

Introduction

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This special issue of *RAL*, the fourth that the journal has devoted to African oral literature, brings together articles by scholars working in francophone West African universities, most of whom teach and all but one of whom are African. In conceiving this special issue, Richard Bjornson and I originally envisioned a broader range to include work from all West African countries, but it soon became clear that the framework of a journal issue was too narrow for our purposes; thus, we had to sacrifice articles on countries such as Benin Republic, Burkina Faso, and Gabon. Having to limit oneself is always crucial.

In putting together this collection of articles, we planned to present to anglophone scholars a significant sampling of the work being done in francophone African universities. The present sampling is quite small. All too often, because of the linguistic barrier, we are unaware of work being done elsewhere, and although articles by Nigerians and—especially—Ghanaians might fill the pages of specialized journals of African studies in the United States, it is much rarer to find in those pages a paper by a Malian or a Mauritanian. Therefore, we take pleasure in presenting in the pages of this issue of *RAL* scholars who, for the most part, have never published in an anglophone journal.

We shall begin, then, with the University of Niamey, and with a woman: Madame Fatimata Mounkaila, whose thesis on the Zarma epic was defended in Dakar and published by CELHTO (Centre d'Etudes Linguistique et Historique pour Tradition Orale) in Niamey in 1989. She presented the traditional text in three languages—Songhay, Zarma, and French—accompanied by a solid study of the relationship of the myth to the history of the Zarma, whose long migratory journey across the Sahel is recounted in oral tradition. I have written elsewhere (see Mudimbe) about the long-unsuspected importance of these epic poems in bringing into focus African historiography, which has been so cruelly deprived of writings from these ancient epochs, from the first to the tenth centuries A.D. In her article published here, readers will find the perspectives made explicit in Mounkaila's thesis, and they will certainly want to pursue the ideas.

Keeping our focus on Niger, Ousmane Tandina, our colleague who teaches African literature, examines Abdoulaye Mamani's narrative *Sarraounia*, which has been made into a grandiose epic film by Med Hondo. In this paper, Tandina shows the traces of oral epic in the written work, an area he knows well because his thesis at Dakar concerned the *Epic of Issa Korombe* in written fiction. Tandina takes advantage of this background by highlighting Azna culture. It appears that this paper is only a prolegomenon of a future study of greater depth.

Staying with the epic-novel relationship, we selected the article by Professor Bassirou Dieng of the University of Dakar. A specialist of oral literature, Dieng is the author of an unabridged edition of the Wolof *Epic of Kaylor* (15-19th centuries) now

critical concepts from Dumézil to Lévi-Strauss and from Derrida to Bakhtin. His article proposes analytical axes for the African novel based on the similarities it bears to epic and myth and within the Sahelian region, which constitutes a homogeneous cultural entity where transtextuality is given full play. Dieng proffers the hypothesis of a true literary system embracing both the written and the oral. As an example, he singles out the most recent novel by Ahmadou Kourouma, providing a theoretical framework for the numerous studies tending in this direction, such as those by Arlette Chemain, M. Boka, Guy Midiohouan, Amadou Koné, and Susan Gasster, to mention only some of the most recent. We would certainly add to that list the studies by R. Relouzat on the relationship of the written and oral literature of the Antilles to the African imaginary.

We would have truly liked to devote a whole issue to myth, epic, and the relationship between the oral and the written. But that would have meant excluding another area of research that has been in development—the study of oral poetry—although it seems several decades late if we look at the work of anglophone Africanist scholars. The typology of Bambara genres proposed by Pascal Couloubaly is an anthropological study using as its point of departure a region in Mali where the author did his research—Beleko. Studying the socio-religious changes in and around the village of Ntiola, Couloubaly, armed with his taperecorder, made great strides in enriching the patrimony of the Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire (Senegal) by completing this rapid survey based on local taxonomy. At the same time, he recorded a large number of songs, which he published in *Une Société rurale malienne à travers les chants de femme* (IFAN, 1989), an excellent little volume that follows closely on the heels of Père Luneau's research. It would be most interesting to undertake a comparison of his original study and those of Dominique Zahan, Y. Cissé, G. Dieterlen, Veronika Görög, Sory Camara, and Jean Derive, each of whom has worked in a different area of the Bambara-Malinké world. To what degree do or do not the typologies intersect? What could be the causes of these differences? Are the roles attributed to the grandmother and to the *talenda*, to the *sokushan*, to the *n'gonifo*, and to the griot (*djeli*) as nuanced and specific in the other parts of the vast Mandinkan territory? In order to answer these questions, it would also be necessary to take into account the studies that do address this issue, especially the studies by the anglophone Gambians and those who work in the shadow of Kankan and Conakry. Finally, we would have to form a team of scholars from several regions in order to compare the results of their findings and to attempt to achieve a synthesis that might show their coherence as well as their richness and their variety of genres and subcategories.

