

THE DARWIN COLLEGE LECTURES

SOUND

Edited by *Patricia Kruth and Henry Stobart*



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1 Re-Sounding Silences

PHILIP PEEK

To begin this collection of essays on our acoustic world with the topic of silence suggests that we ‘naturally’ move from silence to sound. It is assumed that there is a shift from inchoate silence to meaningful sound. This portrayal of human development has it that first there is absence, no human speech or song, but only later do significant utterances and sounds occur. In reality, many world cultures move from sound to silence, most easily demonstrated in religious contexts. But as well we can quickly realize that neither sound nor silence is comprehensible without the other.

From those disciplines devoted to the evolution of human phonation and communication, we learn that we are ‘hard-wired’ for sound and apparently programmed for speech. We cannot not learn a language. Perhaps reflecting that primacy of speech, many origin myths around the world have speech as the first of human accomplishments. We are also programmed for hearing. Cultural systems can be properly considered as extra-somatic systems of survival. In other words, to compensate for our lack of sharp senses and physical abilities we have the means to call out a warning to others or shout for help. Surely signing can do much of this and obviously writing serves such functions, but the point is that it is speech that allows us to live as we do. Therefore, when humans choose silence, one must listen carefully.

I begin, selfconsciously, with what brought me to the topic of silence – and that was sound. For many years, I have studied the sounds of African cultures to be heard in historical narratives, sacred prayers, music, verbal arts and so on. Yet, over and over, I encountered significant silences. While researching the primacy of speech in African societies, I wondered about the significance of the absence of this essential element – if words have literal power, what does it mean to choose not to speak? Why is it that divine kings throughout Africa seldom speak publicly? In the huge corpus of sacred and secular narratives told



FIGURE 1. Anansi the Spider as depicted on a linguist's staff of the Ashanti of Ghana.



FIGURE 2. Spider divination among the Kaka Tikar of Cameroon: the oracular message is read by the diviner from the cards as rearranged by the spider.

by African peoples, there are many characters, notably trickster figures, who are silent creatures in the natural world yet they play very important communicative roles. For example, in Ghana there are many Ashante tales about Anansi the Spider, a very quick witted and often sacred character (Figure 1). Spiders are not known as noisy, yet in a world where words are acts and soundscapes underlie all else, they serve as spokesmen and are a source of tales. One also wonders why the silent Tortoise is so often an emblem of wisdom? And what of that wily Hare (Bugs Bunny's African trickster ancestor)? In Africa, these characters survive and triumph by their wits, usually expressed through clever words, yet they are essentially silent creatures in the 'real' world.

In African divination systems, where cross-world communications (between this world and the 'spirit world') are literally life-giving, we find an extraordinary number of silent or voiceless creatures involved. In Central Africa, pangolins (scaly anteaters) are linked to diviners, while in West Africa we find spiders (Figure 2) and land crabs serving as divinatory agents. One may always argue that these creatures may well be selected for other culture-specific reasons, but it remains that silent creatures are chosen and often the absence of vocal communication is emphasized. Thus, among the Dogon of Mali, their divinatory agent the 'Pale Fox' is said to be totally speechless and can use only his paw



FIGURE 3. Guro mouse divination from Côte d'Ivoire: the mouse will walk over the chicken bones in the tortoise shell; the resultant arrangement is interpreted by the diviner.

prints tracked across a diviner's carefully prepared grid to communicate life-guiding messages to human beings. Having lost their original ability to speak, the mice used by the Guro and Yohure of the Côte d'Ivoire for divination can communicate only through the divination apparatus (Figure 3). Nearby, the Lobi of Ghana and Burkina Faso seek oracular messages from specific spirits who are known to have no tongues and can communicate only by causing the joined hands of diviner and client to move up or down.

Further research confirms that 'normally' silent creatures are chosen for a range of significant communicative cultural functions in the arts as well as in religion. Why, for example, would one choose to 'cool' a heated head, to calm a person down, as the Nigerian Yoruba do, with the liquid of a snail? And why would the Isoko of the Niger Delta cure stuttering by having a child drink the water in which a snail has been boiled? Why, unless this absolutely silent creature has something very important to do with proper speech?

