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Oral Literature in Africa

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Oral Literature in Africa, by Ruth Finnegan. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1970.

I have in my possession a first edition, hard copy of Ruth Finnegan's quintessential work, *Oral Literature in Africa*. It has a yellow cover, preserved by a plastic sheathe, it is a little frayed around the edges and has that old, musty library smell about it. I love and treasure this book. It is dedicated by Professor Finnegan '[t]o all my teachers'. Professor Finnegan is indeed one of *my* teachers. I properly met Ruth Finnegan at the second International Society for Oral Literature (ISOLA) conference in 1998, which I hosted at the University of Cape Town. She gave a keynote address which included reference to her seminal work and the future of oral literary studies. She has continually influenced our work as researchers following in her footsteps: Isidore Okpewho, Harold Scheub, Abiola Irele, Graham Furniss, Elizabeth Gunner, Karin Barber, Isobel Hofmeyr, John Foley, Olayibi Yai, Edgard Sienaert, Brian Street, Noverino Canonici, Mark Turin, Daniela Merolla, Jan Jansen, Jeff Opland, and many others; some younger, some older, some living, some departed, scholars influenced by this great and humble intellectual and her body of work.

Some of us have at some point taken issue with aspects of her work; Beidelman (1972), Walter Ong (1982) and others, yet we remain engaged with the thinking in it. Today, my treasured hard copy with its ragged edges has *not* been replaced by an online version. It has been augmented and embellished by the need to acknowledge our 'new cross-over teachers' who embrace contemporary technologies and the need to now include them in Ruth Finnegan's original dedication. Even the new bright blue cover of the online version appropriately contains a technologized etching of a performer/singer in colourful West African attire. This makes the online version come alive, in a sense representing the rebirth of this work.

Professor Ruth Finnegan requires little introduction. Her book, *Oral Literature in Africa*, first published in 1970, has been prescribed and used throughout the world as a seminal text in the field of orality. To date it is still the most authoritative book on oral literature, a term defended by Finnegan over the years in her debates with Beidelman (1972) and others. It seems appropriate to quote from a review of the original edition of the book, which would equally apply today. It appeared as follows in *The Times Literary Supplement*: '... a book certain to establish itself as a classic in the field of oral literature, distinguished alike for the range of its references, the weight of its judgments and the quality of its discriminations. Future scholars are likely to find ... a vast web from which their innumerable lines of inquiry will radiate and to which they will ultimately return.' Indeed, this review has withstood the test of time and remains on point today, with many contemporary scholars ultimately returning to this work, in a sense returning to our intellectual habitus.

This text has now been published in an online version. This has allowed for the work of this renowned scholar and fieldworker to reposition itself back into contention via the technologized work, or what I have referred to as 'technauriture' (Kaschula 2004; Kaschula and Mostert 2011, 3). The 'techn' represents technology, the 'auri' derives from the word auriture, and the 'ture' represents literature. Technauriture attempts to embrace the dichotomies acknowledged by Ong and Finnegan. The online version of *Oral Literature in Africa* speaks to this merging of dichotomies and can be accessed or downloaded free of charge at the following website: <http://www.openbookpublishers.com/product/97/oral-literature-in-africa>.

The online version came to life in September 2012. It consists of 614 pages of text, 38 black and white illustrations, as well as a black and white map of Africa, which shows the people mentioned in the book, outlining where they live.

What is significant about this revised, online edition is that it makes this ground-breaking, seminal work freely available to all who want to use it. This is particularly significant for the African scholar living in an increasingly technologized society on a continent where academics often remain on the periphery of a society consumed by emerging capitalism and political

uncertainty. African academics, their universities and libraries are largely under-resourced and can often not afford to purchase hard copies of books. Making this book freely available therefore returns it back to its people on the ground, back to its original home, which underpins the fieldwork represented in the volume. It is now available for the next generation of researchers who will emerge through being influenced by this technologized version of the book. Scholars will indeed be able to take a look backwards into the past, through the clear window represented by this book, before leaping forwards into new intellectual terrains, in pursuit of new directions.

