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978-0-521-54687-4 - The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics

Karin Barber

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THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF TEXTS, PERSONS AND PUBLICS

What can texts – both written and oral – tell us about the societies that produce them? How are texts constituted in different cultures, and how do they shape societies and individuals? How can we understand the people who compose them? Drawing on examples from all over the world, this original survey sets out to answer these questions, by exploring textuality from a variety of angles. Topics covered include the importance of genre, the ways in which oral genres transcend the here-and-now, and the complex relationship between texts and the material world. It considers the ways in which personhood is evoked, both in oral poetry and in written diaries and letters, discusses the audience's role in creating the meaning of texts, and shows textual creativity to be a universal human capacity expressed in myriad forms. Engaging and thought-provoking, this book will be welcomed by anyone interested in anthropology, literature and cultural studies.

Karin Barber is Professor of African Cultural Anthropology at the University of Birmingham. Her most recent publications include *Africa's Hidden Histories* (2006) and *The Generation of Plays* (2000).

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Preface and acknowledgements

Although this book is short, it was hard to write, and I deleted more pages than I kept.

My first degree was in English, and this was at a time when New Criticism reigned supreme in British universities. I was trained in what I now think was one of the most exacting disciplines possible. Eyeball to eyeball with the “words on the page”, there was no escape into historical generalities, biographical details, or private personal emotions. We had to look at what was before us, and through an intensely concentrated exercise of attention we had to account for what we found. At its best, this approach showed a scrupulous respect for the otherness of textual forms which, as it turned out, was an oddly appropriate starting point for an anthropology of texts. At the time, though, I felt the need for more history and more social context. And as a returned volunteer from a pre-university year in Uganda, I was also interested in texts outside the English canon. I wanted to know about oral traditions, popular genres, writing in African languages.

So, with a view to doing research on African popular verbal arts, I went on to take a postgraduate course in social anthropology. It was called a “conversion course”, and conversion it certainly was – root and branch. This was long before the “literary turn” in anthropology. My literary background was no asset, and I was enjoined to “think like a scientist”. A new world opened to me: a world in which the apparently unlimited

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inventiveness and variability of human communities is seen not just in their “arts”, but in their social organisation, their interaction with the environment, their cosmologies and the details of their everyday lives. But in the British social anthropology of the time, verbal texts were rarely the focus of research. My project ever since has been to bring the two sides of my education together.

In a way this book reflects my tentative and piecemeal discoveries about how texts can be constituted and interpreted, evaluated and held to have meaning, in cultures far from the purview of New Criticism. I have described in an earlier book my initial puzzlement and discomfort with Yoruba praise poetry, which seemed to lack all the qualities I loved in the poetry I had studied before (coherence, stillness, completion, clarity). The fragmented, protean, allusive forms of *oriki* baffled and almost repelled me at first. Every phrase led out to hinterlands of explanation. Every component of the shapeless, baggy text opened up into other narratives, other formulations, quotations from other texts. The text appeared to have no centre and no boundaries. But gradually the power and fascination of *oriki* made itself felt. Subsequent study showed me that praise poetry genres across Africa work in a similar fashion – but with differences; and that African textual forms of all kinds – oral, manuscript and print – make up a field with consonances and divergences, shared and separate histories, echoes and singularities, which have never been adequately appreciated.

I have tried to go on from there to think about what it is, more generally, that students of anthropology, history and literature need to ask in order to get a sense of how textual meaning is produced in other cultures – and what it is we can understand about those societies and cultures by so doing. My focus is on the emergent, the popular and the everyday, the creativity of obscure people and the extraordinary things people everywhere seem to do with words.

This book is intended to open up, in exploratory fashion, a range of questions about texts. It is not intended to be comprehensive or even

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systematic. Inevitably, experts in each of the fields I have touched on will immediately detect great deficiencies in my reading and thinking. They will be right to reproach me. But I will be happy if my readers can nonetheless find something stimulating or productive to react to or to take further in their own work. Despite the change in intellectual climate since my student days, there is still room for a bigger and more concerted discussion about the production and interpretation of verbal texts, and their social significance, in the cultures we study.

Writing this book was made possible by a two-year British Academy Research Readership, which I gratefully acknowledge. I am deeply indebted to two of my editors, Michael Lambek and Jonathan Spencer, who provided good-humoured but extremely searching commentaries on the first draft and vital encouragement when I got stuck with the second. Their contributions went far beyond normal editorial obligations, and led me into ideas and material I would not otherwise have known about – to my great pleasure and benefit. I would also like to thank Ruth Finnegan, who read the whole of my final manuscript at short notice and provided characteristically perceptive, clear-eyed advice. Rosalind Thomas and Lynne Brydon, from different perspectives, offered valuable advice and comments on parts of the book. And Paulo Farias, my companion in everything, has influenced every detail of this book, both by his attentive and illuminating readings and by his own creative intellectual work.