Thus, from a variety of contexts, we have evidence that an auditory criterion was being employed for the selection of significant creatures. Many of these creatures, such as the pangolin and bat, have other anomalous features to recommend them, but so many of these creatures seem to share an acoustic

dimension of voicelessness and silence. Why should 'normally' silent animals be chosen for such critical communicative roles? Everything from representing the king, to divinatory agents and messengers to God – small, silent creatures have been entrusted with so much. Why are not the large, loud creatures used?

Properly we will find our answers in those very African cultures, but first it will be informative for our broader study of human beings' acoustic realms to consider silence among other world cultures. We will turn first to the Americas and Asia, then, briefly, Europe and European-America before returning to Africa.

Native Americans and the silence of propriety

Part of an old Navajo song goes,

The mole, his hunting place is darkness.

The mole, his hunting song is silence.

Studies of Native Americans have noted how quickly Europeans will judge negatively their reticence and attribute a range of negative stereotypes, such as sullenness, passivity, stupidity, and hostility. On the other hand, within those same Native American groups, silence is positively valued and one finds in silence the essence of good character and evidence of another's courage, self-control and dignity. One who speaks quickly, loudly, and directly gains only disrespect. According to Keith Basso, the Western Apache 'give up on words' when they are faced with uncertainty in social relations. For example, when one is with kin of the recently deceased or even with one's own children returned from college (or in other very explicit situations), silence is considered the appropriate action. Rather than commit an error by speaking inappropriately, one's wisdom and thoughtfulness are demonstrated by silence.

Even more generally speaking, we find that in South American religions deities often have associations with sonic forms, some of which may be silence, just as their visual forms might be invisibility. Among shamans, silent curing via magical blowing on the ailing may be used rather than healing songs. During initiation ceremonies, periods of silence mark a variety of key stages, initiates' 'senselessness' or the presence of sacred entities. Among Native American peoples there are very different meanings for silence, yet all are essential

and respectful; silences pervade ritual acts and intensify significant actions. From these few examples, we find that silence has curative functions. Saying 'nothing' can aid in smoothing over awkward social situations. In the apparent silence of religious ceremonies, we learn that much of significance has been conveyed and the ailing client is once again in harmony with the larger social world. Such social and spiritual harmonies are heard in silence among Asian peoples as well.

Asia and the search for silence

Europeans have stereotyped Asians as speaking less, as being quieter than Europeans, and often they add those same negative evaluations as I just noted for Native Americans. In actual fact, research has demonstrated that Asian peoples really do speak less than Europeans. Europeans speak almost twice as much as the Japanese and the latter have more proverbs valuing silence (and devaluing speech) than do Europeans. The Japanese gave us such expressions as 'Speech is silver, silence is golden', 'Those who know do not speak; those who speak do not know', 'A flower does not speak', and 'Out of the mouth comes evil'. There are even reports of South Asian peoples for whom verbally communicative individuals are considered quite offensive. Asian children are taught to listen as much to silence as to sounds.

Clearly, very different worldviews are involved. This is also demonstrated by the acceptance of essential space and silence, the integrity of the interval. The Japanese make a distinction between *ma*, a determinate interval (in time or space), 'space between', and *kukan*, an indeterminate interval, 'empty space'. This perspective finds intriguing continuity with the presence and functions of the physical world of the vacuole. This is a space in a cell that appears to be empty and functionless but, as each cell type is investigated, the critical roles of vacuoles in different organisms are revealed. Thus, as with silence in much human communication, this is not purposeless 'empty' space, any more than the spaces that were used in Morse Code were purposeless.

