Transitions, transformations, and translocations of African oral literature in the 21st century

Tobias Otieno Odongo

Introduction

The articles in this issue were initially presented as conference papers during the thirteenth conference of the International Society for the Oral Literatures in Africa (ISOLA) held in Nairobi, Kenya, from the 8 to 10 July 2021, under the general theme: "Transitions, transformations, and translocations in African oral traditions and (re) imagined boundaries". The conference was further divided into ten sub-themes that ranged from "Translocations and melting boundaries of African oral literatures" to "Contemporary fieldwork and research methodologies in African oral traditions". The two keynote addresses were those of Domitiene Nizigiyimana of the University of Burundi and Tom Michael Mboya of Moi University, presenting in French and English respectively—the two official languages of ISOLA.

Certain conference participants elected to submit the complete articles on which their conference presentations were based to *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde*, after which they underwent a process of anonymous peer review managed by me as the guest editor. Only articles who were unanimously accepted for publication by the reviewers are published in this, the first *Mbuyu* issue of *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde.*

Nizigiyamana's keynote highlighted the overarching theme of the conference, immersing the audience in a perspective that sharply contrasted with the typically addressed topics, whether they be stylistic, thematic, or formal in nature. He went on to elaborate on this perspective during his speech in the following manner:

> It encounters a field of study that specialists have now identified as likely susceptible of revealing on the cultural, linguistic, and artistic levels, similarities, points of convergence, divergence, marks of identity, and belonging on a continental scale and beyond. By basing our reflection on certain examples of these traditions which go beyond borders, and more particularly on African oral literatures, our contribution will examine in turn the links between African speech, oral traditions and African literatures, the historic and linguistic dimension of the considered issue, oral tradition in a migratory context, and African oral traditions as a source of inspiration and creation for writers and artists in their diversity. Finally, given that African oral traditions bear witness to a circulation of ideas, uses multiple and varied exchanges between African peoples, and that these same traditions have been subject to intra and intercultural variability resulting from adaptations, their analysis requires a comparative approach taking into account several disciplines.

Having set the tone and outlined the tasks for participants in this conference, the address was complemented by the second keynote, Mboya, who delivered enlightening address. Mboya's speech titled "'*Ukinidiliti mwezako ananidownlodi*': African oral literature and everyday life in the information age", was imbued with the wisdom of Heraclitus, who famously proclaimed, "Everything flows and nothing stays," as he suggested that the practices that we collectively categorise as "oral literature" should be viewed as integral components of our daily existence. This is defined by Rita Felski as a process of becoming acclimatized to assumptions, behaviours, and practices which come to seem self-evident and taken for granted. Through this being 'taken for granted', Mboya makes a convincing argument that reutilization is making contemporary oral literature invisible.

Undoubtedly oral literature was easily recognizable in traditional societies' everyday life—Mboya himself, like many of us growing up in the last three decades of the 20th century, knew the many variants of narratives, riddles, proverbs, oral poetry, and epics within our largely homogenous ethnicities. What is of concern is our

Tobias Otieno Odongo is senior lecturer in the Department of Literature, Linguistics, Foreign Languages and Film Studies, School of Arts and Sciences, Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya.
Email: tobiasotieno@yahoo.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0006-5405-9288

ability to recognize the 'transformed' varieties in this urbanized digital age. Using the title of his address to illustrate this, "If you delete me from your life someone else will download me", Mboya rightly points out that the users of this modern proverb indulge in it and dispose of it without ever being aware they are using a proverb. The task of the contemporary oral literature scholar then, Mboya avers, is to help identify and classify these dynamic oral performances in this information age, in whatever new forms they manifest themselves—whether in our speeches, gestures, movements, or even during our participation in the various modes of social media.

A survey of the articles

In her pace-setting article "Invention of boundaries and identity issues in the story of an anti-colonial war", Cécile Leguy analyses a performance that takes place in San, Mali, in December 2001in commemoration of "the Bwa revolt", a resistance movement that took place during the First World War. The Bwa are a people who speak a Gur language closer to the population of Burkina Faso. They seek not only greater recognition within Mali but also aim to symbolically assert a claim on a region that defies established national boundaries. Not only is this a remarkable ethnicization that is built on a rewriting of history, but it also creates a context where identity claims are reinforced by the importance taken by social networks on the internet. Leguy's article not only foregrounds how engaging oral literature is, but also how homeostatic and multi-media. She analyses how, through the accumulation of purely Bwa names to the exclusion of other ethnicities, the performance invites the Bwa people to embrace their role within the nation, all the while asserting the uniqueness of an event in Mali's Bwa history that encompass Bwa communities beyond the confines of present-day Mali. Leguy defines this performance as a "paradoxical injunction" revealing the tension between universalizing globalization and local particularisms, through a multiplicity of traditional and modern channels.

