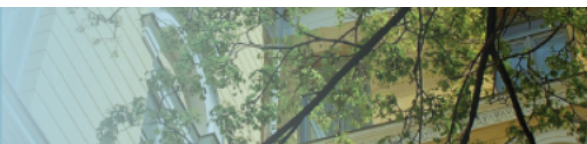


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Folktales and interculturality in Africa

The Ugandan case

Among those writers who were influenced by the oral tradition of their respective countries, Okot p'Bitek is certainly the most involved in pondering on ways to save African oral culture from oblivion. In this paper, I propose to discuss within the question of intercultural discourses how this playwright and poet went round the difficult task of collecting and rewriting oral tales in a continent deconstructed by the colonial system. Interestingly, the term which I shall be using throughout this presentation is 'Orature', a literary expression coined by the Ugandan linguist Pio Zirimu and popularized by the Kenyan novelist and playwright Ngugi Wa Thiong'O in his literary essays. The regional origin of the term orature is worth stressing here as I am examining the way the Ugandan Okot p'Bitek has worked on the transcription and recovery of East African oral tales. As a matter of fact, the influence of orality on literature is particularly significant in Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya where writers and story-tellers integrated their traditional oral culture in their written works, making it their duty to stress the value of their East African heritage, especially in the 70's and 80's. In his thought-provoking *Decolonising the Mind*,¹ Ngugi proposes a definition of orality as being a language which has "a dual character: *being* both a means of communication and a carrier of culture"². Most African intellectuals perceive orality as being certainly a "total aesthetic system"³, naturally connected to African literary studies. The transfer of past oral culture in today's reconstruction of Africa is surely significant in every part of the African continent. If Okot p'Bitek is mostly known for

his folktale play *Song Of Lawino* on which many studies have been undertaken, it would be worth looking into the interplay between the primary oral culture and the written word through his folktales or short stories published in *Hare and Hornbill*⁴.

The question of transfer will be addressed by looking into how a critic can testify the authenticity of orality in a written text and second by studying how Okot p'Bitek collected these oral stories. Thanks to the writing of *Hare and Hornbill*, studying how these tales operate and succeed by being translated from a primary oral language, Acoli, to a written form, English, would help us look at specific ways to save parts of African culture. I shall analyse the literary techniques used by Okot p'Bitek to succeed this passage from orality to writing by underlining the borrowings from specific themes and specific oral narrative techniques. I shall ultimately show that the mixing of genres can be enriching.

Investigating on the presence of orality in a written work can be a delicate task to undertake for any critic who is not familiar with the source language or the primary culture. When this is the case, checking the biographical data of the writer/artist is highly advised as the cultural ethnographer Richard M. Dorson suggests. In order to establish the genuine link between a given written work and its oral tradition, the writer's connection with the oral tradition must be proved by verifying that the writer "enjoys direct contact with oral lore"⁵ and that some "internal evidence indicates his familiarity with folklore", and that there should be "corroborative evidence that the saying, tale, song or custom inside the literary work possesses an independent traditional life"⁶.

Concerning Okot p'Bitek, he was born in the village Guru which confirms that his early life was spent within a deep Ugandan traditional culture. His primary learning was influenced by local oral Acoli tales from which *Hare and Hornbill* take their source. Besides, his thorough knowledge of Ugandan regional cultures was acquired through football when he travelled round the country with the Uganda national team. The football player mingled with villagers who gave him “a more varied experience of the traditions of his people.”⁷ Such a broad genuine cultural immersion was at the source of the completion of a thesis on “Oral literature and its Background among the Acoli and Lang'O”⁸ in 1964. The psychological impulse for such an academic interest in oral Ugandan culture was a reaction to his British teachers who “kept referring to Africans or non-Western peoples as barbarians, savages and primitive tribes ...”⁹. Okot p'Bitek devoted his life to proving that not only his African culture existed but it was varied and meaningful. The first poem he wrote, ‘The Lost Spear’, which retold in English the traditional oral Lwo tale of ‘The Spear, the Bead and the Bean’, proves his initial keen interest which led him to publish in 1953 a novel in his native language, Acoli, *Lak Tar miyo kinyero wi lobo*.¹⁰ So, the author of *Hare and Hornbill* is culturally located and intellectually committed to the promotion of African orature, one of the proofs for a genuine insight in the ‘source culture’.

