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THE PERSISTENCE OF ORALITY IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN  
LITERATURE: WOMEN WITH A HYBRID VOICE,  
GCINA MHLOPHE AND WEREWERE LIKING

Orality and literacy intersect continuously in African literary history, and this is particularly true of South Africa where the tradition of literacy and written literature has a long history. Yet, as some scholars have remarked (Brown: 1998), the two types of products have been studied by different sets of experts; and only seldom have oral literatures been evaluated together with written literatures as elements of one and common tradition.

Literary critics and authors of literary history – that is, authorities whose statements have created general evaluations and contributed to building up canons in the Western world – have not dealt with oral texts and performances, thereby implicitly denying them the status of art. In Africa, where in the past the traditions of oral production were widely practised and included the whole art of the word – if I may use such a home made definition – and where they are still active and relevant nowadays, there has been a dichotomy and a fracture between on one side the active practice of orality and on the other side the disregard of such practice on the part of literary critics.

South Africa is a typical case, because there the literary canon has been firmly held in the hands of white critics strongly grounded in European aesthetics; but also because the racism and then the segregationist policies of colonial and postcolonial governments and establishments generated separate categories also in literature and the arts. The art of the oral word was classified as ethnic and thereby confined to a separate and subaltern position. Now that the concept of race is undergoing a process of deconstruction, and separatedness has become an ugly word, literary critics are discovering their inadequacy in trying to deal with both productions at one and the same time and see the connections linking the two traditions, often merging into one in recent and contemporary history. Yet the strategies of social renewal put in practice in New South Africa – the South Africa of post-apartheid – may help to solve the aesthetic problems faced by critics not only

in evaluating oral as well as written products, but also in analysing written transcriptions of oral texts.

The problem is at heart both philosophical and political and cannot be approached, not to say solved, in the brief space of a paper. But I thought one might find useful inspiration by observing two contemporary authors who are excellent oral artists and very successful performers, enormously popular with their own African constituencies but also with European audiences; two artists who mix oral and written words and styles, and appear excellent in both. Two women artists.

Gcina Mhlophe and Werewere Liking are two contemporary African artists belonging to entirely different backgrounds, yet with certain common elements which recommend a joint analysis within the frame of a common interest in African orality on our part.

Mhlophe is a South African from KwaZulu-Natal with a Xhosa-Zulu ancestry. She lives and works in South Africa where she is very well known as a storyteller, actress, and writer, but she has been on tour in several European countries – and is especially popular in Germany and Italy. She has published plays, stories, poems and several children books, all written in English. For the purpose of the present analysis I shall consider her latest book *Love Child* (Mhlophe: 2002), a collection of writings mixed in genre, from which I shall be quoting.

Werewere Liking is a Bassa from Cameroun and has been a resident of the Ivory Coast for a long time. She is a well established writer and has published widely in France and Africa; some of her books (novels, plays, essays), all written in French, have been translated into other European languages – such as English and Italian. She is an extremely versatile artist and performer: storyteller, actress and singer, dancer and choreographer, she has created a group of artists who live together as a community in Abidjan — the so-called KiYi Village. She designs jewellery and makes huge puppets and marionettes which she then puts on stage, reviving an old traditional form of art of the area. She is also a painter, a fashion designer and an excellent musician playing several African instruments. For the present purpose, I will mainly refer to her poems entitled *Drôles de poésies*, as yet unpublished, which she and her companions use for their public performances.

I have seen both Gcina and Werewere perform for African as well as for European audiences and have observed the differences

in the two sets of selections, styles and attitudes caused by the deeply different relationships they established with their listeners. I have noticed that while European audiences, although highly appreciative, are usually reduced to a state of stunned wonder by these artists (unless they are made of children, of course), African audiences participate actively in the show, and contribute with interjections, comments and occasional suggestions, creating antiphonic situations — but also moving their bodies in rhythm and dance. The result of this situation is obvious to the onlooker: when in the middle of an African gathering, the oral artist becomes physically part of it, part of the people, and her movements and rhythms find continuous echoes in the audience. The show thus becomes a collective and communal business, a song with many voices in one. Communality is generally absent outside Africa, or, if there is a shared feeling of pleasure or joy, it does not find expression in body signs. And in fact it is on the basis of the body signs that we should judge the oral artist's capacity to reach out to her audience: in Africa, art does not exist for its own sake, but is identical with its functions, personal and social. Gcina and Werewere repeat the miracle of the ancient oral poet or storyteller insofar as they both re-interpret African culture for their audiences. (This obviously causes the *décalage* in front of non African spectators).