In "Folklore genre designation among the Manden peoples", Olga Zavyalova explains in detail the definition of the genres of the Manden Oral tradition—a people who inhabit Mali, Guinea, and Cote d'Ivoire—to help reveal the culturally significant features of these oral traditions. Their proverbs, riddles, songs, myths, legends, etc. are fluid and easily flow into each other, defying conformity to equivalent European languages in translations, forcing the researcher to resort to unique terms such as "tale-riddle", "short fairy tale", and so on—an eye opener for researchers who more often than not force European classification systems into unyielding traditional African performances. Zavyalova concludes by affirming that such supposedly 'universal' division into genres is not quite suitable for African cultures, since the peculiarities of the historical and cultural development of African countries, as well as differences in mentality, are not taken into account.

In "Performance in propitiatory reconciliation among the Nandi community", Anthony Kipkoech Biwott, Collins Kenga Mumbo, and Robert Oduori investigate how performance manifests itself in Nandi propitiatory reconciliation, outlining the specific steps that involve the playing of drums, chanting, singing, and offering of sacrifices among others during the ceremony. Through actions and gestures, singing, formulaic expressions, and the wearing of special costumes, the active audience in this propitiatory ceremony interject, exclaim, and sing along, producing a truly Nandi cultural experience. In essence, the three main stages—investigation, interrogation, and cleansing—are clearly outlined and religiously adhered to, bringing offenders and the offended together and transforming the situation from a hostile one where the victims punish the culprits as per the set formula and the latter submissively accept the punishment, thereby creating a catharsis and everyone goes home convinced that justice—and just compensation—have been served and forgiveness must naturally follow.

In 2020, Covid-19 became a global pandemic overnight, and amidst the fear and despondency, human capacity to create humour to lighten the situation prevailed to make life a little more bearable. It is this humour that Rose Akinyi Opondo chooses to explore in the rural setting of her people, resulting in the article: "Masking death: Covid-19-inspired humour in the everyday orality of a Luo community in Kenya". Employing discourse theory which treats language as a living social phenomenon capable of change, growth, expansions, and adaptations for contextual spatial and temporal expressions, the article delves into the aesthetics of contextual language through coinage, jokes, and puns, which manifest as humorous responses to an otherwise dire situation—the literal and metaphorical face of death. From her findings, she concludes:

The usage of these coinages in everyday discourse entrenches their interaction into the community's linguistic corpus and which now find their way into normalized discourse. These words and phrases discussed herein keep the mind from literal death through humour. Conclusively, we can deduce the creative power of oral language in devising and establishing novel usage of existing vocabulary for both lexical and semantic incongruities to bring out humour, as well as the significance of verbal interactions in the recreation of meaning in response to emerging contexts.

Joseph Mzee Muleka's article, "Oral performance as substitute for ritual: *Ekutet*, a Teso exhumation ceremony" entails a quest to discover what has replaced *Ekutet*, a ceremony which was performed for ritual healing in cases where there were persistent misfortunes such as frequent deaths, illnesses, accidents, or unexplained endless feuds. It involves the exhumation of a suspected dead family member's remains for reburial or display in sacred shrines, accompanied by a rich occurrence of oral performances—rendered as narrations, incantations, swearing, prayer chants—and occasional re-enactments of attendant dramatic anecdotes. Muleka notes that oral performances and mock exhumations have become a psychological fallback for the diminishing actual *Ekutet* ritual performance which some youth already in their twenties have never witnessed. Applying the psychoanalytic concepts of (dis)placement, (re)placement, and (re)presentation, he argues that the Christian faith and modern medicine which has replaced *Ekutet* are grossly inadequate. They do not wholly address the psychological needs of groups, but rather focus on individuals, creating a gap in reducing communal anxiety, boosting communal morale and confidence, alleviating grief, and providing therapeutic relief. Because of the pervasive nature of Christianity—which views *Ekutet* as 'Satanic'—in the community, and the younger generation's conviction that the ritual is 'obsolete', Muleka concludes that this therapeutic ritual can only be conserved through oral literature.

In "A feminist analysis of '*Dhako en …*' (A woman is …) proverbs among the Luo community of Kenya", Daniel Otieno uses the poststructuralist theories of deconstruction and postcolonial feminist theory of sexualized objectification to analyse Luo proverbs about women collected from Facebook and other social spaces. The objective is to find out the extent to which these proverbs are existential threats to the 'transfiguration' process of the female body, and how they perpetuate the 'othering' of the image of the woman, thereby complicating the overall feminist struggle. Using numerous examples of "*Dhako en …*" wordplay, Otieno convincingly demonstrates that these examples not only contribute to the marginalization of women in society, reducing them to mere instruments for male sexual satisfaction in a capitalist and masculine hegemonic society, but also result in the objectification of women, depicting female bodies as commodities that can be utilized and discarded by men. Nevertheless, he allays fears of the obscenity of the proverbs socially perverting innocent children in our multi-mediated settings by pointing out that the signifiers on the surface are ordinary everyday usage words, and that the underlying sexual connotations can only be deciphered by those who are conversant with the playbook—that is, able to decode the verbal and social context of the imagery and euphemism using socio-cultural rules and rules of discourse.

