

ORAL TRADITION AND THE TEACHING OF AFRICAN CULTURE: NEW CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES

A TRADIÇÃO ORAL E O ENSINO DE CULTURA AFRICANA: NOVOS
DESAFIOS E PERSPECTIVAS

Kazadi wa Mukuna

ABSTRACT: Understanding african culture has challenged educators and researchers both in Africa and in its Diaspora. In this article, I argue that the transmission of knowledge about African culture is only possible through the application of a multidisciplinary research paradigm capable of crossing information related to different cultural activities and practices. In order to take greater advantage of the diverse sources of traditional knowledge, the researcher can not ignore the so-called "oral tradition", a mode of documentation and transmission practiced in Africa since ancient times.

Keywords: African culture; Education; Oral tradition.

RESUMO: A compreensão da cultura africana vem desafiando educadores e pesquisadores tanto no continente africano quanto em sua diáspora. No presente artigo, eu defendo que a transmissão de conhecimento sobre a cultura africana só é possível mediante a aplicação de um paradigma de pesquisa multidisciplinar capaz de cruzar informações relativas a diferentes atividades e práticas culturais. Visando tirar maior proveito das diversas fontes de conhecimento tradicional, o pesquisador não pode ignorar a chamada "tradição oral", um modo de documentação e transmissão praticado na África desde tempos remotos.

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Palavras-chave: Cultura Africana; Educação; Tradição Oral

ORAL TRADITION AND THE TEACHING OF AFRICAN CULTURE: NEW CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES

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The quest for understanding African culture has long challenged ill informed educators and scholars on the continent and in the Diaspora. I assert that to properly transmit knowledge about African culture, educators and scholars are compelled to apply a multidisciplinary paradigm in their research, that is, an approach that will assist the researcher in leaving no stone unturned in order to gather pertinent knowledge from diverse African cultural activities and practices. To benefit from various sources of traditional knowledge, the scholar cannot ignore the “oral tradition” – a mode of documentation and transmission that has been practiced in Africa since the dawn of time. This multidisciplinary approach includes but it is not limited to written documents that include all the arts in general, i.e., sculpture, painting, weaving and music and dance in particular. In this paper I assert that in Africa, arts are the media through which the oral tradition is visualized. Therefore, educators who fail to consult the arts as traditional sources of information about different aspects of African culture are committing serious factual errors in their classroom delivery. In other words, educators will be denying students valid ethnographic information, contained in one of the traditional modes of documentation and transmission, such as the “oral tradition.”

This way of thinking underlines the importance of the arts in researching African history and literature. Scholars have to accept the fact that in Africa, arts have to be studied from a contextual perspective to reveal their value as tangible carriers of cultural information. They are within reach of scholars as a tangible source of total knowledge that should be seen as the broad-based backdrop against which is couched the African concept of “Ubuntu.” ² The recent seminar organized by the Centro de Estudos Africanos at the Universidade de São Paulo (Brazil) on the theme “A Pesquisa na Universidade Africana no Contexto da Globalização e Interface com o Brasil: Perspectivas Epistemológicas Emergentes, Novos Horizontes Temáticos, Desafios” brought together African and Brazilian university educators who teach a range of subjects related to African culture on the African continent and in the Diaspora. The authors of various papers

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presented at the seminar failed to use a holistic research approach that would allow them to consult a mixture of sources, mostly oral, to obtain total information about African culture. This holistic approach would shed light on the continent of Africa, as a whole in which all things are linked together and interact (HAMPATÉ BÂ, 1981, p. 168).

What is oral tradition? There are many definitions of "oral tradition" found in anthropological literature, it would take more than an article to entertain half of them. Nevertheless, let us compare three of these definitions from the viewpoint of their concept. In his contribution to the General History of Africa project under the auspices of UNESCO, Jan Vansina defines oral tradition as a verbal testimony transmitted orally from one generation to another (VANSINA, 1981, p. 143). In the same source, he asserts that the special characteristics of oral tradition are the fact that it is oral and its manner of transmission (*ibid.*). According to Vansina, oral tradition is a body of reported statements concerning the past (VANSINA, 2006, p. 19–20). These statements are "exclusively of hearsay accounts, that is, testimonies that narrate an event which has not been witnessed and remembered by the informant himself, but which he has learnt about through hearsay" (*ibid.*). These testimonial messages must be oral statements spoken, sung, or carved out on musical instruments.