Although both of them perform on the basis of a written text, they change the text at each performance, adding new developments to a story and new verses to a song/poem. They retrieve ancient forms while renovating them, and so re-state the continuity of tradition and the sense of history while asserting the freedom of the artist and expressing the need for individual invention. It is difficult to say whether they compose the written text first, to perform orally on its basis, or whether the oral text is born on the spur of the communal oral experience and only later written down. But the fact of having a written text allows them to expand at each individual performance, and at the same time communicate with a wider audience of readers on the basis of a consolidated platform. For the oral artist of the past who could not or did not care to write, transcriptions of oral performances were left in the hands of anthropologists, ethnologists, missionaries, etc. — in short, in somebody else's hands. We now know that 19<sup>th</sup> century transcriptions either reshaped the oral text or were so over-diligent in transliterating it (see the case of the /Kam in South Africa) as to destroy its rhythm and structure in order to pursue a meaning identical with the original — an impossible feat indeed, when

the transcriber ignored everything of the life of his/her informant. Gcina and Werewere are well and truly rooted in the ground and can afford to strut and strive like any other oral artist in the old African tradition without any danger that their words may get lost and disperse.

The themes of their stories and songs, tales and fables are firmly set in political debate and express critical attitudes and judgements on public situations. If they do not have the political power of an ancient griot or imbongi speaking for and in the name of the power elites or with the specific task of reconstructing history for a family or an individual hero, they do both rise hymns to value and virtue and despise and condemn vices and abjections. In short, they are both moved by ethics outside which there could be no aesthetics. Gcina uses old folktale motives to instruct children while entertaining them, in the best of classic African storytelling. Werewere is directing her efforts toward an ethic and aesthetic utopia, and states, in her own words, that

We try to dream our lives as an utopia, that is to say freed of all that is blocking our continent today: ignorance of our own cultures and history, the lack of both critical discourse on customs no longer useful to us and of re-evaluation of our achievements, the blockage of African energies within Africa itself, and too great a dependence on external aid for even the most minor initiatives. We wanted our village [continues the poet] to be pan-African, in other words, to assemble cultures of diverse African origins, removing them from the tribal or national settings in order to form a continental culture. (website, Interview with WL)

The pan-African ideal, present as a recurring theme in her essays as well as in her oral statements, is part of a more general vision of Africa as a new and hybrid whole that can absorb the past and continue to innovate. For this reason, she says, education is a fundamental value in the life of the individual and the society. In her poem/song *L'éducation* she exalts the role of education and work in order to develop mankind, because, she concludes, "The individual being becomes that which s/he learns" ("L'être devient ce qu'il apprend").

Gcina, on her part, has been one of the major agents in New South Africa literacy and educational campaigns; she has toured remote rural areas of the country bringing books to children and singing for them, in the shape of attractive stories, the importance of books. This campaign was part of a nationwide project called *Nozincwadi* (The Mother of Books), designed by Gcina Mhlophe herself and supported by the government of South Africa. Gcina

has also created a school for young storytellers, called Zanendaba, thus renovating the pattern followed in the past by the oral poet who would elect a favourite disciple and teach him/her the art.

The theme focussing on the relevance of education to reach liberation is of course in agreement with a widespread African need for improvement, and has been emphasized by African intellectuals from colonial and postcolonial times. Education means new tools for liberating the hidden potentialities of the nation: a theme which connects back to the past and at the same time projects into the future, for Gcina into the Renaissance of New South Africa, for Werewere into the freedom from war and poverty, plagues of contemporary Africa and especially of the Ivory Coast in more recent times. Again, ethics and aesthetics link together in a chain of solidarity. Werewere is very attentive to the need of her people also in her practical decisions, and in her KiYi Village she has been accepting street children who were wandering around and wasting their lives. Her mother like attitude is however tempered by an inner tension which makes her run the little artistic community with consistency if not with severity. Because the artist – oral poet, writer, or whatever kind of artist s/he might be – must always be a teacher (see Achebe, the writer as a teacher). In ancient times, the oral poet would train young pupils and bring them up to excellence; nowadays s/he has the important task of setting an example and showing an ethical line of conduct.

