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978-0-521-08794-0 - Power, Marginality and African Oral Literature

Edited by Graham Furniss and Liz Gunner

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African oral literature, like other forms of popular culture, is not merely folksy, domestic entertainment but a domain in which individuals in a variety of social roles are free to comment on power relations in society. It can also be a significant agent of change capable of directing, provoking, preventing, overturning and recasting perceptions of social reality. This collection examines the way in which oral texts both reflect and affect contemporary social and political life in Africa. It addresses questions of power, gender, the dynamics of language use, the representation of social structures and the relation between culture and the state.

The contributors are linguists, anthropologists, folklorists, ethnomusicologists and historians, who present fresh material and ideas to paint a lively picture of current real life situations. The book is an important contribution to the study of African culture and literature, and to the anthropological study of oral literature in particular.

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*School of Oriental and African Studies
University of London*



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Preface

The chapters in this collection derive from a conference held at Birkbeck College and the School of Oriental and African Studies in January 1991, under the auspices of the Centre of African Studies, University of London and the Department of African Languages and Cultures, SOAS. The impetus for the conference emerged from a growing sense of convergence between African, American and European scholars of African popular culture, history, music, oral literature and political anthropology, on the nexus between popular expression and power relations.

In examining that nexus the participants emphasised differing contexts and interpretations both of the question of power and of marginality. Assumptions differed among participants about the implications of the notion of *power* as it was to be deployed in our discussions. Aware of the definitional and connotational complexities of the term (see, for example, Fardon 1985, introduction and essays by others therein) participants tended to refer to the ability or potential of one party to be able to influence or affect the actions, words, and occasionally, beliefs and emotions of another. In deploying the term, however, it related sometimes to the capacities of constitutional authority in government, sometimes to the capacity of an individual over other individuals and sometimes to the relation between cultural forms as dominant and dominated.

Similarly, the term *marginality* opened up a number of avenues of debate. While some participants felt that, within the cultural landscape of particular societies, oral literature had been marginalised in comparison with written genres of literature, others saw such marginalisation as illusory, being based sometimes upon the 'literal' preoccupations of observers and commentators within the academic tradition, and sometimes as a reflection of a narrowness of view that sees oral literature as a separate entity rather than a communicative

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process within an interlocking network of media that includes written and oral forms – in public performance, on television and radio and in the eclecticism of daily cultural life. Within the context of particular power relations, however, marginality was taken to refer to differential positions between social categories, for example, men and women or between the old and the young, and to social distance from a seat of constituted power within a particular society. Importantly, however, such social marginality does not make the artist powerless; it is often precisely such a position that enables the speaker/artist to attack and occasionally to devastate. This perspective is extended from the artist as an individual to the relations between genres such that undervalued, denigrated forms may operate as satirical subversions of dominant forms. Contrasting positions run through the contributions: song that reinforces the marginalisation of categories of people as against song that, from the margins, contests dominant cultural forces, furnishing thereby a vigorous alternative voice; marginal people speaking as against marginal people being spoken about. The focus supplied by the term is upon the relational characteristics of the utterance and upon the people who speak, and who hear, relations of power.

In addition, there emerged two broadly distinct perspectives on the approach to oral literature. In a more traditional vein, some participants concentrated upon the representation of particular types of power relation as portrayed within a body of texts, thus discussing, for example, images of father–son relations and their attendant tensions within a particular culture. A rather different approach set the ‘act of speaking’, represented by the performance of oral literature, in a broader context of interpersonal dynamics, or within the exercise of power by authorities of one kind or another. This latter perspective is more heavily represented within these pages, though there are variations of scale and emphasis within those chapters.

There were a number of paper givers, chairpersons and discussants at the conference whose names do not otherwise appear in this collection. Ruth Finnegan gave a keynote address reflecting upon the development of the study of African oral literature since her seminal work, *Oral Literature in Africa*, published in 1970. Many of those reflections are drawn together in her 1992 volume, *Oral Traditions and the Verbal Arts: A Guide to Research Practices*. Alongside the presentation of academic papers we wish also to acknowledge the presence of an unexpected and very different event in the conference. It was an experience to which no reference is made elsewhere in this book, but, for all who participated, it constituted a moving, if not

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disturbing, moment. Reference to it has already been made in Lee Haring's thought-provoking introduction to a recent special issue of *Oral Tradition* (1994), in which there is a paper by Sory Camara. Camara handed on to us, spontaneously, at this conference the words of a *maître du chantier* – words he had kept to himself for some twenty years – a myth about life and death, parts of a cosmology, which became ever more resonant when, in response to a question, Camara added that, in Mandinka, people say *parler, c'est mourir* – to give away information is to give away part of one's life-force. That text, that experience, is not represented here but formed an intimate part of what each participant took away from the conference. We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of the following paper-givers, chairpersons and discussants: Ifi Amadiume, B. W. Andrzejewski, Karin Barber, Szilard Biernaczky, Stephen Bulman, G. G. Darah, Caleb Dube, Lee Haring, Zainab Jama, Russell Kaschula, I. M. Lewis, Virginia Luling, Nhlanhla Maake, Mohammed Abdi Mohammed, J. D. Y. Peel, Alain Ricard, Beverley Stoeltjie, Elizabeth Tonkin, Farouk Topan, Olabiyi Yai.

The editors also wish to thank the British Academy, the Commonwealth Foundation, the A. G. Leventis Foundation and the Research and Publications Committee of the School of Oriental and African Studies for financial support which made the conference possible. Without the help of Jackie Collis of the Centre of African Studies the conference would not have been organised as efficiently as it was. We would also like to thank Janet Marks for assistance with typing, and our editor at the Cambridge University Press, Jessica Kuper, for her helpful guidance and for her sterling efforts in bringing the book through the press.

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Note on transcription

Some special characters have been employed in presenting words in a number of African languages. Orthographic conventions differ from one country to another and between standard orthographies and more linguistically specific orthographies.

In this volume the following special characters are used: ɔ and ɒ (for vowel sounds like the English *pot*); ε and ɛ (for vowel sounds like the English *pet*); ʊ (for vowel sounds like the English *put*); ɪ (for vowel sounds like the English *bit*); ə for a mid vowel like the one in the English word *the*. Nasal vowels are marked with a superscript tilde as in *ã*. Additional consonantal characters occur in two chapters: ʃ (representing a phoneme which may also be transcribed by the digraph *sh*); ɲ (for a nasal phoneme otherwise transcribed by the digraph *ny*, and which corresponds to the *gn* in the French word *agneau*, and the *ñ* in the Spanish word *año*); and ŋ or the digraph *ng* (for a nasal phoneme like that at the end of the English word *bring*); ḳ represents an ejective *k* and ḍ represents a glottalised *d*.

Tone marks generally use the following conventions (illustrated using the vowel 'a'): á (high), ā (mid), à (low), â or àà (falling), ǎ or áá (rising). In the chapter by Moraes Farias and in accordance with the official orthographies of the Republic of Mali, tones are left unmarked in transcriptions of Maninka and Soñoy. As regards Borgu languages, both Bààtònúm (a Gur or Voltaic language) and Bo'ó (a Mande language) still lack comprehensive studies of their tonal systems. Arabic words are transcribed according to established scholarly practice. Moraes Farias's transcriptions of Bààtònúm words display tonal marks wherever it has been possible to confirm these in the light of the work of professional linguists. In addition to and differently from the tone marks illustrated above Moraes Farias uses á (top), a (high, unmarked).