Whereas Vansina defines oral tradition as understood from the Western practical perspective that is characterized by the unwritten transmission of hearsay accounts, Amadou Hampaté Bâ formulates the definition of oral tradition within the context of an African frame of reference. Hampaté Bâ's definition highlights the effect of its mental conditioning when he writes, "Oral tradition is the great school of life, all aspects of which are covered and affected by it – it is at once religion, knowledge, natural science, apprenticeship in a craft, history, entertainment, and recreation" (*ibid.*, p. 168). To Hampaté Bâ, oral tradition is "the heritage of all that our ancestors have known, and it is in the germ they transmit to us, just as the baobab-tree is potentially in its seed" (HAMPATÉ BÂ, *op. cit.*, p. 166).

In his definition, Hampaté Bâ underscores the conditioning result of oral tradition from a contextual and conceptual status of the African mind. This definition implies not only the deep-seated significance of conceptual conditioning, but also the lasting effect of this conditioning on an individual. It provides the African with a state of mind that governs his environment from whence are rooted his thinking process and eventually his behavior. Portia Maulsby relates this thinking process as African retentions in African-American music, which makes black people, wherever they are, create, interpret, and experience music out of an African frame of reference.

² In Zulu language, the concept of Ubuntu means the Humanity. In the aftermath of the apartheid, the South African government adopted the Ubuntu concept in the process of forgiveness.

These retentions also constitute the ‘reference system’ of values in terms of which music is made, performed and interpreted. This mental conditioning becomes the heritage that is not lost, but remains with the individual and is transmitted orally beyond the present generation. This heritage, according to J. H. Kwabena Nketia, lies in the memory of the last generation of great minds, of whom it can be said: “they are the living memory of Africa” (NKETIA, 2005, p. 324). As if he is taking a defensive posture about written tradition versus verbal knowledge, Hampaté Bâ clarifies the difference between these epistemological thoughts: “Writing is one thing and knowledge is another. Writing is the photograph of knowledge but is not knowledge itself. Knowledge is a light that is in man” (ibid.).

Discussing the interdisciplinary nature of African music research, Nketia gives the third definition of oral tradition from the ethnomusicological perspective, pointing out that ill-prepared educators in their quest for knowledge about African culture on the continent and in the Diaspora frequently ignore the holistic approach to research. In this light, I assert that the educator, who is not submerged in and has not accepted the validity of African oral tradition as a legitimate source of information about topics of African culture, is doomed to remain ill-prepared. In short, to be considered as a true instructor of any African subject, the educator has to acquire a deep-seated knowledge of the language that carries the tradition. Often, the language is laden with hidden nuances about various cultural aspects. Without this linguistic knowledge, one is exposed to unsubstantiated sources of information. This condition presents an insurmountable challenge for educators in Brazil.

The definition of ‘oral tradition’ included not only narratives but also traditions associated with every aspect of culture – social and political institutions, religion, art and craft, music and dance, as well as language and the texts of oral literature (NKETIA, op. cit., p. 226).

This holistic approach reveals the challenge encountered by educators who teach topics of African culture in the Diaspora. Often, these educators avoid seeking data from traditional formats of documentation such as music, dance, or carving, which embody the reality of oral tradition. Most educators/scholars view music from its technical aspect, as a subject that requires special training. They ignore the fact that music contains several integral parts, including song lyrics, instruments, and props, above and beyond the mere sound structure. Africanist scholars who ignore the integrity of music have published their studies incomplete or laden with erroneous conclusions.

This shortcoming was apparent in the recent “Seminário Internacional” mentioned above. As I listened to presentations made by my African and Brazilian colleagues, I observed that the majority of them omitted/ignored or simply avoided reference to the arts as sources of infor-

mation to corroborate their assertions or to point out the significance of the arts in documenting the message of oral tradition as discussed above.