That there are absolutely meaningful, sacred silences is abundantly demonstrated in Asian religions where silence is equated with the holy and is sought through various meditative techniques. There is a fundamental distrust of the obvious, the superficial, the easily heard: 'What is real is, and when it is spoken

it becomes unreal.' During meditation, for self-realization through introspection, Europeans tend to close their eyes, whereas Asians tend to close their ears. There is no question that during silence, hearing becomes highly acute, which reminds us of the yin/yang nature of sound and silence.

The question 'What is the sound of one hand clapping?' has become a caricature of the Zen *koan* (intentionally puzzling teaching questions) and the alleged 'inscrutability' to Europeans of Asian thought; but, nevertheless, it is an informative cliché. Where else would we find silence as such an instructive reference? The literature on Asian philosophies is full of references to the 'deafening silence' of the Master's response to some error in the monastery, to the interior voice of silence when meditating, to the silences in Noh drama, and so on.

The Japanese carry the importance of silence into their written literature also. There is a 'silence marker' often used in writing. The attitude of the Japanese towards silence is also reflected in their most important poetry. *Haiku* frequently treat the topic of silence:

A voiceless flower
speaks
to the obedient
In-listening ear.

(Onitsura, 17th–18th cent.)

Thinking comfortable
thoughts
with a friend in silence
in the cool evening . . .

(Hyakuchi, 18th–19th cent.)

In fact, silence is so important and powerful that the Japanese know to guard against being seduced by it. We are all familiar with Japanese gardens as sites of contemplation and great serenity. But, as if to demonstrate the power of silence, there is a device in many gardens to prevent absolute silence. A small bamboo tube slowly fills from a trickle of water and then *clacks* down loudly as it empties. Then it rises to be filled again. This device ensures that we hear the silence. In Japanese culture not only

is silence clearly not nothing, but it usually indicates a desired state of mind or status of being.

Africa, where 'silence is also speech'

As I have noted, there are numerous instances of cultural silences in African societies. It appears that they cluster in two basic, and not unrelated, areas. Ritual uses of silence seem to refer fundamentally to the Other ('normally' silent) World of deities, spirits and ancestors. Although in full experience the Other World is not 'really' silent, it cannot be heard easily. The other basic realm of significant meaning is that of wisdom and respect. For cultures throughout Africa, the absence of speech is commonly understood to convey respect, sagacity, esoteric knowledge and serenity.

We should also observe that silence can be the manifestation of social power, where the control of others is demonstrated by silencing them. Those in power, be they elders, men or rulers, can prevent others from speaking – they can cause silence. But these instances often overlap with situations of ritual, sacred uses of silence and/or situations where respect or wisdom is evidenced in not speaking.

African religious beliefs and practices provide numerous instances of the roles of silence. Many times during my research on Isoko religion in the Niger Delta, priests would speak of the awesome 'deep' silence that indicated the presence of a deity. Such a silence might surround a shrine or be temporary, marking the arrival of the deity for ceremonies. Silence may also be used by a deity to demonstrate its power by not answering prayers or responding to sacrifices. The Yoruba of Nigeria have proverbs about the phenomenon of the deity who is so powerful that it does not have to acknowledge our puny existence; for example, '*Akii je nii gb'orisa niyi*,' [It is the silence of the deity that confers dignity on it.]

Throughout Africa, silence and death are linked in a variety of ways. Silence is usually observed during aspects of burial and funeral ceremonies at least as a matter of respect for the deceased if not representing more fundamental associations. This silence may indicate beliefs about communication and the Other World, as the recently deceased (and thereby silenced) individual returns to that other, silent world. This association of kinds of silence seems probable

and correlates with prohibitions of speech during the birth process, thereby reminding us of the cyclical nature of birth and death here being equivalent to death and birth in the Other World.

An analogous phenomenon occurs with some of the silences of initiation rituals. As one moves from one status to another, 'dying' in one role in order to be reborn in another, one then must relearn all human skills, including speaking. Silence as well as speechlessness often figures in initiation ceremonies. The loss and then relearning of speech and language effectively stand for death and rebirth.