In order to justify his move and his endeavour to collect and rewrite thirty two tales collected in *Hare and Hornbill*, Okot p'Bitek always expressed doubts on the authenticity of many tales he has read in English especially those recorded without “a working knowledge of the language of the people”¹¹, and without a good command of the English language as he always says. It is true that some missionaries and ethnographers were compelled to hire African assistants to collect African stories.

These assistants used poor English as they “did not have a deep knowledge”¹² of it. Thus, Okot p’Bitek underlines the inadequate translations, as many of these assistants “faced the very difficult problem of translating ideas from one cultural expression into another.”¹³ In his study Okot p’Bitek provides cases of British ethnographers, such as Lindblom, Wright or Lees, who collected stories at the beginning of the 20th century in artificial conditions which resulted in including foreign tales in their collections which “they claimed to be Lango and Acoli tales”¹⁴. Furthering his research, Okot p’Bitek discovered that some of these tales belonged to non-Ugandan tribes, and some of them presented as Ugandan were in fact stories read in *The English Readers* because these African assistant schoolboys conveyed them as being genuine Ugandan ones¹⁵. In ‘Sources of African Stories’, p’Bitek reminds oral culture collectors that “care must be taken”¹⁶.

Many critics in orature, among them Amadou Hampaté Ba from Senegal, suggest that the ideal conditions for collecting African stories should be in real situations of storytelling, that is when they are told in front of an audience. As the storyteller is an artist, he could be boosted by his listeners who react to his stories, which brings life to the whole process of creation. Okot p’Bitek reminds nevertheless that the structure of the stories is basically the same. Concerning *Hare and Hornbill*, he testifies that the thirty two tales have always existed in Acoli culture, that “the saying, tale, song, or custom inside the literary work possess an independent traditional life”¹⁷. In his rewriting, variations may have occurred. Certain liberties justify his personal touch put into the stories he has collected and published in English. For the sake of the spirit of orality, and as a storyteller, he felt the right to adopt an artistic freedom when retelling the tales. In *Africa’s Cultural Revolution*, Okot p’Bitek underlines the revival of

African oral culture through the challenge of the storytellers who make it their duty to “interpret and present Africa in *their own way, in their own interests*”¹⁸. In the introductory note to *Hare and Hornbill* he refers to the Ugandan setting of the tales, even though many stories are known in other parts of African, because of migrations due to trade or slavery. The paratext asserts that the tales are “refreshing versions” transmitted in the English language to show the wealth of Ugandan oral culture¹⁹.

In *Hare and Hornbill*, the aesthetic transfer from orality to writing operates through varied and unexpected ways. These tales are not modern stories written with narrative oral techniques. They are rather inspired from a rooted Ugandan cultural heritage, a first powerful indicator of orality, inscribed not only in the very themes of the stories but also in the symbols which belong to the Ugandan culture, such as the horn, traditionally associated with the “ritual process of initiation into adulthood”²⁰, or the bull, the spear and the hare, always present in the collective Ugandan cultural consciousness as sources of manhood and life. The themes of these tales express people’s perceptions of their immediate surroundings mixed with intimate aspects of human behaviours. Throughout the tales, one notices that explanations on the origin of the difficult relationships between people are exposed and answered which permit to better understand the relations between man and nature. These short tales become fables as they depict a world where animals and human beings communicate on an equal basis. Animals are given human feelings and human life experiences. These fables strike the imagination through magic which offers a moral to adopt. The tales are told in such a convincing tone and colourful style that the reader/listener makes the story become his own experience, a specificity of oral tales. These animals with human feelings bear moral issues, give advice on how to behave and what to do in critical

