concerned the display and activation for visitors of what is visually “intangible”: voices greeting, singing, narrating stories, reciting proverbs and poems, and answering interview questions. The curators created a fascinating tour by combining voices recorded in audio format and their contexts such as rituals and everyday encounters that were captured by photos and videos. Explicative texts and labels allowed visitors to discover social, cultural, and political aspects of African languages and oral genres. The curators also decided to conclude the visiting tour with a “dialogue room” in order to inspire visitors to reflect on the possibility to learn “from concepts and understanding of language that have already demonstrated their effectiveness in the African societies from which they originate”.

With the myriad of examples and offered approaches, this volume allows readers to appreciate the wide range of educational purposes of oral literatures and the pivotal role that contextualization plays when investigating and understanding “education” across the multiple domains that give shape and are molded by oral performances.

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<sup>4</sup> On the role of conservation (museum as “repository”) and education in museums, see Hooper-Greenhill 2007 and Keene 2011.

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**About the author:** Daniela MEROLLA is Professor in Berber Literature and Arts at the INALCO, Sorbonne Paris Cité. She is associated at the Leiden University Institute for the Arts in Society (LUCAS), The Netherlands. Email: daniela.merolla@inalco.fr