I. MUSIC

To entertain the question of “why music is the way it is” writes Allan Merriam (2008, p. 15), it is imperative to apply a contextual paradigm that brings together corroborative evidence contained in different non-musical sources. According to Merriam, to understand why music is the way it is, you must first understand the behavior that produced it (*ibid.*, p. 7). Conceptually, the contextual paradigm recognizes knowledge of Africa as a sum of practices/expressions of a culture seen as a cosmic whole in which there is a symbiotic relation between all elements innate and otherwise. Gerhard Kubik (1983, p. 29–41) emphasizes the significance of contextual approach in the study of culture in Africa and asserts that it constitutes a closed mode of communication that is unique to every community. He writes,

The intercultural approach in the studies of African cultures and its expressions, for example, in the context of music/dance complex is based on the notion that a culture always manifests itself as a system of closed/specialized forms of communication (*comunicação fechado*); that means to say that a totality of transmission of concept—verbalized or non-verbal—between individuals in a culture is determined by an intercultural communicative network (KUBIK, 1983, p. 39).

The contextual paradigm in the study of African culture can also be deduced from these words of the Malian philosopher Tierno Bokar:³ “If you wish to learn about Africa, if you wish Africa to teach you what it knows, cease for the while to be what you are and forget what you know” (BOKAR *apud.* HAMPATÉ BÂ, *op. cit.*, p. 203). In other words, the quest for knowledge about Africa has to be approached with an open mind, free of any pre-conceived thoughts from elsewhere. Learn about African ways first, before accepting the responsibility to educate others about Africa and its cultures.

Elsewhere (WA MUKUNA, 2011, p. 97) I stress that languages are generally vital sources of information about the nature of African musical elements the principle that governs the organization of the music is ethnically defined. African language provides relevant information about the melodic contour derived from the semantic level of the language, the melody of a song adapted from the sequential pattern of tones of each word, its rhythmic organization being a product of syllabic structures of the language, and the harmonic implication of the musi-

³ Born in Segou, Mali, in 1875, he moved to the village of Badiangara where he died in 1939.

cal composition, also a byproduct of the semantic level of the language. Language also plays a relevant role in the selection of a major musical instrument with which an ethnic group is identified. In this case, the instrument is selected according to its capacity to reproduce the linguistic tones of the ethnic group. For example, the Dùndún—a double headed hourglass shaped membranophone, selected by the Yoruba people in Nigeria—is the only one capable of reproducing the sliding (up and down or combined) tones found in the language. To the Yoruba, this is the talking drum *par excellence*.

Socially, music serves a variety of roles in diverse aspects of daily life. It is a perfect vehicle through which numerous cultural aspects of an ethnic group is preserved and cultural knowledge is transmitted orally from one generation to another. Ethnographically, music is the tool that records emic information about geographic landscape travelled by an ethnic group in its migratory movement from one point to another. Music sings praises to and narrates the exploits of the chief, exalts landmarks with songs about rivers, flora and fauna. In short, music summarizes the essence of the African philosophy of existence expressed in a simple phrase, “I belong, therefore, I am,” or as a Zulu would say, “I am because you are and you are because I am.” In other words, knowledge about culture in Africa is a sum of elements that interact (see also HAMPATÉ BÂ, 1981, p. 168).

In a ritual ceremony, music builds the bridge of communication between the world of the living and that of ancestors. In the community, music is an effective didactic tool used to instruct the younger generation about their cultural responsibilities as they strive to become effective and productive members of the community.

In Africa, dance is to music what in Western culture the note is to music. Whereas the latter is a visual representation of the invisible sound/pitch utilized by composers to document their expression, the former is a visual expression of musical rhythm with body movements. As a subject, music should not be feared as a specialized subject that requires special training. In research, music, as well as dance, is just one of the formats of preservation of oral tradition. Music contains data with which to corroborate the appropriate understanding and the interpretation of the oral tradition in Africa. Therefore, the study of African history, literature, and philosophy, cannot be complete without the assessment of artistic expressions.

II. HISTORY

In the first section of this work I have given definitions of oral tradition and stressed its importance in Africa as a vehicle of documentation and transmission of past accounts, as oral

testimony transmitted verbally from one generation to the next. This testimony is preserved and carried out through the benefit of collective memory. According to Maurice Halbwach (1950), collective memory is the sum of individual memories, each of which accounts for an aspect/version of an event or an historical fact. Vansina warns about studying a society where all the principal legal, social, and religious texts were transmitted orally. He points out the problem of reliability in this mode of recording facts and questions its accuracy in historical documentation, when he writes, “historians who study [societies with oral tradition] must confront the question of the validity of oral traditions as sources for history” (VANSINA, 1971, p. 443). Further in the same source, Vansina recognizes the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to African history based on oral tradition and stresses its multifaceted approach in these words:

Oral tradition is presented as the respected lore of the past; it has a tradition, whether it purports to tell specifically what happened in the past (historical traditions) or merely to take delight in the performance of oral wisdom, wit, or beauty of the past (literary traditions) (Ibid., p. 444).