situations. The number of animals which appear in these stories is quite impressive, underlining the acute observation of the storyteller of his own surrounding and his capacity to link its characteristics to human behaviour. Leopards, elephants, Antelopes, monkeys, tsetse flies, lions, rhinos, hippos or hyenas to name just a few populate these stories. Many of these African animals embody roles which identify with the best or the worst in human behaviours such as jealousy, arrogance, treason or lust. They can also symbolise cleverness, pride, bravery, courage or love. These animals and ogres, clearly rooted in a non-industrialised Africa, become high metaphores for wrongs and rights in the village or tribal life which confirms a sociological reality which is the tight link between man and nature. The sociological map explains the need to create fantastic and magical worlds as in 'Hare and Hornbill', the tale which gives its title to the whole collection. In this particular tale, being jealous and wicked is told through fantasy as the listener in this case travels in space, goes up the sky, and provides a moral which is 'don't be jealous' if you do not want to become like Hare whose "chest makes crackling sounds" (2) when he runs, after his fall on the earth, because of his wickedness. As the listener/reader connects with the hare, he will implicitly refuse to have the same experience as the hare.

Oral narrative devices connect with the Ugandan themes of these tales. They are present in the style and within the tone used by Okot p'Bitek. The beginnings are clearly of oral inspiration as they address an audience to attract its attention. The introductory expressions referring to a bygone time help the listener to travel away, as in 'In those days ...', 'It was time for...', 'Once there was a very old lion...' or 'In those days long ago ...'. These time indicators transport the listener/reader outside his own time, putting immediately some distance between the story and his personal daily

preoccupations. Besides, in these tales the various life experiences belong to other times, hence the efficiency of their implicit didactic function. The didactic oral narrative technique introduced by Okot p'Bitek at the openings of the stories through teasing arouses the curiosity of the listener, creating a situation of expectancy in the listener/reader who wants to know what is going to happen next as these examples show: 'Hare and Hornbill were great friends', 'Awili was a beautiful girl ...', 'Hare's sister was married to a crocodile...', 'Once there was a rich man ...', 'One day all the birds gathered ...', or 'Once there was a very famous warrior'. The brevity of the first information arouses curiosity. Brevity is therefore a specificity of oral tales. Okot p'Bitek remains faithful to the technique of the brisk style, so he does not dwell on long descriptions. The storyteller goes to the point by using striking and colourful metaphors to strike and attract the imagination as for example in 'Hare and Hornbill' where two supposed friends travel up to 'Skyland' (1) to look for girls, or in 'Leopard and Dog' where the bad smell of one character is compared to "a rotten mushroom" (58). The used symbols and images, which meant something to the traditional audience, attempt to give sense to the world.

The factual and situational actions of these tales express orality through a down to earth vocabulary, connecting the stories to the immediate surroundings of the listeners. If these stories are outside real time, the settings are certainly familiar such as the huts, compounds, forests, jungle and hinterland with a local Ugandan vegetation like the *oceke* shrub. Animal characters are presented in their natural surrounding, but as they are given human roles they own a hut, a bed, a stool. In their daily life they are shown eating, drinking, rotting, farting, vomiting, bleeding. It is clear that Okot p'Bitek stories are far from being poetic or romantic. The words which describe natural

physical needs are included in a very factual manner. There is nothing more efficient than describing things as they are to explain particular behaviours. In ‘Hare and Hornbill’, Hare plays a trick on Hornbill to make him have diarrhoea because of his jealousy: “Hare tiptoed in the house and unhooked the cork. Three days of diarrhoea spewed out and flooded the entire house. The stench rose like smoke and the dancers fled from the arena ” (1). In “Ten Girls who went to pick Ocuga”, the girl describes her friends as “The girls whose anuses make noise like cocks” (23). One can say that abstract ideas are not used in these oral tales and that concrete examples convey direct messages which surely speak to the authentic audience. These are major characteristics of Ugandan oral narratives.

Repetitions of certain words with particular sounds, inspired from narrative oral techniques, are included in the English version of these tales. A close study shows that repetitions bear a didactic function as for example when names are repeated each time a new action starts. This technique works as a reminder which helps the reader/listener to follow the story. The repetition of the name ‘the cripple’ in ‘Awili and her Suitors’ is a case in point: “The cripple went” (11), “When the cripple returned” (12), “The cripple hurried” (13), “The cripple told Onguka” (13) or “The cripple woke up” (14). The storyteller wants to make sure that his listener/reader understands who is doing what in the process of the oral narrative. The names of the locations are also often reminded. If a wicked act is performed, it is repeated again and again to make sure that the listener understands, a trick in orality to prepare the listener/reader for the outcome of the story and to make him accept and interiorise the moral of that story. Repetitions bear other functions such as maintaining the attention of the audience. These repetitions take different narrative forms: in ‘Chameleon and Elephant’, where drought

