

In an era of faddish theorizing, hybridity and other preoccupations, the discussion of memory and orality within the context of African poetry is intriguing. Where does orality end and literacy begin? And where exactly is that magical "in-between space" of transition if orality has been

associated with primitiveness while literacy is considered the gateway to civilization? In the contemporary African experience, the two are not separable. In fact, in terms of the relationship between memory, orality and African poetry, the modern African poet, like the traditional griot, owes a lot to memory and oral traditions. Without memory, the creative artist dries up like an oasis in the desert of stifled imagination. As interpreters of cultures, memory is that commonality we share through the imperative of remembering.

Contemporary scholarship 2 associates orality with authenticity and literacy with sophistication while eluding the central issue of memory in oral traditions. African poetry, be it traditional or modern, draws extensively from oral traditions and collective memory. The African society from which poetry draws

nourishment and inspiration is equally an oral culture. Between the spoken and the scribal, orality is an unbroken tradition. The legacy of writing makes the transition from oral to written both a necessity and a challenge to contemporary writers. The craft of the oral poet is essentially performative while technology compels the literary artist to translate memory, thoughts and stories into words. It is in this sense that the modern African poet combines the attributes of both the oral and the literary artist through the creative negotiation of the same elements of tales, parables, and proverbs--all of which are resuscitated from the traditional treasury.

Borrowing from psychological findings, Jan Vansina, in "Memory and Oral Tradition" (Miller, *The African Past* 262-279) identifies three major dimensions of memory processes, namely, the verbal, the semantic, and the visual. The verbal code contains all the retrievable information which triggers and facilitates verbal expression. The semantic, considered the master code, is culturally determined and acquired during infancy. The visual refers to the concrete images retained during initial memory gathering. Students of oral literature as history perceive these categories as interrelated. Even then, the integrity and necessity of African orature were established after a long battle by Ngugi, et. al., in East Africa. The recurrent question then is how these oral traditions persist and are

recognizable in contemporary African cultural production.

In his own study of the strength of African oral traditions over three literary periods, Harold Scheub asserts:

The African oral tradition distills the essences of human experiences, shaping them into rememberable, readily retrievable images of broad applicability with an extraordinary potential for eliciting emotional responses. (African Studies Review Vol. 28. 2/ 3 (1985):1)

The "performer" Scheub refers to as the embodiment of "rememberable" and "retrievable images" ranges from the griot to the contemporary artist. The past will be lost for ever and the present may be forgotten without such guardians of memory.

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