

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-48061-1 - Power, Marginality and African Oral Literature

Edited by Graham Furniss and Liz Gunner

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## · CHAPTER 1 ·

*Introduction: power, marginality  
and oral literature**Graham Furniss and Liz Gunner*

In a recent guide to anthropological research practice in relation to oral traditions and the verbal arts, Ruth Finnegan, a founder figure in the field of African oral literature, points to the interest that has developed, in anthropology as in many other fields, in local processes of negotiating meaning, the agency of artistic creativity and its relation to social action:

One theme is greater concern with individual voices, repertoire and creativity, part of the move within anthropology and other disciplines from 'structure' to 'agency'. Another is an emerging interest in work on the emotions and in aesthetic and expressive facets of human activity. A more explicit focus on 'meaning' comes in too, both meanings to be gleaned from the 'text' and those expressed through a multiplicity of voices. What is involved, further, is more than just the voice of the composer/poet (in the past pictured as *the* central figure), but also the other participants who help to form the work and mediate its meaning and the dynamics through which this occurs. (1992: 51)

This represents a move towards an appreciation of the role that oral literature plays as a dynamic discourse about society and about the relationships between individuals, groups and classes in society. In particular, this perspective sees oral literature not merely as folksy, domestic entertainment but as a domain in which individuals in a variety of social roles articulate a commentary upon power relations in society and indeed create knowledge about society. There is a substantial body of anthropological scholarship that addresses the issue of oratory, rhetoric and political/ritual language and tropes and figures deployed in discourse (see, for example, Bloch 1975; Sapir and Crocker 1977; Paine 1981; Bailey 1983; Parkin 1984), and as Parkin writes in discussing arguments relating to the deployment of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony, 'These many particular uses of tropes point, nevertheless, in one direction: it is people who retain the power to name, entitle, and objectify others, who determine the terms

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of discourse' (1984: 359). Determining the terms of discourse may involve contestation, forcing different individuals and groups to engage in debate over perceived and evolving roles and, at times, shifting identities. Situating a particular speech event within a process of direct debate (or seeing them as juxtaposed alternative expressions) draws attention, when examining the 'text', to the interrelations between that text and other precursor, contemporary or subsequent 'texts'. This interactive dimension between texts is mirrored in the focus upon the relation between performer and audience in the moment of performance. Where Bloch (1975) has seen oratory as the deployment of fixed forms, other anthropologists have foregrounded the adaptability and experimentation that takes place in rhetorical utterances in the face of differing reactions from audiences (Paine 1981; Parkin 1985). In anthropology, discourse has become an extended trope in itself through the work of Foucault and Derrida among others.

In the field of folklore studies, particularly in America, the shift away from a focus upon 'reified persistent cultural items' to 'folklore as a mode of communicative action' was marked by an expansion of the concept 'performance' such that it no longer simply meant gesture, voice quality, etc., in the moment of performance but came to encompass

a focus on the artful use of language in the conduct of social life – in kinship, politics, economics, religion – opening the way to an understanding of performance as socially constitutive and efficacious . . . these critical reorientations relied centrally on the ethnographic and analytical investigation of form–function–meaning interrelationships within situational contexts of language use. (Bauman and Briggs 1990)

The exploration of the term performance and the broadening of its implications has been going on within folklore studies for some time (see Paredes and Bauman 1972; Ben-Amos and Goldstein 1975; Limon and Young 1986). In concentrating attention upon the social action involved in telling a story, singing a song or giving a speech, a number of boundaries previously solid begin to dissolve: the boundaries that delimited a text are replaced by a constitutive notion of textuality (Hanks 1989a); the authorial voice is placed in relation to a variety of other voices both internally and through the intertextuality of external reference, as source, as counterpoint and as 'one side of any particular story'; 'traditional' and 'modern' become not separate categories but current labels under internal cultural debate; 'oral' and 'written' become, '[not] two separate "things" . . . [but part of] the whole