Still in this vein, but in the narrower field of oral poetry, the Mauritanian *Abdoul Aziz Sow* introduces us to the diversity of Fulani songs from the northern region of the Senegal River. More than likely, the text-music relationship—capital in the differentiation of categories—evades us, but this attempt at typology, which follows the criteria of Fulani taxonomy, at least allows us to grasp the subtlety of a pastoral poetry that has been the subject of Christiane Seydou's *Berger des mots* and Alpha Sow's study, *La Femme, la vache, la foi*, which plumb the splendor and breadth of this poetry.

Remaining in Mauritania and in the realm of poetry, Georges Voisset has contributed a fine study of women's songs from the ethnic group known as the Hassan-iyia. Although inspired by Arabic poetry, these songs bear the indelible marks of a pre-Islamic Moorish poetry that also resembles the poetry of the neighboring Fulani

and Wolof-Lebu. Voisset examines in detail the Hassaniya love poems—which we found delightful—using the precise scientific method of the linguist.

Ch. Ah. *Tidiane Ndione* set out to collect, transcribe, translate, and explicate the epithalamions of his village of Bargny in Senegal. The Lebu language is respected there in all its particularities, despite the proximity of the dominant Wolof tongue, which possesses an equally rich array of wedding songs. Such songs are found throughout the entire Sahel, from the Atlantic to Cameroon, where the first gleanings of the genre were assembled by Henriette Mayssal and Roger Labatut. There is solid material here for academic work in comparative literature on a study of common themes—sadness at leaving one's family and friends, fear of the new family of co-wives and husband's sisters, advice to the young bride on patience and endurance—and different formulations found in many languages. Such a study would offer an opportunity to confirm this common cultural space in its broadest perspective, with the songs echoing a conception of marriage that is astonishingly similar from one end of the West African savannah to the other.

Should the observations of *Louis-Marie Ongoum* on erotic songs from the Bamileke Mountains be placed in the register of love poetry? They are, to tell the truth, quite libertine, and they strongly contrast with the Moorish or Fulani complaints—especially in the vigor of tone, which the metaphors scarcely attenuate. But isn't that a result of the nearby forest civilization and of their Dionysian conception of sexuality? Modern rural songs have nothing on them in this regard, and the *velum pudicitatis* of which Ongoum speaks and which is found in the old songs seems to have vanished from the present-day selections. That is to be regretted, for the poetry has also disappeared....

Lifting us to a more philosophical level of reflection, *Agnès Monnet* invites us to a long speculation about the *agnanda-nou*, the broad and profound speech of the Akyé of Côte d'Ivoire. Her analysis follows in the wake of the pioneering thesis by Professor Bernard Zadi Zaourou on "La Parole poétique dans la poésie africaine, domaine de l'Afrique de l'ouest francophone" [Poetic speech in African poetry from francophone West Africa]. For her part, Madame Monnet also wrote her thesis on Akyé songs for the University of Abidjan in 1985.

I would like to take this opportunity to draw attention to those doing research in oral literature, a number that has multiplied in the Ivorian capital: a first generation, including Niangoran Bouah, Henriette Diabate, Memel Fote, and Barthélémy Kotchy, launched studies in oral tradition from an anthropological and historical perspective. Madame Monnet is part of the second generation of African scholars, who include Simone Ehivet-Gbagbo, Gnaoule Oupoh, Professor Marius Ano Nguessan, Pierre N'Da, Severin Gohrebi, Hélène Ngbessa, Charles Konan, Nyamien Nyamien, Houphouet Nguessan, and others. This is a true "school" with which French scholars are associated, such as J.-P. Eschlimann, Jean Derive, H. Borgomano, and the renowned Claude-Hélène Perrot of the African Research Center in Paris—CNRS (Centre National de Recherche Scientifique). Of course, we have not even mentioned those scholars in the fields of history and linguistics who help form a veritable constellation around oral tradition, which is collected and explored by interdisciplinary teams.

That is exactly what was recommended by the dean of oral studies, Amadou Hampaté Bâ. For he was the one who, during the 1970s, provided the impetus for this movement among Ivorian academic who heretofore had been relatively timid. We were but a handful, trying to sow the seeds of programs in African literature in French universities. There were Kotchy, Zadi, Wondji, and Christophe Dailly, now

all departed; there were Bernard Mouralis, René Richard, and myself; there were front-rank students such as Gnaoule and Lezou, Issa Sido of Niger, and the Senegalese Yero Sylla. It was a great struggle, which the Europeans paid for with their positions, even those who were teaching history or African sociology.

It was Hampaté Bâ, then the ambassador to Abidjan, who used his prestige to encourage African colleagues and strengthened the resolve of their enterprise after our departure. He himself gave lectures at the University. He was oral tradition incarnate! And he was the closest friend and relative of President Houphouët Boigny; that is, he was untouchable, invulnerable.... Thus, teaching and African research were freed from constraints, then expanded, taking flight in incomparable fashion with more or less success and delay in the other universities of the former Afrique Occidentale Française and Afrique Equatoriale Française. So goes the world....