Where as to Vansina, songs, proverbs, and animal stories are just as much oral tradition as are lists of kings or royal chronicles, he also warns scholars about the shortcomings of the oral tradition by pointing out its lack of validity, without the multiple sources for accuracy, especially in the study of history in Africa. Scholars should seek assistance from other sources, primarily archaeology, linguistics, ethnographic data, biological facts (VANSINA, op. cit., p. 443). Vansina failed to include in this list the role of musical expressions and dances in oral tradition.

As discussed above, in Africa, music and dance fulfill a vital role in historical documentation and transmission. For example, the *Jali*⁴ in Burkina Faso, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Mali, and Senegal, practice their art to the accompaniment of the 21-stringed chordophone instrument known as the *Kora*.⁵ A similar practice is also found among the Haya epic singers in Tanzania and the musicians at the court of Mutara in Rwanda. In both of these traditions, musicians accompany themselves on the seven-stringed through-zither known as an *Inanga*.⁶ The *Tshinkimbu* songs of the Luluwa in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and the *Timbila* songs in Mozambique, sung to the accompaniment of xylophones, are also laden with historical accounts, to name just a few.

Often, the ornamentation on musical instrument contains ethnographic data about various historical aspects of a given ethnic group. These include but are not limited to the mention of

⁴ Among the Mandingo, *Jali* are traditional historians, genealogists, and storytellers

⁵ A long neck harp-like instrument with a half large calabash covered with animal skin for resonance.

their migratory journey, the succession of their royal lines, the praise of their land, the deeds and exploits of their heroes, and didactic proverbs. At the seminar, I was appalled at the content of papers presented on the subject of African history by colleagues who perpetuated the Eurocentric opinion that “Africa did not really have any history” (OBENGA, 1981, p. 72). This belief falsely based on the absence of written texts, has been proven wrong time and again. According to Nketia, the initial question “Does Africa have a history?” was badly framed (NKETIA, 2005a, p. 225.) This was evidenced by the approach taken in all the papers presented by both African and Brazilian scholars at the seminar. They all failed to recognize the fact that:

Africa’s own history consists of a mass of oral traditions of small- and large- scale societies. These need to be pieced together with other sources of evidence to make coherent general and specialized histories (NKETIA, op. cit., p. 225).

Often, scholars do not recognize that the history of Africa is larger than that of family lineage or clan history; it is larger even than the histories of traditional states (e.g., Mandingo Empire in Mali, the 15th and 16th centuries Empire of Kongo, in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the 19th century Zulu empire carved out by Shaka in South Africa). These histories, which exist in oral form, are observed within the history of African arts in general and in music in particular (Ibid.).

In the majority of papers presented on the theme of history at the seminar my Brazilian colleagues missed the point or simply approached the topic from a structuralist perspective. They interpret the history of Africa as being primarily that of lineage and clan, or simply avoided the topic of the panel, and gave an account of his/her trips to Africa. These presentations about this topic of African culture revealed for the most part my colleagues’ lack of interpretative realities. They ignored the multifaceted nature of oral tradition suggested by Vansina, which pieced together with other sources of evidence make coherent general and specialized histories of Africa. Musically, Kwabena Nketia acknowledges a similar concept as “the ‘reference system’ of values” in terms of which music is made, performed and interpreted (NKETIA, 2005b, p. 324). In short, these papers were not inclusive in their paradigm and methodology. The result was a Western-oriented interpretation that is one-sided.

Equally significant is the strong rapport that exists between music and language, which forces one to summarize that, to comprehend the functioning of African arts in the oral tradition, the scholars must first strive to understand how the semantic level of languages impacts the son-

⁶ A chordophone of the zither family, technically called “through-zither”, a name that gives the indication of the shape of the sound board of the instrument.

ic level of music. Scholars must also decipher how music derives its rhythmic patterns from the syntactic level of languages.

