



Oral traditions and minorities without written literature: The South African Case

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South Africa

I assume I asked to participate in this workshop as being from South Africa – Africa known for its richness in oral stories and traditions, incorporating the hundreds of minority languages that exist in most African countries, many of them heading for extinction.

In my introduction to the Round Table Discussion, I considered the three issues embedded in the topic: oral traditions, minorities (and minority languages) and the issue of the lack of a written language. The following are merely my comments which I had hoped would contribute in a constructive discourse on the topic.

My approach to oral tradition is not ethnocentric. I do not think it necessary to defend oral traditions/oral literature and to engage in a discourse as is often done by African authors, who explain that oral traditions or oral literature is not primitive, that oral literature is not “cultured” and that it should not be seen as something opposed to written literature. The importance and the value of oral tradition are self-evident and it is not necessary to defend it. It is not an art form or tradition that should be seen as in opposition to written literature – rather as equivalent to, or in addition to.

The second issue is the one of minorities. How do we determine what a cultural or linguistic minority is? South Africa, for instance has a population of approximately 50 million people. Ninety percent of the South African population is black. They consist of different cultural or language groups – about 15 million are isiZulu-speaking people and about 12 million isiXhosa speaking people – clearly not minority groups. There are other language groups, such as the Venda, the Ndebele and the Swazi (and I am just talking about the official languages of the country) each consisting of between one and two and a half million speakers – minority groups if compared to the larger language groups. However another 2 million Swati-speakers live in Swaziland – where the language is by far the majority language. There are about 2 million mother-tongue

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English-speaking people in the country – clearly a minority group, but it can certainly not be seen as a minority language – not if you switch on South African television or listen to Government ministers or look at the newspapers, magazines or books that are sold in bookshops or on street corners. There are nine official languages in South Africa that are equal, or, that are supposed to be equal but in practise English is promoted and favoured. This is also true for education. Although the first three years of education should officially be received in the mother tongue black parents prefer to send their children to schools where the language of instruction is English from the first year – with disastrous effects on the reading abilities of these children. If we take mother-tongue as the measure, English is a minority language but with a majority status, while some of the African languages are majority languages with minority status. Unfortunately mother-tongue speakers very often accept their minority status and put themselves in a minority state. This is also true for many other African countries where the colonial languages are used and promoted to the detriment of the indigenous, majority languages. In Africa, we often confirm our minority state ourselves.

The last issue that is captured in the topic is “written literature” – minorities without a written literature. There are of course many minority groups globally, as well as in Africa, without a written literature. Some of the smaller San languages in South Africa are in this situation. Clearly oral tradition is crucial in such groups because it is the only way in which children in these communities are exposed to their own culture, heritage and tradition in their own language.

The point that I want to make, however, is that oral tradition/oral literature has a value of its own, whether a written literature exists or not. This is especially true in Africa where the social organisation always was more in favour of the transmission of information in an oral manner, and I believe still is. In South Africa for instance, imbizo’s and indabas are favourite ways in which issues are discussed and decisions taken by government, by departments and organisations. “Imbizo” and “indaba” literally mean to sit down and talk or discuss, usually accompanied by eating and drinking.

When it comes to children and young people the oral tradition used to be the way in which parents and grandparents passed on information and wisdom from generation to generation. As somebody said, in this sense oral tradition is the original



and persistent technology that gave us human culture in the first place by allowing us to build on our experience over generations.

Oral tradition is the original form of education, in which both social values and environmental knowledge are transmitted. Much has been written about the value of this way of communicating information. Oral tradition does not transmit information as a “fact” or does not produce a single answer. It is left open to the listener’s interpretation. It gives the listener the opportunity to use his or her own imagination and makes use of their own initiative and creativity and develops problem-solving skills. In oral tradition and storytelling there are often different ways to solve a problem. It teaches the value of different alternatives.

Finally, one often hears that the oral tradition is dying in Africa, because of urbanisation, the breaking up of families, adaptation to Western ways of life, technology and modern ways of transmission of information ... I don’t think it is disappearing. I think it is still very much part of African society, maybe in other forms and ways.

In South Africa for many cultural groups it is still the norm to go for initiation – and even modern city boys of 17-18 years old go to rural areas where they are taught, orally, by elders of their culture and the ways of traditional life. In the isiXhosa community you are still not seen as a real man if you have not been through the initiation ritual – and this is the norm, not the exception. Songs are still important as a way in which social values and cultural realities are conveyed in the African community – and I can give you many examples in contemporary South African society. African languages themselves and the way in which it is spoken, the use of proverbs and riddles are a verbal art. Just the way in which the language is spoken is part of oral tradition.

Let me conclude my introduction, by saying once again that oral tradition should not be seen as opposed to written literature. They are two different art forms, two different ways of conveying information – both are equally important. I therefore do not agree with Chinua Achebe when he calls for African children to be saved from what he termed ‘the beautifully packaged poison’ imported into the continent in the form of children’s story books. To read story books, written literature, does not mean that oral tradition is necessarily negated to a secondary position.