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communication process in which there may at any one time be a number of different media and processes' (Finnegan 1992: 50), thus directing our attention to the particular communicative processes of 'being oral'/orality rather than objects that are specimens of 'oral literature'. In all this, the concentration on social action demands that the performance, the people, and the 'text' are seen together in their political context. As Finnegan puts it:

Equally striking is the growing awareness of the 'political' nature both of the material to be studied and of the research process itself. This is increasingly appreciated within anthropology, but also runs across many disciplines, from emphasis on the politics of language or of literary theory, to the socially constructed nature of artistic forms or the many-layered nature of human expression. (1992: 50–1)

The concentration upon the broad notion of performance within folklore studies is linked to the movement within linguistics broadly defined to assess the utterance not as a manifestation of underlying linguistic competence but as a 'speech act'. The idea of speech act as social action is not a new one, but the development of speech act theory goes back to Austin (1962) and has been extensively developed (see, for example, Searle 1969, 1979; Bauman and Sherzer 1989) concentrating upon the study of effectiveness, 'illocutionary force' in speech, and intentionality.

Intentionality brings to the fore the myriad, overlapping types of purpose: to amuse, to satirise, to teach, to expound, to warn, to stir . . . the list is endless. In performing these and other functions many speech acts, and the text that flows from them, present a picture of individuals and groups in society and the relationships of power between them. A number of contributions to this volume provide examples. However, people producing oral literature are not just commentators but are often also involved in relationships of power themselves, in terms of supporting or subverting those in power. The forms with which they work are themselves invested with power; that is to say, the words, the texts, have the ability to provoke, to move, to direct, to prevent, to overturn and to recast social reality.

The particular dimension that is most pressing in all orality is the relationship between the fleeting temporary experience and the people who were present at it. Such temporary experiences are nevertheless a class of event that are repeated, even if differently each performance. As such they are socially embedded and have particular relationships with individuals, groups and the state. Not only may the class of event

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have a particular relationship with external social forces, but all those involved in it have their own longer-standing positions and attitudes to the surrounding society. The ‘meaning’ of the content of the transmitted messages in the oral performance, complex as it usually is, may yet be only a supplement to the significance of the performer’s position in relation to the audience and third parties. Seemingly innocuous jocular moments of relaxation between social equals may yet carry significant messages of exclusion or solidarity to participants and other people. Set outside the parameters of group membership, the performer may articulate unwelcome reflections on the nature of society, or may be looking for inclusion. Lying, therefore, behind the apparent meaning of the text is the complex set of power relations within which the performer, audience and denoted individuals and groups are enmeshed.

Approached from this perspective, then, orality and oral literature raise issues in a number of areas that are represented in the division of this volume into parts. First, at the broadest level, there is the question of the appropriation of expressive forms by the state and the application by the state, or by corporate organisations or social groups, of oral forms to particular purposes. Whether it be through the articulation of patron–client relationships or the co-option of whole artistic movements, the issue addresses both how control is established and maintained and, conversely, how expressions of resistance or alternative views are articulated. In some circumstances, the distinction between supportive and subversive may correspond with genre boundaries, in others even the most narrowly circumscribed of genres may be intrinsically double-edged – praise-song may be, in an instant, transformed into innuendo or vilification.

A second issue is the way in which oral forms articulate and represent to the performer and audience particular visions of existing power relations in society. Whether such representations are supportive or subversive in intent they constitute part of a continuing debate about older versus younger, husbands and wives, mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, one generation and the next, aristocrats and commoners, one ethnic group as against another, elites and ordinary people. The debate is of course in terms of ideas, symbolic representations rather than ‘social realities’: Azuonye’s chapter discusses the representation of kingship in Igbo tales. Kingship is an idea in Igbo debate rather than an immediate reality in Igbo society.

A third issue that emerges is the question of the instrumentality of oral performance in affecting existing power relations. Here the focus

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is upon the ability of performance to transform and not simply to represent existing power relations or to operate across the margins of praise and mockery. This instrumentality is a dimension of oral forms that is visible most directly at a level of personal or small group interaction. Clearly, when dealing at a more general level with the developing class structure of particular societies or current social transformations, discourse about society is enmeshed in complex social, economic and political forces.

