

Orature, Literature and the Media

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Summary

This paper argues that people yearn to return to an Africa, not as it actually was, but as it should have been. An Africa based on the written accounts of colonialists and travellers because the Africans themselves had been incapable of "writing" in the strictest sense of the word - a contention negating, for example, the significance of drawings as a form of "writing". The African anger at a loss of origin because the past is inaccessible, is understandable, for the past can neither be denied, but nor should it be regarded as having been akin to Paradise.

The privilege of writing and possessing information was confined to the select few until the advent of oral and visual media catering for the illiterate masses. Whereas the original poet/narrator commanded respect and enjoyed a captive audience within his closed community which exacted the accurate retelling of an event, the media of today babble incessantly, also repetitively, but the *signifier* is of no consequence in the eternal quest for the original and the innovative.

Recording traditional narration by the *imbongi* will be a travesty as it cannot bring back the oral poetry of Africa, *per se*, because it will merely become a media event, transgressing all boundaries, signifying nothing.

Opsomming

In die referaat word geredeneer dat mense 'n hunkering het na 'n Afrika, nie soos dit in werklikheid was nie, maar soos dit moes gewees het. 'n Afrika gegrondves op die geskrewe vertelling van kolonialiste en reisigers omdat die boorlinge van Afrika nie kan "skryf" in die engste sin van die woord nie - 'n veronderstelling wat byvoorbeeld die beduidendheid van tekeninge as 'n vorm van "skrif" negeer. Die Afrikaan se woede omdat hy sy verlede nie kan naspur nie is verstaanbaar, omdat die verlede allermins ontken kan word, maar dit moet ook nie gesien word as die Paradys op sigself nie.

Die voorreg om te kan skryf en oor inligting te beskik, was beperk tot 'n klein uitgesoekte groepie tot en met die koms van die mondelinge en visuele media wat op die ongeletterde massas ingestel is. Waar die oorspronklike digter/verteller ontsag afgedwing het en kon staatmaak op 'n belangstellende gehoor binne die geslote gemeenskap wat op 'n akkurate en getroue weergawe van 'n gebeurtenis aangedring het, babbel die media van vandag onophoudelik en herhaaldelik, maar die betekenaar is van nul en gener waarde in die ewigduurende soeke na die oorspronklike en die innoverende.

Die klankopname van 'n tradisionele vertelling deur *imbongi* sal 'n bespotting wees, aangesien dit nie intrinsiek die orale poësie van Afrika sal wees nie, maar 'n mediagebeurtenis wat alle grense oorskry en wat geen noemenswaardige betekenis het nie.

The wish that Africa may return, one of the most often repeated "oral poems" in the culture of resistance, signifies an absence, but the absence of a presence which nobody has ever experienced, a presence which, thus, cannot be invoked against that absence: the image of a pristine Africa before the rape of colonialism - that absent present which is invoked by the wish *mayibuye* is thus not Africa as it has been, but Africa as it should have been. The desire that it may "return", like the wish for the return of the innocence and plenitude of childhood, can never be quenched, and it thus moves through the realm of the imaginary for which any real "liberation" is only the inadequate supplement. There is - "in truth" - no source, no origin, no innocence, no plenitude. What is reflected in the image of that Africa which we implore to return, is an image divided against itself, because any image and any speculation is a double, dividing in two that which it doubles. The origin of that speculation which attempts to mirror what was *before* is a mere difference (Derrida 1983: 65): the wealth of mother Africa, Africa imagined *minus* the colonizers; the Africa of the present imagined as the same Africa (the Africa that should return) from which the treasures have been *subtracted* by the exploiting colonizers to enrich the metropolis, and to which these treasures should now return.

Because we imagine our freedom under the call that "Africa" should return, freedom in Africa has often meant that indecision between an innocence impossible to attain again after a rape, and an assumption of a maturity in a world in which both the return of the land and of the culture is devalued; in an economy in which whatever Africa produces cannot pay the interest on the loans needed to "develop" it as the producer of raw materials for the metropolis; and in which Africa is discounted either as a nature reserve or as a native reserve - both without "culture". The biggest invisible export of the land that has been returned (in a purely "imaginary" way), is a supplement and reserve for the "nature" lost for ever and so eagerly sought by European culture as an image of mass tourism. The Africa which has "returned" or which, to be more precise, "has been returned to" the Africans when the colonialists handed over political power elsewhere in Africa, is one of poverty, destitution and indebtedness, which means that the political control over the "land" is largely imaginary. The chimera of an *African* socialism has shown itself to be as much of a *fata morgana* as the chimera of a revival of a pre-colonial *African* culture, the valiant attempts of the poets of Négritude and Black Consciousness notwithstanding.