One might say, but where is the aesthetics of all this? A good person is also a beautiful person – so at least suggests an attractive tale told by Gcina, where the patient and wise Old Tortoise is scorned and tormented by Hyena, until finally is able to settle the matter by compensating the animals who help her by giving them multicoloured skins, while Hyena becomes ugly and spotted and will be hated by all for his ugly perversity. The etiological fable is also a little apologue on beauty and ugliness and their ethical values.

In this mixing of old and new roles, the contemporary oral artist finds space to express her personal feelings. Love, tenderness, compassion and sorrow are faithful companions to the poet's existential journey. And all these experiences blend together in the fact of being a woman and wanting to celebrate womanhood with joy and pride. These two figures of the African world are really types of New Women, each in her own way. Gcina inherits the strength of all the South African women who fought in the long struggle against apartheid, threatening the regime, because "When you hit a woman you strike a rock", as a glorious

slogan said in the Fifties. For, sang Gcina back in the Eighties, *We are at war*:

Women of my country  
 Young and old  
 Black and white  
 We are at war  
 The winds are blowing against us  
 Laws are ruling against us  
 We are at war but do not despair  
 We are the winning type  
 Let us fight on  
 Forward ever  
 Backward never  
 .....  
 .....

Women of Egypt and Libya  
 Drink tears from the River Nile  
 And you will gain courage and bravery  
 Women of Congo and Liberia  
 Drink her tears from River Congo  
 You will shed inferiority  
 Women of Zambia and Zimbabwe  
 Drink her tears from River Zambezi  
 You will gain understanding  
 Women of Namibia and South Africa  
 Drink her tears from River Limpopo  
 You shall see liberation  
 We the chained women of Africa  
 We are bound to win  
 Let us fight on  
 Forward ever  
 Backward never (Mhlophe: 2002, 73-75).

This poem echoes the liberation poetry of the season of Soweto and is organized like a war song of ancient time in the Zulu epic tradition, with its evocation of place names. Gcina is not alone in this approach to civil poetry, for in fact the whole of Soweto poetry was strongly based on African orality. White critics, academic critics, refused to see, to acknowledge this fact at the time, and spoke with disdain of “poor and repetitive lines”, proving themselves blind to the deep epistemological and aesthetic sense of that production, not to mention the cultural and political sense of its style.

The destiny of woman is a theme particularly relevant to

Werewere. She sees the path of woman as open towards change and innovation – again, a New Woman – and her role and function, in sexual and public life, as needing invention. In her “song-novel” (“chant-roman”) *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail: journal d'une misovire*, Werewere Liking celebrates woman's independence and her repudiation of the servile role vis à vis men. Her new being allows her to position her own destiny in the interstices of old roles and thus create a *misovire*, a new being whose hybridity is also reflected in a renovating bisexuality.

There is a poem by Werewere, *Haranguer les gueux*, which is particularly meaningful in this context, and where the *maîtresse de la parole chantée* sings a new sexuality in a mixture of French and Bassa, pouring out for us “parole d'eau pure, paroles de feu, paroles de pierre et de fer fondues”:

Aï su u mbébé bé mwèt (bis)  
 Tèhè wè minpông mi môl wèè ngohop njock  
 Su ma tuba wèè sèguè sèguè  
 Ni likôl li minlung wèè môlô sèp  
 Sèrbak konbak su u mbébé bé mwèt  
 Le visage ne déplaît jamais à son propriétaire  
 Chacun se trouve beau et surtout ne veut le taire  
 Même avec des narines tels des trous de purgeoirs d'éléphants  
 Le visage troué de variole comme dans les anciens temps  
 Les fesses galeuses d'igname poudreuse de saison sèche  
 Chacun se trouve beau et chacun se le confesse  
 Devant un miroir de face ou en oblique  
 Chacun se nomme se redresse et s'implique  
 Eééé sèrbak konbak su u mbébé bé nwèt éi !