It is clear both from the original and the online version that Ruth Finnegan dedicated years and years of her life to fieldwork and to the creation of this book. The study first deals with the perceptions of oral literature as art; it deals with nineteenth-century approaches and collections, as well as with the literary complexities of oral cultures. It outlines the implications for the study of oral literature and provides a linguistic basis with examples from Bantu as well as some literary tools for analysis.

Second, the book provides a detailed and layered analysis of African oral poetry, beginning with an exposé of the poets themselves, followed by a description of the epic, panegyric, elegiac, religious, war, hunting and work poem as well as the form and composition of lyric poetry, political songs and poetry, as well as children's songs and rhymes. These include lullabies, nursery rhymes, children's games and verses and southern Sudanese action songs. The panegyric poetry looks at southern Bantu praise poetry; its form and style, occasions of delivery as well as its traditional and contemporary significance. The elegiac poetry concentrates on Akan funeral dirges, while the religious poetry analyses the Swahili *tenzi*, the Fante Methodist lyric as well as Sotho and Yoruba divining poetry. The topical and political songs are particularly interesting. They include Mau Mau hymns, Guinea R.D.A. songs as well as Northern Rhodesian party songs. This aspect of the book allows for the introduction and study of work done on comparative liberation songs and poetry between the past and the present in Africa. It has had a particular influence on the work of contemporary scholars such as Alec Pongweni (1982), with his work on songs that won the liberation war in Zimbabwe as well as my own work on political influences in South Africa on contemporary isiXhosa oral poetry (Kaschula 2002; Kaschula and Mostert 2009).

The third part of Finnegan's book deals with theories of prose, its content and form, proverbs, riddles and forms of oratory. In this section one is introduced to evolutionist interpretations, the historical-geographical school, classification and typologies as well as the structural-functional approach to oral literature. Prose narratives are classified, for example, into tales about animals, about people, myths and legends as well as historical narratives. The significance and concept of the proverb is interrogated, its form and content with a description of where the riddle functions and on what occasions, specifically in relation to Jabo, Zulu and Azande peoples.

The final part provides an analysis of drum language and literature as well as examples of drama; for example, West African puppet shows and Bushman 'plays'. There are examples of Mande comedies, and West African masquerades from South-Eastern Nigeria, in particular Kalabari. One is also introduced to the principles of drum language, with examples of drum literature in the form of announcements and calls, names, proverbs and poetry.

One may now ask: So what is new in the online version? Is it not simply a case of new wine in old bottles? Well, in a sense this is exactly what it is, as is all oral literature or technauriture. Oral literary forms are simply building on the past, putting another dimension to the continual building of the continuum that is the link between the past and the present. It is not a continuum that divides us, but a continuum that unites us as a people, underpinned by the cultures and traditions that place us on an ever-changing continuum rather than a linear trajectory of existence. This speaks very much to Finnegan's (1988) approach to the orality-literacy debate in her works.

Today one can speak of an oral–literate–techno continuum and it is this continuum to which Finnegan alludes in her new online book.

The technologized version includes 26 images, a foreword by Dr Mark Turin, a new introduction and an updated bibliography. Perhaps more importantly for the new generation of researchers are the online audio recordings of stories and songs from the Limba country in northern Sierra Leone that Finnegan originally collected and recorded, in the villages of Kakarima and Kamabai, mostly from 1961 though to 1964, as part of her fieldwork which can also be accessed free of charge at: <http://www.oralliterature.org/collections/rfinnegan001.html>.

These recordings were made using an old style narrow tape battery recorder. In the same way that this online version is now cutting edge, so too was the use of this tape recorder in the 1960s. One can clearly see the ‘continuum’ at play. The dominant language used on these recordings is Limba (Hulimba Ha and including various dialects) with occasional words in Krio or Creole, which was increasingly becoming a lingua franca at that time. The online recordings are for example divided into: Tape 1, Side 1; Tape 1, Side 2 and so on.