The anger of the Africans over the sham of *uhuru* is thus fully justified. Yet the most radical turning towards that speculative past cannot compensate for the traumatic irrecoverable loss of that origin which, although it remains

inaccessible does not, however, deny the reality of an oral tradition which is said to contain this past. It is here, certainly more so than in the writing of the European colonialist and traveller, the anthropologist and ethnographer, that there is a trace of what is now absent. Singing the praises of the *imbongi* as the true repository of the African tradition is, thus, a rejection of the debt Africa owes to the European writer when it comes to our knowledge of Africa's past. Yet even so, the distorted images of the early travellers determine largely what many African elite consider the Africa they wish should return.

The designation of the "African" culture as an oral culture (notwithstanding the fact that Africa produced one of the earliest writing cultures even in the narrowest sense of writing) overlooks that the designation of certain African cultures as lacking the ability to write, is itself a colonialist and ethnocentric gesture, which denies the non-alphabetic sign the name "writing", like the one which denies any culture other than the one resembling one's own, the name of "human". In reality no human culture has ever lacked "writing", unless one defines "writing" narrowly as a specific type of syllabic or alphabetic "writing".

The cluster of critics who have addressed orality and literacy, following the lead of Walter Ong, H.A. Innis and Eric Havelock, have - like them - failed to comprehend the fact that McLuhan was disseminating a Joycean view which grounded communication in tactility, gesture and CNS processes, rather than promulgating the emergence of a new oral/aural age, a secondary orality.

(Theall 1992: 4)

The trace of a hand on the walls of a prehistoric cave is as much "writing" as the correctly spelled word "h-a-n-d". Gesture, with its affiliation with all of the neuro-muscular movements of the body, is a natural script or originary writing, for the word "has been reconstructed out of oral style into verbal for all time with ritual rhythmic". Since the oral is "reconstructed" (reconstructed + constricted or limited) into the verbal, words also are crafted in relation to sound, a natural development of which is "wordcraft": for example, hieroglyphs and primitive script based on drawings or mnemonic devices (Theall 1992: 11; cf. Gelb 1963). Many "African" intellectuals, nevertheless, have accepted the description of their own societies as "oral" and "without writing" uncritically, and have developed their identity in opposition to the "European" culture of writing.

The rejection of writing as a mode of thinking and as a violent political intervention in Africa, is at the same time a rejection of the form of accounting which retains on record the "indebtedness" of Africa to Europe: both the economic and the cultural balance of payments appear in this

writing as "in the red". Yet, any repudiation of that debt would have disastrous consequences: the exclusion from the world market, and political interventions of the kind which destroyed Tanzania, Angola and Mozambique. The "return to Africa" is as romantic and impossible as Rousseau's "return to nature". The cry of Afro-Americans - "Get off our backs!" - and the dream that now the colonizers will finally leave Africa alone and to its own devices, is as illusory as the dream of the Romantic to find unspoiled nature somewhere on a far-off and unspoiled island: wherever he jets in, Coca Cola has been there before.

To think the unique within a system of signs under the guise of a name to which it loses its uniqueness, is to write and to pre-scribe. To write is to make the law, and the law disregards the unique and subsumes it under the generic, the individual under the genealogy. The symbolic power was always allied to writing, the archetype of the laconic is the law/inscription in stone, its subversive and powerless obverse is the graffiti, the inscription which can be washed off the walls of suburbia, whitewashed, even if this writing is never quite eradicated, always shines through the whitewash, palimpsest of a revolutionary writing which has been drenched in blood. He who refuses to write, excludes himself from the making of the law. True, writing is part of the fatal violence of political institutions (Derrida 1983: 63, 168)¹ which is said to have been inflicted on "Africa" (even if one of the earliest forms of writing, the hieroglyphs of Egypt, comes out of Africa), writing was and is part of the ethnological warfare of colonialists and missionaries. In this game there are those who write and those on whose bodies the laws are written. If writing means inscription and lasting convention of signs, then writing covers the entire field of linguistic signs. Because "writing" is definitive, it is laconic, silent, it only moves its tongue in order to make the activity of others achieve something.