The fourth issue addressed in this volume concerns the relation of gender and genre. Women are constantly redefining the terms by which they are signified within broader social discourses. Thus, for instance, in Durán's essay the emergence of powerful women singers in Mali has not only shifted power relations within the music industry itself but has shifted the discourse on gender and enabled women to produce their own signifying terms. Chimhundu's essay, on the other hand, outlines the enchainning effects of language and popular song which conspire to prevent the emergence of new definitions of women and women's sexuality in contemporary Zimbabwean society. There is thus no clear pattern of an emergent discourse as regards genre, gender and power but rather an ongoing dialectic of positives and negatives.

The final part of the book focuses upon the dynamics of language use in the context of a variety of communicative strategies, related to the wielding of power in society. At the very centre of the exercise of power conventions about speech may inject distance across which communication can take place only in certain ways and through certain forms of mediation.

The chapters in this book encompass different historical moments, current practices, and cover a number of countries in Africa. Oral literature in Africa, as discussed here, is not a discrete and self-contained, inward-looking sphere of human activity but constitutes a field in which the dynamics of political process and the daily representation of social life are central. Song, poetry, popular representations of many kinds, are an integral part of the way in which people in Africa today are commenting upon what is happening to their societies.

A further aspect of the discussion relates to the sometimes unequal status of written and oral texts. The power of the latter is often underestimated in the official discourse of the state. Just as Jameson (1981) simplifies the literatures of the so-called Third World, casting them all as 'national allegory' (Ahmad 1987), so, in a parallel way, oral texts are often regarded within national cultures as texts of the 'other' and thus marginalised.

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## ORALITY AND THE POWER OF THE STATE

The relation between oral literature and power structures can be viewed in a number of ways. The multiple means of constructing nationalism, of involving and re-using cultural forms, have been drawn out in Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983). Benedict Anderson (1983) has pointed to the fluidity of notions of nation, although he, unlike Hobsbawm and Ranger, overplays the part of print and underestimates the role of oral forms in constructing the nation. A number of essays in the collection point to the interrelation of cultural forms and nationalist discourse. There is, as Ahmad (1992) has usefully pointed out, the danger of a too unitary notion of nationalism. There are, he suggests, any number of different kinds of nations and nationalisms. Certainly the essays in this collection suggest such a multiplicity.

Mlama's chapter suggests a static and artificial use of nation and culture with the latter rigidly used as part of official nationalist practice. She looks at oral art in relation to the Tanzanian State and its political programme as it has developed over the modern period. Post-colonial Tanzania saw a great upsurge of nationalism such that the state itself proposed a major revaluation and endorsement of a wide variety of indigenous cultural forms, thereby striking a position opposed to the colonial 'silencing of the people'. As in many other parts of the world the singular identification of the interests of the state, the people and the party, produced both the reification of tradition and its co-option to the interests of 'the ruling class'.

Mlama's chapter bemoans the monopolistic state control of patronage such that art becomes mere fawning propaganda, on the other hand she stigmatises government for not having a cultural policy with resources to support art. She expresses surprise that the artist does not bite the hand that feeds it in spite of the fact that it very rarely gets fed. The artist is disempowered, in Mlama's view, by being estranged from the 'true' sentiments of the people. But Mlama sees hope in the parallel existence of unofficial art in song and in popular theatre which, beyond the reach of state patronage, attempts to 'empower' the artist and, through the artist, ordinary people.

This broad overview of the place of oral culture in the state raises issues concerning the possibility of benign as opposed to malign policy, the arguments as to whether all oral art is embedded within relations of patronage and whether no policy is the only policy worth having. Nevertheless the Tanzanian example clearly illustrates the

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way in which issues of ‘political correctness’ are tightly interwoven into the content and performance contexts of much oral art, and yet oral art has the ability, on occasion, to transform itself out of one political function into another.