In recent research, Kaschula and Mostert (2011) make reference to the work of the World Oral Literature Project based at the University of Cambridge and the research which has been conducted as part of the *Verba Africana* series at the University of Leiden, as well as the *ELLAf* Encyclopaedia of literatures and languages of Africa) supported by our French colleagues at INALCO and LLACAN and various other organizations. These organizations and intellectual endeavours are primarily concerned with the preservation, archiving and dissemination of oral literary forms. This research can be referred to as cutting edge technauriture. In fact the technauriture underpinning the work of the World Oral Literature Project has allowed Ruth Finnegan’s work to recreate itself, as part of the *World Oral Literature Series*, in a way which appeals to the contemporary student, scholar and teacher in what is increasingly becoming a technologized reality on the African continent and globally. The non-profit Open Book Publishers must be commended for bringing this book back into a new form electronically and free of charge.

The paperback version as well as the hard copy can also now be purchased online. However, the book is available as a free pdf and ebook for download – this is facilitated by donations and support from interested readers and organizations, using the crowd-funding website unglue.it. The epub is suitable for iPads while the mobi edition is suitable for kindles.

A word of caution: like the printed word, technauriture or technology is dependent on the human factor in terms of accuracy. In other words, what we feed into the technologized form is what we will get as the end product. We are not yet at the point where technology creates thought and provides original thought. On this note, it is indeed unfortunate that as part of the new images forming part of this publication perhaps one of the greatest poets ever to emerge from the African continent, SEK Mqhayi, is incorrectly referred to as Mqhyai. To compound the error, the image that is provided is not in fact of Mqhayi, but of another great poet, DLP Yali-Manisi. This error serves as a caution to all scholars in this emerging domain of technauriture: your online material is only as accurate as the hand that feeds it into the system.

It is true that I cherish the hard copy of my yellow-covered *Oral Literature in Africa*, but it would be foolhardy of me not to embrace the online technologized version in the same way that the concepts of orality and literacy embraced each other, as so expertly and succinctly shown in the work of Ruth Finnegan. Indeed, with this online version of Finnegan’s book the oral–literate–techno continuum has been brought full circle, the one feeding into the other in an ongoing contemporary dance of orality, literacy and technology, offering new approaches to the researching, teaching and understanding of oral literature, past and present. In the 1970s, Ruth Finnegan (1977, 3) already aptly concluded as follows with regard to oral poetry and indeed in regard to oral literature more generally: ‘oral poetry is not an odd or aberrant

phenomenon in human culture ... destined to wither away with increasing modernization'. In fact, Ruth Finnegan's online version of her book speaks to these continuities between the past and the present, as part of a continually adapting and changing modern reality.

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Slavery and the Culture of Taste, by Simon Gikandi, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press 2011, 386 pp., 6 × 9, 73 halftones, \$45.00/£30.95, Cloth, ISBN: 9780691140667; eBook, \$45.00, ISBN: 9781400840113

Whenever I enter the British Museum – particularly as I cross the Enlightenment Galleries – I suffer an involuntarily mental tic. I feel the urge to quietly, but emphatically repeat '... men had been kept back as a kind of enchantment...' – words that formed part of Francis Bacon's potent description of his generation's frustration as they pondered the obstructions to truly innovative and clear thinking. In his *Instauratio Magna*, Bacon constructed a counter-vision to what he saw as the suffocating ambient fog of ignorance and superstition: a grand museum in a book. It suggested a framework within which a new generation of Europeans might redefine and catalogue the world. As the frontispiece to the volume Bacon chose an image of a magnificent ship sailing away across an ocean towards the horizon. Classical pillars defined the margins of the image; just as the classical world would offer up many of the underpinning tenets and axioms to govern Bacon's intellectual endeavour. But despite their romantic hankering for the seeming clarity of the ancient world, this was a project that would come to be identified by new thinking.