African masquerade traditions often include fearsome silent masks who are non-speaking, non-sounding, and in their silence reveal even more potency than if they were noisy and loud. Sometimes masks may have no mouths depicted at all. We also know that masks which do 'speak' seldom do so in normal voices, using instead instrumental means or voice disguisers to communicate. Others may use exclusively visual languages of gesture and sign language to communicate. While the treatment of masqueraders' voices may comment on the fearsomeness of spirit speech, a closed or absent mouth may demonstrate the wisdom of silence. One who could speak wisely chooses silence instead. Some scholars have speculated that the accented (enlarged, decorated) ears and eyes of some African mask styles signals the importance of listening and looking rather than speaking.

Because musical instruments are most often heard in performance contexts with masqueraders and dancers, we might note here how often 'silent' animals are employed in the construction of musical instruments. We find pangolin skins used for the spectacular harp-lutes of the Mangbetu (Figure 4). Accounts recorded among numerous African peoples indicate that reptiles are significant creatures in part because of their sounds, or lack thereof. While we know many reptiles can hiss loudly, most are considered by Africans to be silent. Thus, we might understand such instruments as giving voice to the voiceless, as when a drum head is made from a snake's skin. Significantly, we find tortoise shells used widely both as percussive instruments (Figure 5) and as containers for divinatory apparatus or the diviner's materials.

Certain instances of the denial of speech seem to participate in both demonstrations of sacredness and of secular wisdom (indeed, one can hardly maintain a strict separation of those two areas). Silence can be associated with specific actions in the sense that by refusing to speak one demonstrates something. For



FIGURE 4. Mangbetu harp with pangolin skin.



FIGURE 5. Isoko Oworu masquerader with attendants striking tortoise shells.

example, among the Isoko of the Niger Delta, a warrior will place a certain leaf in his mouth to indicate his resolve that he will not speak until a specific action is completed (usually the killing of some individual). Silence may be required in certain ritual acts in relation to certain highly potent and dangerous forces, such as smallpox and strangers. If, as many African cultures have it, to speak is to act, then to not say something is to prevent its actualization. A taboo might exist where speech at certain times in certain places is prohibited.

Similarly, silence indicates certain avoidance patterns, classically of mothers-and sons-in-law but also between those who might marry. But here we seem to be moving into the areas of respect and proper behavior, as demonstrated by restrictions on speech and sound. Relations between juniors and seniors may be revealed by some restrictions on speech. The Tutsi of Burundi emphatically employ silence in their speech behaviors. Upper caste girls are carefully trained to be respectfully silent, while Tutsi elders dramatically use silence to control their juniors. The silence of an elder can effectively stifle all social inferiors and end the proceedings – there is no recourse.

Among the Mende of Sierra Leone, a person's silence is understood to demonstrate one's composure and quality of judgment. Thus, just as wise persons seldom open their mouth and the chief is quietly aloof and the proper woman is discreetly silent, so the masks are depicted with small, pursed mouths as appropriate for their exalted status. The images of ideal, perfect silence permeate the society, occurring in all possible contexts to continually remind people how to behave as a proper Mende woman or man. The chaste girl is silent, while the promiscuous woman is talkative. Here, as elsewhere, the study of esthetics among African peoples usually reveals their most fundamental philosophical tenets.

Silence also 'reveals' secrets. Absolute secrecy through complete silence is neither possible nor effective because secrecy survives only with partial information, some sounds but not with complete silence. In other words, one must be aware that one is not receiving all or sufficient information; complete ignorance is simply that and nothing more.

We could also study the presence of silence in folk tales and proverbs. Indicative of the importance of silence, the Kuranko of Sierra Leone have an ideophone for silence when it occurs in tales. In the verbal arts we easily find a variety of paths to pursue. Many narratives told by African peoples comment on the loss of speech by animals, usually as punishment for, strikingly, com-

munication errors such as a garbled message from God to humans which looses death into the world. Narratives often caution against loose talk and many proverbs laud silence and the silent person. In Mali, the Bamana say that 'Silence reveals paths, speech confuses them.' Among the Hausa of northern Nigeria, the silence of the dove is frequently praised and rewarded in tales. And in southern Nigeria, we find the tortoise's silence and wisdom cited in numerous contexts. The complexity and subtlety of allusions and metaphorical references are impressive. The Ashanti say 'Precious beads don't speak.' This refers to the waist beads all women wear, which are fairly snug. Therefore, they do not rattle, or 'speak', and cannot tell us what they have seen of the woman's private life.