The idea that oral literature is 'obsolete' has often been voiced as a result of an inability to appreciate just how dynamic this art form can be. This is a dangerous assumption, but not the only one, as we see in the article "Gender and power as negotiated in Bukusu circumcision ceremonies" by Scholastica Nabututu Wabende and Simon Nganga Wanjala, in which they strongly argue against the assumption that language is gendered and that it espouses male gender. Employing theoretical and methodological principles from critical discourse and conversation analysis, they posit that, by using linguistic strategies, traditional gender roles are not only discursively highlighted but they are also negotiated and even resisted. Guided by audio recordings of conversations that take place alongside the main circumcision ceremony among the Bukusu, they analyse data at the level of content and prosodic organization to identify discursive practices that reveal the negotiation and contestation of gender roles and succeed in exposing gender asymmetries and contestations that lie behind 'taken-for-granted' realities. This leads to their conclusion that gender is best understood in the context of how it emerges through roles, how it is negotiated, and how it is accepted and/or contested.

In "Orality in Yorùbá films: A study of selected films of Akínwùmí Ìṣọ̀lá", Abidemi Bolarinwa Olusola uses the intertextuality approach to examine orality in three of Ìṣọ̀lá's films, with a view to proving that the filmmaker uses verbal art as a powerful tool for the transmission of cultural values—folktales, legends, songs, Ifa corpus, drumbeats, incantation, and panegyric—in his films to reawaken and preserve Yoruba oral tradition. From her research, she arrives at the conclusion that one can infer from Ìṣọ̀lá's films that there is an overlap between oral tradition and creative film—since he uses his creative ingenuity to revive and safeguard Yoruba oral tradition in

these films—and this essentially points to the fact that oral literature has a continued vitality for our contemporary society.

In "Variations in the application of the components of the oral performance to Yoruba chants", Anthony Gboyega Kolawole investigates how the utilization of oral performance elements changes within different contextual settings of oral traditional forms. The focus is on Yoruba oral traditional chants in order to verify how the nature of each chant influences the extent to which these components can be employed within their respective contexts. Utilizing a combination of the oral performance theory and functionalism, the author examines thirteen selected Yoruba oral poetic forms by classifying them into three categories of poetic forms: the context-restricted, the secular featured and the easily adaptable. In analyzing such oral performance components as artists, texts, audiences, music and histrionics, he arrives at the conclusion that all the subtypes studied can easily be categorized as "context-restricted" because they are religious, or "diffused" because they are losing their religious nature and turning secular or "context-free" because they are not religious in origin. In essence, digressions are the result of spontaneous observations of the oral text by the artist or reaction by the active audience who force the artist to add, to subtract from or to rearrange the text in performance to suit the current contextual performance circumstances.

In "The state of Hausa children's folktales and play-songs in Gombe, Nigeria", Bilkisu Abubakar Arabi investigates contrasting Nigerian locales of the upper and lower classes of society to find out the extent to which modernity has affected transmission and understanding of traditional forms of oral literature among parents and children, and whether social classes have a significant effect on the daily consumption of such material. Adapting the concept of "technauriture", and especially "cultauriture" theoretical models (derived from Russell Kaschula and Andre Mostert's reflections), Arabi analyses data from questionnaires from school-going and non-school-going children and their parents to gauge awareness of children's folktales and play-songs and to establish their preferred mode of transmission in the face of globalization and fast-changing digitization. Her findings reveal that though there is a ninety percent awareness of these folktales and play-songs, there is less than fifty percent participation in narrative sessions due to rapid technological transformation in modern society. The inevitable recommendation arising, then, is for all the traditional folktales and play-songs to be digitized and passed through satellite television and other popular social media to effectively entertain and educate children and their parents on language development, cultural preservation, promotion, and sustainability.

In "Gospel Àpàlà music in African Christian worship: Thematic and stylistic analysis", Esther Titilayo Ojo studies how Gospel Àpàlà undergo a transformation from African traditional songs into a form of worship dedicated to the Christian God. Her goal is to identify and describe its distinctive style and the ways in which it conveys its message, particularly in the context of contemporary changes driven by modernization and globalization. Drawing on systematic functional linguistics and sociology of literature, Ojo provides an analysis of six gospel songs from three artistes, exploring in detail praises, thanksgiving and adoration to God, salvation and acknowledgment of Jesus, God's greatness and miracles, forgiveness, unity, holiness, heaven, love among brethren, commitment and dedication to God's work, etc. She achieves this by delving into an analysis of the use of stylistic devices such as repetition, rhetorical questions, personification, loan words, code-mixing and code-switching, and proverbs—all of which complement the music.

Conclusion

The articles in this issue constitute a successful exploration of the transitions, transformations, and translocations in African oral traditions and (re)imagined boundaries and have opened up vast areas for future research. That the articles cover mainly Western and Eastern African regions (with particular emphasis on the countries Nigeria and Kenya) exposes a need for more inclusion of Southern, Central, and Northern regions. Although ISOLA members come fortunately from all over the world, this is therefore a recommendation for future conferences. The genres range from orality through film and music, of course touching on social media platforms and the future genres and subgenres which must keep emerging in an evolving, dynamic, and globalized society.