The psychoanalyst who sits silent while the hysteric pours out her stream of consciousness, is an image of the laconic silence which will in the end speak the word which absolves, which heals. "Writing" delimits itself against the inconsequential babbling of a hysterical orality which merely repeats what is in our consciousness already in ever new variations; this babbling is ever new, fashionable, because fashion is the repetition of ever the same elements in ever new constellations: fashion is a form of orality, it can count on the fact that the fashions of our grandmothers are forgotten by the time they are repeated. For this reason news-media have no authority, they babble, and what they have said yesterday is forgotten today. This distinction laconic/babbling cuts across the written/oral divide, which doesn't mean to say that they have no power: their power lies in the endless repetition of the same ideologemes for ever new situations.

The belief that orality is suited more to the masses implies the belief that the masses are unable to write or read, an impression carefully fostered by the class of scribes since Ancient Sumer and Ancient China: Writing - they maintain - can only be the possession of a small percentage of people, who are in possession of spiritual culture (Derrida 1983: 47). The masses are unable to be laconic, unable to write the decisive sentence, the document, the law. The masses, therefore, do not decide the strategies of society, they are involved in the tactics of the everyday, the from-day-to-day, which is the constant repetition, the constant babbling of ever the same patterns drawn by others who can afford to be silent because they have written.

The demise of writing, reading and printing since the invention of media like radio, phonograph, film and TV, seems to introduce a new age of orality.

Imagine Joyce around 1930 asking the question: what is the role of the book in a culture which has discovered photography, phonography, radio, film, television, telegraph, cable, and telephone and has developed newspapers, magazines, advertising, Hollywood, and sales promotion? What people once read, they will now go to see in film and on television; everyday life will appear in greater detail and more up-to-date fashion in the press, on radio and in television; oral poetry will be reanimated by the potentialities of sound recording.

(Theall 1992: 5)

Yet these media are only apparently oral. They are, to use Baudrillard's term, a simulacrum of orality, because they function in a completely different context from the one in which the Homeric bards or the *imbongi* functioned.

Orality does not leave a trace, yet it constantly reinforces the trace (*Nachträglichkeit*) which is always already there in our structure. It does not leave a trace because it does not really need to be remembered, it is remembered before we even hear it: the machinery of codification is implicit in communication. It reinforces what we have already remembered. The apparent spontaneity of orality is in reality extremely limited by the fact that no signifier can have a unique and special reality: any signifier is from the beginning the possibility of its own repetition or its similarity with itself. That is the condition of its ideality (Derrida 1983: 165). Spontaneity is nothing but the ability to repeat ever more perfectly the affection of the self which we call subjectivity (Derrida 1983: 284). Speech, as Gayatri Spivak has said:

is structured according to those structures in writing that are generally denigrated as non-spontaneous, dead. Speech cannot, indeed, be understood if there isn't a

pre-existing code which is institutional, and to conceive of the living present, the subject has to understand her own death.

(Spivak 1990: 35)

Speech, in short, is a living corpse, a zombie moving its lips to produce sounds.

Writing is that which creates power, because it is an act of power and violence, beginning with the writing of weals on our backs to make us obey. The true word of the prophet or the saviour is always in this sense writing, however much it disguises itself as speaking from mouth to ear and from heart to heart. It desires its own immutability and it desires to last in the memories of others, but in order to last, it needs to hurt, because nothing is remembered which does not hurt. It assumes the form of the slogan, the aphorism, the didactic saying, the form which with the aid of cuts and spankings can be remembered in the schoolroom, can be recited whenever needed later in life. The trace of this "orality" is a "writing", and one much more permanent than the black squiggles in books which can be burned or simply forgotten. Libraries are good places for forgetting and for gathering dust.

This type of "orality/writing" is anchored in the presence of the performer-narrator-poet in a small community, and what he tells is both legitimized by his presence and his age, which makes him the repository of the wisdom, experience and the living tradition of that community. This living presence is the universal and absolute form of the transcendental experience (Derrida 1983: 108). Orality is inherent in the Rousseauistic ideal of a community which is immediately present to itself in the spoken word, while all members of the community are within distance of that spoken word (Derrida 1983: 238). The attempt to revive the *izibongo* for example, only works as long as there is - in whatever sense - such a community, or as long as a group of people (for example a COSATU local) experiences itself as such a community. But the media are everywhere, and they have already subverted such communities, before they have sensed the threat: whether the *izibongo* praise Inkatha or COSATU, the disc jockey stands ready to make them consumables like Mzwakhe Mbuli's fusion-rap, fodder for European and American radio and TV.