Mon nom est “Lentement, Fille de la course, Bruit du pas d'escargot  
 On ne l'entend pas mais on en voit toujours les traces, tard ou tôt”  
 Maîtresse de la parole chantée je dompte : sons de guitares et de  
 cythares,  
 Chants des genèses et d'initiées hermaphrodites aux langues de dards  
 Je décrypte des danseuses herméneutiques les signes tracés à l'envers  
 Et sur leurs pas de danses je retrace la genèse de l'univers  
 Belle de ma place de moucheron je veux haranguer les gueux  
 Et les inviter à ma table de sons pour goûter à une parole neuve  
 Je leur demande d'écouter la Maîtresse de la parole chantée,  
 Et je leur dis : Mè Mayèmbè Ma Ngo Ngwé Kim Koo  
 A Tagbèguè U Nok bé U Téé Ndigui Likèng  
 Talén Fola ! Mè Nkôt Nganda Ni Ndinga mbôn Mbéé Mbôn Koo  
 Mè Nsôhbè Nding ni Mandjan mèn mè nkahal téndèl Mbock  
 Aiiii, Parole d'eau pure, paroles de feu, paroles de pierres et de fer fon-  
 dus  
 Venez écouter ma parole, venez réinventer une nouvelle marche du

monde

Nèguè masa ya kiri là éi nèguè masa ya kiri la, sans honte de notre marche du monde

Les adultes jouent à des jeux d'enfer, les jeux de feux

Les adultes aiment jouer à dominer, à manipuler

Moi je m'adresse à l'enfant survivant au fond de toi

L'enfant ne comprend toujours pas pourquoi

Les adultes désapprennent si vite à jouer

A réinventer le monde sans désespérer

Moi je veux haranguer tous les gueux jusqu'à la totale stimulation

De ce qui reste au plus profond d'eux d'enfance et d'inspiration

Et je leur dis : Mè Mayèmbè Ma Ngo Ngwé Kim Koo

A Tagbèguè U Nok bé U Tée Ndigui Likèng

Talén Fola ! Mè Nkôt Nganda Ni Ndinga mbôn Mbéé Mbôn Koo

Mè Nsôhbè Nding ni Mandjan mèn mèn nkahal téndèl Mbock

Paroles d'eau pure, paroles de feu, paroles de pierres et de fer fondus

Venez écouter la parole, venez réinventer une nouvelle marche du monde

Nèguè masa ya kiri là éi nèguè masa ya kiri la, sans honte de notre marche du monde

Both artists have a vision of the New Woman and actively work to give reality to such an image. Gcina Mhlophe's song/poem *A Brighter Dawn for African Women* appears as a conclusion in her book and intertwines the feeling of pride in the new nation with the confidence in a dawn of resurrection for South African women, exalted in the tone of a praise song (107-8):

Hoyiii-na! Hoiyna!

Everybody come out and watch

Today the morning star shines brighter

As it triumphantly ushers in the sunrise

The day has finally dawned when

The African woman

Will be appreciated and honoured for who she really is

For hundred of years hunger and disease

Have been her unwanted companions

Denied education and the dignity every woman deserves

As insults and humiliation were heaped up upon her

All too often made to feel like a refugee in her own home

She has been fighting the battles of colonialism

One after the other, without any recognition

But you would not say so by the smile she bears

To kiss the sunrise every morning



Grateful just to be alive with her children and man  
 Her laughter inspires birds to sing new melodies  
 She hates war with all her heart  
 Every time she's called upon to sing and dance for one victory  
 Her hips sway longingly for all wars to end  
 For every bullet on the African soil  
 To turn into a ripe juicy fruit  
 A vegetable seed or a cup of creamy milk  
 The woman of Africa wants to sing a song of love  
 To bring back old wisdoms that will shine a new light  
 Brighter than the stars on the night sky  
 For all her tears and laughter, her wishes and endeavours  
 May all the springs, lakes and rivers, sing her praises  
 May the leaves of every tree sing Halala! Halala!  
 We celebrate you, Woman of Africa  
 Halala! Halala! We celebrate you!!