Hofmeyr examines the interface between native administration bureaucracy and chiefs in South Africa in the period between 1920 and 1950. The political struggles between those two forces are manifest in many different ways. Hofmeyr’s discussion focuses on the way in which each side attempts to mould communication to fit their own familiar and dominant modes of discourse. Overlaid therefore upon the politics of language use, relating to the differential command of English, Sesotho and Seswati, is the struggle by the native administration officials, on the one hand, to impose the authority of written documentation and the styles of language appropriate thereto, and the countervailing strategies employed by chiefs and their people, even within modes of writing, to retain many of the distinctive characteristics of orality, always looking to frame interaction in terms of meetings, debates, spoken promises, recollections of past precedent. These strategies are discussed in more detail in Hofmeyr (1994). Far from seeing the onward march of the hegemony of writing, Hofmeyr documents the repeated frustration of native administration officials as they are required again and again to explain verbally, to exemplify verbally and to justify verbally information whose natural authority, being written, was not accepted by its addressees. In this way, therefore, Hofmeyr’s discussion documents the struggle, and the failure to some extent, to marginalise orality in the politics of communication.

Kofi Agovi examines the role of a particular oral performance, *avudwene*, in the situation of a public festival in Ghana. Where Hofmeyr situates the argument between native administration officials and chiefs and their people in South Africa, Agovi looks at the debate between two classes of people in Nzema society, ‘chief men’ and ‘young men’. Young men dominate the articulation of ideas within *avudwene* about the way in which chiefs, and other individuals, do behave and should behave. This articulation of ideas about good governance is undertaken within a structured division of artistic labour: one category of person acts as thinker/author and listener to what people are saying. Their composition is handed on to a category of artistic director who shapes the piece for performance; this second category then train the ‘actors’ who will actually perform the piece in public. This is not transient, spontaneous material; it constitutes



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careful reflection upon the ideals, values and expectations of leadership and their relation to observed actions of current leaders. In festival performances audiences indicate their degree of concurrence with the views expressed. Agovi sees the articulation of these ideas not as the forlorn cries of the forgotten and the powerless but as something which affects day-to-day behaviour, and the observation of such modifications of behaviour leads him to view *avudwene* as both a forum for the discussion of constitutional principles and an effective check upon the behaviour of the executive.

Within the articulation of criticism and opposition Agovi sees proverbs as performing a particular role. They encapsulate values and philosophical positions that are part of general popular sentiment. Their deployment in the *avudwene* is part of the articulation of popular sentiment in public debate by one important class against another which cannot afford to ignore that class. Good governance then is not a matter of abstract rules applied to the ruling class but an insistence upon putting into practice these values and philosophical positions. In Nzema society individuals will move from one class 'young men' to the other 'chief men' but the relation remains one of government and 'loyal opposition'. Loyalty to the ancestors and to the people constitutes the perceived basis of the legitimacy of the opposition.

#### REPRESENTING POWER RELATIONS

Azuonye sets out, through the representation of kings in Igbo tales, a picture on the one hand of legitimate authority and on the other of the abuse of power, two sides of the same coin. His discussion is directed along two lines. First, and most directly, he examines the nature of the picture of power relations painted in the tales insofar as it presents a 'democratic ideal'. Second, Azuonye sees the painting of that picture as part of the propagation of competing visions, 'the power of oral literature to sustain, through the selective process of mythic filtering, a particular type of social ideology against the claims of rival or contending ideologies'. In terms of the image of legitimate authority the tales establish a composite set of criteria – each tale fills in another criterion wherewith to judge an individual – that together constitute a yardstick of approved or disapproved attributes. In this sense, then, the tales both give expression to underlying social tensions such as are explored in the chapter by Görög-Karady, and are self-conscious explorations, through narrative exemplification, of the boundaries of acceptable behaviour by those in power.