A wonderful example of meta-communication on cross-cultural differences is provided by the Yoruba and Igbo of southern Nigeria. In several of their masquerade traditions, Europeans are depicted not only by masks of expected skin color and clothing, but by their silence. They do not speak, but they continually write on everything and everyone. This is intended as a comment on the Europeans' poor speaking abilities, their virtual silence, rather than an observation about their literacy. This form of silence *is not* an indication of wisdom but of a degree of non-humanness.

There is overwhelming evidence that African peoples value silence. Their social behavior, their arts, their religions all demonstrate this; but do they directly discuss the issue? Is there discourse on silence? What few studies we have of African philosophies and systems of thought provide further support. Among the Bamana and others in the Western Sudan, silence is valued as the supreme virtue of the wise, prudent, courageous man and it defines the elder of true moral character. On the other side of the continent, we find similar comments from the Fipa in eastern Africa. Here quiet speech is associated with careful thought and wise expression. Wherever we find reference to human discourse, the values of considered and careful speech are always cited, while the dangers of loose talk are cautioned against. These attitudes correlate with the firm conviction that true knowledge is secret knowledge – not all should know all things and surely not all should speak of all things.

The distinction between (relatively) secular and sacred realms is seldom easily maintained in analyzing African cultures and the separation of types of silence seems to converge in practices surrounding divine kingship. Divine kings in Africa seem to be surrounded by silence. There are restrictions on all

speech in and around palaces, but what is especially striking is the muteness of the divine king. Not only does the king not speak in public but commoners are not supposed to see the king's mouth move. Among the Yoruba, kings wear crowns with beaded veils and some still carry small fans to shield their mouths further. The Ashantehene of the Ashanti Federation in Ghana carries a gold object in his mouth during public outings, which signals his non-speaking and reminds others not speak to him. Most divine kings have spokesmen who not only speak 'for' the king but 'as' the king. These traditions remain very much alive and well in Africa today, as I learned during a visit in 1996 to the Ashantehene in Kumasi, Ghana. He has at least five *okeyame* with him during audiences and no one ever speaks directly to him.

An extraordinarily poignant tale from the Yoruba of western Nigeria brings forth the subtlety of thought on these matters, in regard to both divine kings and the concepts of silence.

The king invited the animals to a great feast, and offered a prize to the best dancer. The animals danced energetically before him, each showing off its own most striking qualities – the elephant its grave dignity, the leopard its beautiful coat and sinuous agility, the gazelle its spectacular leaps and so forth. When, at the end of the dance, they gathered around the king to hear his judgment, to their surprise and displeasure he awarded the prize to the tortoise. Answering their complaints, the king asked them who had provided the feast, and who was giving the prize, to which they could only reply 'It is you, O king!'. 'And so it is that I awarded the prize to the tortoise,' said the king, 'for it is only I who can see the dance of the tortoise: his dance is entirely inside him!'

(G. Leinhardt in *The Category of Person*, 1985)

What an exceptional testimony for the importance of the unstated, for the superior quality of the inner state! This seems to correlate as well with the frequently encountered comment among African carvers that they seek to represent interior states of being, states of high moral character, not simply exterior, perhaps false, surface features that are easily apparent to all.

The comments are extended here in order to demonstrate that we are dealing with a larger worldview, not a few isolated instances that highlight silence. If we are correct in finding positive associations for silence in African cultures, we would expect to find continuity with African peoples in the Americas. Just as Asian-Americans and Native Americans have maintained their cultural values, so we find African-Americans have retained their most sacred precepts.