These texts that we now read on paper were obviously written for oral performance and show a woman poet taking up the ancient role of the imbongi and even daring to impart lessons and admonitions to the leaders of the struggle by reminding them that in victory they should never forget what that very struggle has meant both for the leaders and the people. In the poem *Leader Remember*, the praise singer speaks for the whole people and takes up a communal voice in the name of common ethics resounding in the style of ritual aesthetics, where the familiar figures of Eagle, Tortoise and Elephant, derived from well known African folktales, participate in the evocation of necessary political wisdom for the New South Africa (95-7):

Leader remember  
 The time you spent  
 Fighting for your freedom  
 And that of your people  
 The time you played hide and go seek  
 With the oppressor man  
 Till he caught you at last  
 Put you in chains and leg irons  
 Threw you in jail  
 Believing in his rotten heart  
 That you would never again  
 See the light of day

.....

.....

Leader remember  
 We wish you peace in your heart

We wish you the Eagle's sharp vision  
 We wish you the Ancient African Tortoise's wisdom  
 We wish you the Mighty Elephant's memory  
 So Leader remember  
 The Mystic equatorial moisture whispering  
 That timeless message all freedom fighters know;  
*Don' give up*  
*Don't give up*  
*Here, take with you*  
*Love*  
*Self-respect*  
*Selflessness*  
*Fight for your people!*  
 The fight is never over...Leader Remember...

Gcina Mhlophe is an important voice in the life of contemporary South Africa and has assumed public roles in a unique way, finding space for a *prise de parole* imposing attention while retaining her own original position as a woman artist. She has often been called upon to sing and perform in situations of difficulty, tension or downright anguish. She was together with the group of people – many hundreds of them – who after the end of the regime took a boat back to Robben Island where they had been detained for years under apartheid. Her experience and role in that circumstance is reflected in a moving and yet humorous story entitled *Fly, Hat, Fly!* (92-95) where a former convict on board the boat returning from Robben Island throws the hat overboard, into the ocean, pretending it represents apartheid which he wants to get rid of.

Another situation where Gcina was asked to help was during special sessions of the TRC reserved to women. It seemed impossible to convince women to speak up and retell their experience of torture and harassment. Women were ready to tell the stories of their fathers, husbands, brothers and children, but appeared firmly reluctant to speak up for themselves and thereby break a taboo of silence and subjugation imposed on women. It was then that Gcina was asked to take part in the sessions. She sang for them and cried with them, intoning the dirge-like poem *The Bones of Memory* to induce them to unbury their pain and share their memories with others.

Where did they come from?  
 Tell me, tell me  
 Where did they come from?  
 Tales so strong, tales so brave  
 Some are so funny, so crazy, unbelievable, Hayi! Hayi bo!

Where do they come from?

Tales so strange, tales so sad  
Some are so funny, so crazy, unbelievable  
Hayi! Hayi bo!

I say they come from the bones of memory  
From the bones of memory, of memory, of memory...  
(Unpublished poem)

Hers was a midwife's role, and it did help women in the painful task required of them. The healing power of the word, its capacity to work in the solution of social conflicts and the therapy of emotional troubles belong in the grain of African cultures and re-emerge in the role taken up by contemporary oral poets.

For Werewere there is not such an identification with a new nation and an artist's role in its rebirth, for the historical and political situation of her Ivory Coast are different. But she does take up a public voice when she condemns injustice in *Que ça cesse*:

Refrain:

A défaut de justice un peu de justesse  
Ou ce sera le déluge et la tempête  
Car les femmes en ont plein la tête  
Les jeunes rejettent votre dette de promesses

Quand on a tenu des colloques, signé des conventions  
Adopté des droits pour les femmes et l'enfance  
Droit à la vie, droit à la protection et à l'éducation  
Droit à la santé et à l'autonomie de conscience