What is the actual status of research in oral literature in these regions? In all the universities, there are teaching scholars in the departments of French, modern literature, and linguistics. Only very rarely is a department devoted only to African literature or simply to African studies. These studies are broken up and dispersed throughout diverse disciplines and course offerings. Thus, African history cannot be studied for itself; it is part of a program encompassing other parts of the world, a program that gives a diploma in general history studies. Likewise, one can only become a specialist of African literature at the level of thesis or dissertation. Before that stage, one would have had to follow the entire program for a degree in French: language, grammar, medieval literature, modern literature, etc.—among which courses could be found ones on written African literature and, more recently, oral African literature. I know of only two universities that have had the courage to create a “Department of African Literatures and Civilizations,” and these are Congo Brazza and Cameroon. On the other hand, rather than tamper with the sacrosanct structure of French universities, certain countries have created centers of specialized research. Thus, Côte d’Ivoire founded GRTO with Zadi Zaourou; Niger established CELHTO with Dioulde Laya; Gabon’s Centre International des Civilisations Bantu (CICIBA) was created by researchers such as M. Théophile Obenga and Mve Ondo; and Senegal opened a department in the Institut Fondamental d’Afrique Noire (IFAN) in 1975 in order to collect, study, and publish oral texts as well as to establish a sound library for conservation.

Allow me to close this short presentation of my African colleagues by adding a few thoughts of my own. First of all, the researchers who appear in these pages are far from representing the totality of those laboring to preserve oral literature. There are large numbers of African scholars who are taking part in this task which demands patience, meticulousness, and perseverance; likewise, there are large numbers of informants and keepers of tradition collaborating on projects. Some have paid with their lives, like Soumara and Waa Kamissoko. For the traditional environment has built up a defense against the intrusion of Western curiosity and Western methods of preservation—tape-recorders, cassettes, records, books—and distrusts the use to which these could be put, feeling frustrated, dispossessed of a commodity over which it no longer has power and fearing that it has been exploited, swindled, betrayed.

Thus, young professionals often experience great obstacles in finding collaborators for their research, only seeing the hesitations diminish when they can offer substantial payment. Now the resources of African research centers are infinitely less developed than those of the Americans or Europeans—all of which places the

legitimate heirs of the African patrimony in a position of inferiority as far as field missions or investigations are concerned.

The majority of African researchers therefore limit their field studies to their homeland, working in their native corner of the world, sometimes with their own family. How many studies have been interrupted for want of cash or because griots are too expensive or because research sites are too distant!

How many promising studies have I taken part in during the past twenty years of my work in Senegal only to see them sidelined, and for various banal reasons, never brought to a conclusion? How many recordings were never transcribed or completed? How many surveys were never put to use or were ten years in the making? How many texts were transcribed and translated but never published? How many manuscripts have gathered dust, how many these lie dormant? This is the situation at IFAN, which awaits other researchers, other subsidies. If, however, a foreigner arrives with sufficient funding, he or she will realize a similar project within a matter of months, publish the results, and be recognized in the profession long before the African colleagues. The latter will be relegated to the ranks of the foreign scholar's team of informants, for they can be relied upon to help out in the research—after all, oral tradition must be preserved....

Here I want to speak of the great dearth of basic research in Africa. This matter may perhaps seem derisory in the face of famine in Somalia, war in Liberia, terrorism in South Africa, drought, or AIDS.... Yet all are given a destiny, a task to accomplish. Ours is to have struggled to make African literature—both oral and written—known and appreciated and, through this vast literature, to have aimed at restoring the dignity of the African.

—translated by R.H. Mitsch

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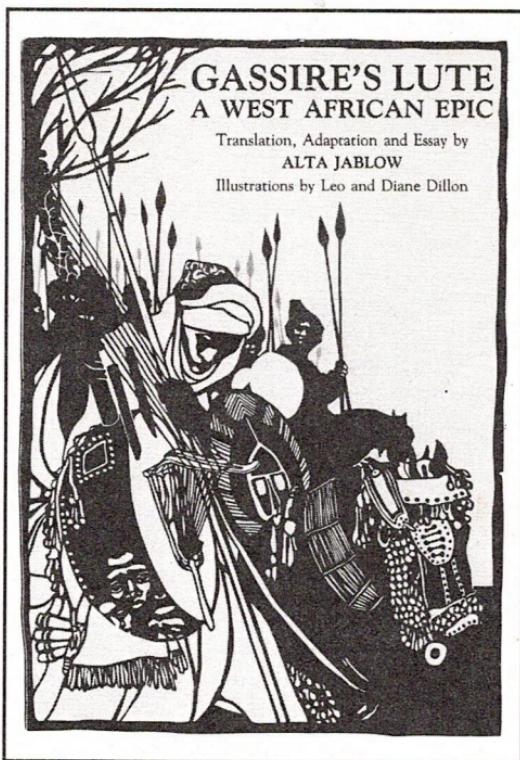
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