In Africa, the role of oral tradition permeates all realms of its culture, each encapsulated in various aspects of music, vocal or instrumental. I have been stressing that there exists a symbiotic rapport among all aspects of African culture, and that the study of one requires the knowledge of all. I also argue that none of these aspects of African culture can be or should be taught without mention of the oral tradition and that music and dance are the media *par excellence* for its documentation. In short, the integral parts of the African concept of oral tradition are embedded in, and have an impact on, the meaning of arts in general and of music and dance, in particular.

III. LINGUISTICS AND LITERATURE

Over the years, Africanists have dealt with the relation between music and language differently. Kathleen Marie Higgins (2012) argues from the psychological perspective that music is a universal language but she is either confused or failed to distinguish the two analytical levels of music—endo- and exo- semantic—that William Bright has coined (BRIGHT, 1963, p. 26–32). The former is the deep structure of music void of cultural meaning; the latter is laden with significance derived for being referential of the composer's *vécu*—life experience, which includes his exposure to the traditional cultural fabric. In summation, Igor Stravinsky (1936, p. 53) asserts that the interpretation attributed to music is derived from contextual factors. When music operates as a means of communication, it functions at this cultural level. As such, those who share the same culture understand the message carried by the music.

Although Higgins fails to recognize the variety of elements known as universals of music, she acknowledges that these universals of music trigger specific emotions in our feeling. I must point out here that these emotions do not result from our understanding of the cultural message carried in music, but rather a product of our cognition of the music elements (melody, harmony, rhythm). In other words, emotions are a reaction of our mind to the stored musical elements when brought to the surface. In essence, the emotions are provoked by known musical elements outside of a cultural context.

The various aspects of the relation between African languages and music have been discussed at a great length in my article “Creative Practice in African Music: New Perspectives in the Scrutiny of Africanisms in Diaspora” that appeared in *Black Music Research Journal* vol. 17, no. 2 (Fall 1997). In the same document I conclude that as the level of African languages lost

their semantic content in the New World they became obsolete. To establish communication among enslaved Africans, the latter were compelled to learn European languages, adopting only the meaning of the words and expressing themselves according to the syntactic pattern of their original languages. This linguistic adjustment gave birth to a new creolized conceptualization transforming Africanisms into Americanisms or Latin Americanisms. Thus it is prudent to say that strong consideration should be given to African languages and their structural nuances in order to understand the effect of oral tradition on the mind of the culture carrier.

The editors of *As Culturas Negras no Novo Mundo* write, "Hoje o negro é visto na especificidade de sua cultura, que varia muito, conforme a área de sua procedência" (RAMOS, 1979, p. XII). In other terms, the study of Africanisms on the continent as well as in the Diaspora should begin by starting to discuss the impact of the semantic level of African tonal languages on the sonic level of the music. This effect is revealed in the structural process of melody. Equally important, the discussion should reveal how the rhythmic structure of African music is derived from the syntactic level of their languages.

The teaching of African literature cannot and ought not to omit the inclusion of the role of oral tradition. The latter is at the core of the practice of documentation and transmission. For example, the content of the body of epics sung by traditional chroniclers (griots), has to be analyzed for their literary value. Equally important is the variety of carvings (Ashanti stools, the decorations on the royal drum of the Kuba), the riddles contained in the weaving of cloth (kente cloth of the Ashanti in Ghana the design on the raffia cloth of the Kuba), are all forms of traditional preservation of cultural information.

IV. CONCLUSION

I challenge my Africanist colleagues, Brazilian and otherwise, to familiarize themselves with arts in Africa as sources for valid information about the culture. I assert that of all arts in Africa, music is the vehicle *par excellence* for the practice of oral tradition, and is a total expression in which all traditional modes of preservation and transmission are related and integrated. Therefore, I call on my colleagues to acknowledge that in Africa, music is not just mere sonic and temporal dimensions, which is understood only by a trained few, but an expression composed of integral elements such as artifacts, lyrics, musical instruments, and dance, providing a valid documented source of ethnographic information about African communities. In a culture where information is documented and passed orally from one generation to another, music constitutes an excellent container of cultural knowledge. "If you wish to know what Africa is, if you

wish Africa to teach you what it knows, cease for a moment to be what you are and forget what you know” (BOKAR apud. HAMPATÉ BÂ, op. cit.).

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