Theall argues that:

Joyce's work² should be recognized as pioneering the artistic exploration of two sets of differences - orality/literacy and print/[tele-]electric media - that have since become dominant themes in the discussion of these questions. *Finnegan's Wake* is one of the first major poetic encounters with the challenge that electronic media present to the traditionally accepted relationships between speech, script and print.

(*Ulysses* also involves such an encounter, but at an earlier stage in the historic development of mediated communication.)

(Theall 1992: 5; 1991: 129-52)

By the time someone believes he has articulated himself as a presence, he has already been transmitted as an absence. The one who spoke the words is not here, s/he is not even in the studio, s/he has been written electronically into the bits and bytes of a digital audio tape. Which is writing just as much as the writing I am engaged in now, and which likewise resides in digital bytes on my hard disk, and that is a writing which exists as black and white dots on a screen, constantly repainted by a focused beam of electrons, long before it is printed out on my laser printer in a form recognizable by humans as writing. The essence of all media from writing to video CD's, is absence: they replace the spatially or temporally absent person by a medium which transmits "what he has to say" but separates the message from the personal presence. A dead hostage can simulate his continued "presence" on a video tape broadcast by the kidnappers. President Bush can speak in my lounge although he is in Washington. Enigmatically Joyce pronounces at one point in *Finnegan's Wake*, "Television kills telephony in brothers' broil. Our eyes demand their turn. Let them be seen!" Whatever appears on the screen (of a TV, a terminal or a computer screen), pictures, gestures, movement, letters, is "written" in the same form of magnetic and electronic pulses:

Writing and speech are subsumed into entirely new relationships with non-phonemic sound, image, gesture, movement, rhythm, and all modes of sensory input, especially the tactile. To continue to speak about a dichotomy of orality versus literacy is a misleading over-simplification of the role that electric media play in this transformation, a role best comprehended through historical knowledge of the earliest stages of human communication where objects, gestures and movements apparently intermingled with verbal and non-verbal sounds.

(Theall 1992: 12)

When De Saussure said that writing itself is foreign to the inner system of language, then modern media make us aware that writing is internal to any speech, and that all the dichotomies - external/internal, image/reality, representation/presence - are inadequate conceptualizations of far more complex structures (Derrida 1983: 59). As Spivak has said:

Our access to spontaneity in speech is actually governed by those structures which one associates with writing Speech operates by way of a code that would work in the speaker's absence.

(Spivak 1990: 34)

One of the most important aspects of writing of any kind is that it does not require the presence of the writer, whereas speaking does require the presence of the speaker. Writing is "transferable", the black marks on paper as much as the magnetic marks on tape can be sent away to another place, can be "read" at another time. The picture of the hand on the prehistoric cave "speaks" when the painter of that sign has long since ceased to speak. "Writing" in the narrower sense, in which we normally use it, like the media, is not delimited by boundaries of traditional communities, it addresses itself to everybody who happens to pick up the written, printed, recorded or transmitted product and is able to decipher it, is able to understand its code. Media, from the written and printed word to TV, radio and video, are not limited by cultural spaces. The transformation of technology into mass-produced consumer goods tendentially destroys all cultural spaces and subsumes them under one Euro-American cultural space which has the capital not only to produce TV's, but more significantly to produce the universal code potentially decipherable by all (on all levels from the bits and bytes to the sequence of programming and advertisements) and the programme content of TV. Alternative contents are constantly under the threat of subsumption under this programme: whether it be jazz, blues, rap - it becomes a commodity like any other whose political content, if any, becomes flattened by the very programme it attempts to invade. Not only does it become one of many alternate programmes and an item within that programme, the selection process of the media ensures that the blandest and most "consumable" form is chosen, the one which least upsets the system. This trend will be reinforced by the current development of a theoretically all-inclusive, all-encompassing medium, "virtual reality" (Theall 1992: 7).

Any attempt to escape the pre-scribed, that which has been written "before" and "for" me, and which draws the boundaries within which I can be "spontaneous", is bound to fail if it naively assumes that speech can be without such pre-scription. Such attempts like the "happening" as the negation of a closure cannot *per se* evade the patterns which are "written": they reproduce them in an aleatoric way. Even the stochastic nature of the happening is, however, in question, when we contemplate the structures of the unconscious as one of the pre-scriptions, which are active now in their *Nachträglichkeit*. The belief that there are no structural principles which limit it (Bürger 1987: 22; cf. Sontag 1973), that this kind of "orality" is a form of emancipation, overlooks that the apparently unbounded is legislated in a form which may be unconscious but is all the more rigid, because it does not allow any critique of itself while it remains unconscious. While the aleatoric can throw up new combinations of patterns, it does not question the patterns themselves which can be combined. Language is not a function

of the speaking subject (De Saussure 1967: 16).