In these cultures where the dominant figure is almost always the 'Man of Words', from bluesman to preacher, rapper to politician, one would not immediately expect to find wise words about silence – but we do.

An essential area of this African heritage is that of the verbal arts, from what have now become 'All-American' folk tales, such as that of Brer Rabbit, to the more personalized narratives of the Signifying Monkey. Here again, we find the constant African caution against the dangers of loose talk. When tricksters are tricked, it is usually because they have talked too much. The Monkey never seems to know when to quit and, as he tries to trick the elephant or lion one more time, he gets into trouble. Strikingly, the most silent of creatures, the rabbit and spider, are the most popular survivors in the trans-Atlantic move. That central figure of speech from the Akan peoples, Anansi, who now appears throughout the Caribbean as Anansi, Buh Nansi, Boy Nasty, Compe Anansi, and even Aunt Nancy, is still the same irrepressible talker, always trying to get the better of others.

Another critical area of expression is musical. I have always believed that the significant difference between Black blues performers and White blues performers is the former's use of silence. Acoustic spacing, affective silence and suspended beats can be found in all forms of African-American music, from contemporary gospel to urban rap. Older African-American musicians often council younger performers to leave spaces so the audience can better hear what is (and isn't!) played. In fact, one can argue that other aspects of African-American culture, even textiles, are 'rhythmized' in these same ways and depend on 'silence' for their sense. Certainly effective sermons are punctuated dramatically with carefully crafted silences as part of the call and response exchange between the preacher and the congregation.

Europeans and European-Americans – Nature abhors a vacuum

This survey of non-European cultures and their uses of silence demonstrates that for them silence is meaningful, it is potent yet positive; while it can be fearful, it is usually a portent of wisdom rather than evil. But when we turn to cultural practices among Europeans and Euro-Americans we find dramatically different assumptions.

One traditional starting point for Western scholarship on any topic is to look

to the classical world to find the roots for contemporary terminology. Terms for, and references to, silence in Greek and Roman traditions are usually pejorative and, thereby, set the tone for subsequent understandings. The silent person is excluded for some 'inglorious act' or for being a stranger. While European cultures often trace their roots through Greece and Rome, it seems this dislike of silence is common to other Mediterranean cultures because silence is not cherished in Jewish or Arab cultures either.

The physical impossibility of absolute silence provides another point from which to study Western attitudes. Composer John Cage is often cited for his observations about the internal noises of the human body stemming from the nervous system and the circulation of blood. He as well as many others have commented on the impossibility of absolute silence, because of these bodily noises as well as the perpetual nature of ambient sound. There are always vibrations of some sort in the world around us as well as within us. In fact, it appears that, if the brain is deprived of sound, the mind will supply its own 'hallucinatory' sounds, as those who have used isolation tanks have discovered.

This could lead us to a discussion of deafness and whether or not absolute silence is experienced by those who cannot hear normally, but we already sense the enormous possible scope of this topic and realize we cannot pursue every lead. Nevertheless, we must note the vehemence with which the (dominant) hearing community discriminates against the non-hearing population as a clear signal of the negative attitudes towards silence in European and European-American cultures. The debate between the use of signing and the struggle to imitate unheard speech by the deaf continues, as was recently revealed when a non-hearing woman won the Miss USA beauty contest.

It is certainly possible to find culturally sanctioned, even desired, conditions of silence in European cultures. But even where one finds sacred silence, the bearers of this silence are waiting to be fulfilled with God's voice, to become one with the Holy Ghost, and so on. The condition of silence is a prerequisite for sound, not the goal as we find in Asian traditions. Vows of silence are punishments, attempts to sacrifice human sound to demonstrate piety. To give up speech is as religiously significant as giving up eating or sexual intercourse. Some Christian faiths use silence to expel the transgressor, as with the Amish people and their 'shunning'. Silence is not sought as a positive state in and of itself but as a condition awaiting correction or fulfillment by spiritual forces.