Mais, de droit, ils ont fait de nous des bêtes de sommes bêtes de rente  
De droit, ils ont pris nos terres et imposé leurs prix à nos ventes  
Ils ont rédigé leurs droits sur nos peuples et sur nos têtes  
Ils nous ont imposé leurs armes corruptrices et une dette  
Qui nous fait marcher à l'envers pendant qu'ils font la fête  
Aurons-nous au mois le droit de dire que ça cesse!  
Les femmes s'époumonent à réclamer leurs droits  
Qu'au moins on ne les coupe plus  
Pendant ce temps, les futurs s'assombrissent  
Qu'à défaut d'autre chose, les peaux s'éclaircissent  
Alors avec l'hydroquinone, elles se pomponnent  
Alors en pleine malnutrition, elles pouponnent!  
Des gosses qui n'auront de l'éducation que simulacre  
Parce que livrés d'avance aux champs de massacres

On s'embourbe et la religion nous enivre de sermons  
On nous dit que c'est la tradition

Qui n'a pas fait ses tâches et devoirs  
 Copiera cent fois au tableau noir  
 Les principaux commandements de la Banque Mondiale  
 Le contrôle des naissances et le planning familial  
 Les dénationalisations et les privatisations  
 Le mépris des enjeux culturels et le redressement structurel  
 Heureux qui comme telle République Bananière  
 A été notée au FMI comme l'élève le Meilleur  
 Son peuple trimera plus douillettement  
 Et crèvera en rêvant de développement  
 Il sera la vitrine du modèle de la démocratie

A défaut de justice un peu de justesse  
 Ou ce sera le déluge et la tempête  
 Car les femmes en ont pleine la tête  
 Les jeunes ne veulent plus de leurs dette de promesses  
 Aurons-nous au moins le droit de dire que ça cesse!

Her performances often touch on themes of general public interest, such as the battle against AIDS and the catastrophe of ebola, that new disease afflicting Africa. In both her writings and her performances, she is highly critical of postcolonial governments as well as of such international institutions as the IMF and the World Bank. Her statements sound very much along the same line as those of, say, Ahmadou Kourouma in the Ivory Coast or Sembène Ousmane in Senegal, not to speak of Wole Soyinka inside/outside Nigeria. I mention here these other African artists because they are deeply connected to oral traditions which they have renewed each in his own way, but always along an unbroken line of continuity with the African past and in the awareness of what African history has been and is now.

Gcina Mhlophe and Werewere Liking show a firm continuity with the African tradition, but they both innovate it in strongly personal ways. The modernity of their attitudes, styles and modes of expression blends with their continuity with the past and shows how the oral poet still has a role in African societies. The written word works together with the oral performance to allow new space and greater control of expression. So Gcina can write her meaningful poem *In the Company of Words* (9-10):

To know that I have eyes to read  
 Hands that can write  
 And an enormous love for words  
 I am lucky to be speaking a few extremely beautiful languages  
 For I love words – language's ancestors  
 When I'm happy, words define my happiness

When I'm sad and confused  
 Words turn into clay and allow me  
 To mould and re-mould my muddled-up thoughts  
 Till I find inner peace in my soul

Had I to choose between weeping and reading  
 I'd most definitely choose reading  
 A good book

.....

Countless nights I've triumphed over insomnia  
 And had a heart to heart talk with my pen and paper  
 I come to my desk in the dead of the night  
 ...words of all types and sizes  
 Come rushing to my fingertips  
 As I feel my whole body smile  
 I welcome them, every one of them  
 Like the good old friends that they are  
 When they start dancing in large circles around me  
 Throwing teasing wordy circles on my walls  
 I am convinced that I was born not to be bored  
 For how indeed can boredom even begin to penetrate  
 My timeless word circle  
 Now you see why I'm so content  
 In the company of words

While analysing contemporary literature from Africa one has to keep in mind that since when the written and printed word was introduced with colonialism, orality has no longer been the same as before. Of course contemporary artists know perfectly well the importance and specificity of written texts. If they choose to convey their meaning through both oral and written mediums it is because the printed sign adds a new dimension to their expressive range, but at the same time cannot be equivalent to the multiplicity of elements deployed in oral performance: voice and singing, facial expressions, gestures and body language, dance, music, costumes, improvisation and, most of all, strong links with the audience and intercommunication with the same.

Gcina and Werewere strike the observer because, while keeping up with ancient traditions, they innovate and modernize them; while refraining from all archaisms and calligraphic complacencies, they find instead new uses derived from the new features of their societies. The adoption of both performative and written versions results in a peculiar hybridity conferring an additional attractiveness to their art.

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