"Orality" always functions within such a set of patterns which are at hand and can only function because it is not in a competitive situation with other products: the story-teller or oral poet has a virtual monopoly within his community. He operates in a closed space, bounded by cultural conventions. The togetherness of the community can also be that of an ideologically blind mass (Derrida 1983: 240). Orality happens in space (the territory of that culture) and can retell the same old stories in the same old way for centuries, indeed departures from the traditional way of telling have to be expressly legitimated (for example: My grandmother told the story like this). Media (including print) happen in time (historicity and being up-to-date). Writing and the printed word have in common with other media the demand for uniqueness (originality), high professionalism (genius, intelligence), innovation and fashion. They appear to change constantly, yet their very variability is subject to a code as strict as that of any "oral" community.

Like the cinema, "wordloosed" (wirelessly but also let loose) transglobally, all such media are engaged in a "crowdblast" of existing languages and cultures, producing an interplay between local cultures and a pan-international hyperculture.

(Theall 1992: 17)

But that hyperculture is the culture not of an equal meeting and mingling of cultures in a hypertext, but the writing of a text by those who control the media worldwide.

Media culture sometimes simulates the presence of the performer in a "live" pop concert. But that presence does not alter its existence in time rather than space. Because of that the performance of a pop singer or a poet reading from his book or performing his poems is essentially different from the performance of the *imbongi*. Inversely a fairy tale printed in a book, a folksong on a record, an *imbongi* on videotape becomes a media-event and ceases to be oral culture. Its ultimate form is where a pop singer fakes his presence, that is to say when he uses a playback and mimes the singing. There are, of course, places which are behind the times, backward places, but as the split-second distribution of all media per satellite becomes a technical reality, distances shrink. America is currently in the process of the most expensive experiment of the world - to become a mere extension and medium of its electronic entertainment: every person is to be connected by cable to the very entertainment machine, the total simulacrum, which imitates an information machine, but its information is mere entertainment.

As the integration of the various media becomes more advanced, the

sequential media like radio, TV, film, where somebody is programming the sequence for you, and where it was impossible to "page back" and have a second look at something which has already passed, is overtaken by the nearly instantaneous access to all material. The media have become random access media rather than sequential. Of course, to a limited extent we could always switch channels and stations, but the selection available was determined by the programming and what it offered at any one time. If none of the cinemas currently showed a particular film, I could not see it, unless I had a private film library.

Random access media, like newspapers, libraries of books, computer word processing, card indexes, multimedia computers, records, CD's, video tapes and electronic disks, allow the user to determine the sequence. A book does not necessarily need to be read sequentially, although finding the information needed at any one point was not always easy. Coming across the word "mnemotechnique" in one text and looking up its meaning in another text, demanded some physical exertion. This more linear form of "writing" has already been partially superseded by the concept of the "hypertext" which at every point in a text allows an immediate reference to other parts of the text such as word definitions, explanations, pictures and music, which "illustrate" a particular point. Thus, reading about Beethoven, I can call up a picture of Beethoven, play parts of the 5th symphony, enquire about the meaning of "sonata" and "symphony", look up the historical context (Napoleon, French Revolution, German War of Liberation etcetera). Vast funds of information are already available in "computer-readable" form and data bases allow access to this information: to the extent that fibre optics allow every household to become an extension of the universal network and to the extent that all information is potentially computer-readable which makes the universal hypertext a distinct possibility.

Mayibuye! in this context changes from an oral poem into a writing on a screen anywhere in the world and a chunk of information in a worldwide hypertext: what is returning is that which has been repressed, but it does not return as the original moment - because that, in itself, is imaginary - but as its supplement. It returns not as "oral" poetry and the culture of Africa, as it once was supposed to be, but as a media event, transgressing all traditional boundaries of the "oral" and the "written".

Notes

1. "On the one hand, writing does entail a certain generalised system of violence. On the other hand, there exist structures of violence in the world which cannot

be reduced to just the violence of writing" (Spivak 1990: 36).

2. "It has not been widely recognized just how important James Joyce's major writings were to McLuhan, or to other major figures (such as Jorge Luis Borges, John Cage, Jacques Derrida, Umberto Eco and Jacques Lacan) who have written about aspects of communication involving technological mediation, speech, writing and electronics" (Theall 1992: 1).

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