Shifting from sacred to secular contexts, we find some ambiguities in

responses to silence, but the associations are largely negative. Certainly silence is not desirable in legal settings. Several years ago there was heated discussion in England whether to permit the courts to assume 'legally' that a defendant's silence was an admission of wrongdoing (as is already true in France). Although such refusal to testify is often portrayed suspiciously by the popular mind in the USA, we still do maintain that legally one does not have to speak if that might be self-incriminating, i.e. in the USA we are still protected by the Fifth Amendment. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that the popular impression is that one is avoiding truth or hiding something by taking such a position. This follows logically or we would not have formally to protect the act of silence in the courtroom. Witness recent reports about dramatic cases of murder and politics in the USA – the less said, the greater the negative speculation. Studies by legal experts and psychologists reveal that this is exactly how most people interpret silence in the courtroom. It is commonly believed that an honest person speaks forthrightly, and quickly, because it takes time to lie; that is why the dishonest person speaks slowly. Certainly lawyers must successfully negotiate those issues as they defend and prosecute in front of judges and juries who are making private decisions about guilt and innocence based not on facts but on perceived courtroom behaviors.

In popular entertainment, silence remains one of the most durable means of terrifying an audience. We scare ourselves with performative silence. Throughout Europe and the USA there are traditions of celebratory mumming when neighbors visit each other while carefully disguised by costumes and silence. These masked 'strangers' are mute and present a mock threat to their hosts. But this practice finds more modern forms also. How often do we observe that the little seen or unheard monster, the non-speaking 'psycho' or murderer in a film, is the more frightening? Is it not a sure sign of impending doom when the birds stop singing? Clearly, we scare ourselves with additional silence, not more noise. The silent, telepathic communication of alien invaders from outer space is usually one of their most sinister characteristics.

Whatever the discipline or perspective, it is abundantly clear that Europeans worry about silence. Where we hear nothing, we project sound. The 'Nature' of European cultures definitely abhors a vacuum and, at least in the USA, that vacuum will be filled with speech. There is concern at social gatherings about 'dead air' and 'awkward silences'. Such moments of quiet could never be understood as a time of comfort for the participants. European-Americans are often

told they are very loud and are continually chattering. But is not the sign of a well-running machine a nice steady hum? Surely, then, a silent machine is a broken machine. Talk is good – silence is bad.

Conclusion

The natural world that cultural beings inhabit is one of sound. Noise is natural. It is silence that must be created. Humans are genetically programmed to speak, and to hear. Normally, we cannot not speak; therefore, to choose silence is a significant act of humanness. This act is as significant in distinguishing ourselves from other animals as is the act of human language. The cessation of sound, the stopping of speech, the choice of silence is always noteworthy. This condition is generally understood to be one of respect and wisdom among African, American and Asian cultures.

At this point we can briefly return to my query about the choice of ‘naturally’ silent animals for critical communicative functions in African cultures. After reviewing the evidence for the values not only of careful and cautious speech but of silence itself, the choice of those often small but definitely voiceless creatures, such as spiders and tortoises, is totally logical. By their very reticence and by their protection of true knowledge by seldom voicing it, these beings serve to remind us of the power of words and significance of sound, as well as the wisdom of listening to Other-Worldly sounds that might otherwise go unheard.

In approximate African fashion, I will end with a tale, a tale that must be listened to carefully for it reminds us of the value of silence. It is also notable that not only is this tale found throughout the continent of Africa but it is still told throughout the Americas by African descendants.

A hunter found a human skull in the forest and asked, ‘What brought you here?’ The skull answered, ‘Talking brought me here.’ The hunter ran and told the king that he had found a skull that talked. The king did not believe him and sent a guard to see if his story was true, with orders to kill him if it was not. All day long the hunter begged the skull to speak, but it remained silent and the hunter was killed. When the guard had left, the skull asked, ‘What brought you here?’ The hunter’s head replied, ‘Talking brought me here’.

(W. Bascom, ‘The talking skull’, 1992)

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