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Azuonye goes on first to set the representation of kings in the context of relations with the Benin kingdom showing how it is the behaviour of Benin which provides many examples of unacceptable behaviour, and second, in historical terms, to posit a process of democratisation that has led Igbo society from kingship to an acephalous society in which there remains 'a deep-seated Igbo admiration for royalty'. Contentious as this view may be, it indicates that it is not necessary to have a king to be concerned with the parameters that do, or should, surround the exercise of power. In relation to his second concern, Azuonye proposes an overview in which the ideology of 'democratic' restriction on the use of power for the Igbo represents a 'mythic filtering' whereby certain dominant ideas are propagated and maintained through time by being reiterated. What are these dominant ideas? They centre on positive and negative representations of *éze* which Azuonye generally glosses as 'king' in the tales, but which in society can constitute a 'leader' in a variety of social, political and religious spheres. Tales which focus on negative representations tend to follow a pattern in which oppression leads to resistance which leads to a reversal of fortune/defeat for the oppressor. The tales portray, inter alia, the sadistic king, the jealous king, the king who imitates Benin, the king who is humiliated and the king who does not maintain royal distance. In each of these representations there is the strong presence of the positive alternative, which is made explicit in the alternative set of tales: the amiable king, the moral king, the firm but fair king, the king who investigates fully, the king who rules by persuasion and not by force, the king whose promises are inviolable and the king who maintains distance. For Azuonye the exemplification of good government in these tales is centred upon the restrictions upon the behaviour of the king and it is these restrictions that are the checks of democratic constraint – arbitrary, unconstitutional behaviour is definable through these popular representations.

Görög-Karady examines the representations of power relations between fathers and sons within Bambara society as seen through a body of tales. She sees the tales as a cathartic working through of the inherent tensions and rivalries between fathers and sons in a society where filial obedience and the unquestionability of the parental edict are strongly sanctioned norms. In one story prohibition and transgression relating to a son's sexual behaviour produce punishment and revenge. The story encapsulates both the enduring nature of the conflict over control of the son's behaviour and the necessary transfer, in time, of power from father to son. In another tale, a variation involving a spear

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motif, there are other dénouements whereby transgression by the son is recognised by the father as a mark of strength and thus of being fit to inherit. The tales weave together, Görög-Karady indicates, inherent tensions between love and arranged marriages, between obedience and revolt, dependency and control. In representing power relations the tales act out the implications of internally contradictory values that remain in contradiction from generation to generation in spite of the momentary resolution of conflict through the transfer of power.

Through an examination of Lyela tales Steinbrich, like Azuonye, sees in an acephalous society a concern with the exercise of power and the accumulation of power in the hands of powerful men. Where Azuonye sees an outside stratified society which provides a model for 'kings' as stereotypes of 'bad' leaders, so Steinbrich sees Mossi as the external influence and source for parts of the Lyela 'debate' on power relations within Lyela society: 'In the divine kingship of the Mossi the peasants had to moderate the outcome of the story. They took care not to enter into conflict with their ruling classes. The Lyela, on the other hand, unfold their fantasies about the elimination of the wicked chief without any constraint.' But in Lyela society the key relationships under discussion in tales about power relate to the temporal power of 'chiefs' outside Lyela and the religious authority of the Lyela Earth Priest, as well as relations between senior and junior and between father and son. In inter-ethnic tales where a Lyela figure encounters an outside temporal authority and is embroiled in conflict it is the magical powers of the 'snake that provides curative medicine' or the 'staff that transforms' which come to the hero's aid. In discussing the symbolic interpretations of these tales Steinbrich also draws attention to the way in which the tales picture a process of transition whereby authority is handed on from father to son sometimes through violent upheaval and sometimes through a more regulated 'inheritance'. Marginal people, destitute orphans, can be the heroes whose defeat of the powerful brings them into the world of influence, wealth and power. Other marginal people, in the case of one tale discussed here, an old woman, can represent dangerous alternative forces. In the debate about the exercise of temporal power the religious authority of elders with their knowledge of alternative sources of power is deployed to counterbalance secular power. The figure of the chief is used as the stereotype of secular authority standing in for the dominant element in a variety of types of relationship, between fathers and sons, rich and poor, families and orphans, young and old, men and women.