is central to the story, the idea of drought is repeated several times through different expressive forms: “Once there was a fierce drought” (5), “All the animals gathered at the mouth of a dried-up river” (5), or “There was no water” (5). Besides, ‘formulaic expressions’²¹ are systematically used in order to punctuate or conclude the tales. They provide explanations, remarks or advice: “Hyena walks shyly through the plains because he knows that his skin is very ugly,” (4) “Blind copying killed hare” (49). The formulaic expressions are used to make general comments on the experience which has just been told: “Goat is good and will share a house with men” (10). They also draw moral judgements out of the story which has just been told such as: “The nose of the beautiful one stinks” (14), or “Even if you take your mother-in-law under the lake you will be discovered” (80). These formulaic expressions can put an end to the tale by giving the feeling that not only the listener/reader has enjoyed a nice story, but has also benefitted from it.

The specificity of orature is that it does not draw boundaries between disciplines as Ngugi Wa Thiong’O underlines: “oral narrative contains dance and music”²².

Interestingly, Okot p’Bitek includes songs and choruses in *Hare and Hornbill*.

Integrated in the tales, repeated at regular intervals, the songs bring life and diversity and are perceived as a show which revives the atmosphere as in ‘Chameleon and Elephant’, ‘The Old Lion and Hare’, ‘Okeny and His Sister’ or ‘Ten girls Who Went to Pick up Ocuga’. The songs are indeed oral devices used to punctuate the story as they repeat the leading idea or the major event. This technique helps the storyteller to keep again the attention of the audience through a pleasant moment and to invite him to join in. The songs become a device to share a pleasure combined with a strategy, that of reminding the listener/reader the key idea through rhythms, rhymes and

pleasant sounds. The words of the repeated songs certainly bear a pedagogical purpose, as for instance in “He who treats me well, I also treat him well” (4). The oral utterance of onomatopoeias enhances the magic of the story: “Kirilikiji jii jii jiii, The waster, the one who wastes the termite rains, Kirilikijii, Hare who wastes the white ants, Let the rain fall, fall, fall, The waster, the one who wastes termite rains” (32). The storyteller may give voice to one particular character through a song as in ‘Ten girls Who Went to Pick up Ocuga’, where the foolish girl begs an old woman to help her find her friends: “Old woman, old woman, Have you seen my companions, Who left me picking Ocuga in the valley? The girls whose anuses make noises like cocks” (23). Choirs are used to repeat key events too. Beside songs and reported dialogues are included in the body of the whole narration as in ‘Awili and her suitors’, a device which plays a determining role in the creation of a lively atmosphere where characters, through their own voices, become real.

In African literature, the use of African words in an English text can be a manifestation of orality as in many of Chinua Achebe’s stories. Okot p’Bitek does not do that in *Hare and Hornbill* even though he uses African names like Onguka or Labongo. His transfer of Ugandan oral tales in English is done through a standard literary language which interestingly does not prevent the written tales from being African, expressed with skilfully used oral narrative techniques such as the sounds, the rhythms, the tone of the sentences, some grammatical inversions. In fact, the oral devices manifest themselves through redundancies and repetitions of words or leading moral messages expressed through metaphors. The Africanity of the tales is transferred through the themes, the natural and the psychological environment which construct the stories, conveying the richness of Acoli culture which is not an urban culture. For that matter,

Ngugi Wa Thiong’O explains that orature “has its roots in the lives of the peasantry”²³. Okot p’Bitek’s tales demonstrate such a sociological reality through these tales, confirming the Ghanaean critic of oral African culture, Kwabena Nketia who says that African tales and poetry are “full of animals and plants *which* are used because they provide apt metaphors or simile, compressed ways of reflecting upon social experience”²⁴. This is exactly what happens in *Hare and Hornbill*. Such a translation/rewriting proves the power of demonstration thanks to situational scenes from which the listener/reader draws a moral for himself, a lesson for life. In transmitting these tales, Okot p’Bitek endorses the role of a modern storyteller, a literate verbal ‘griot’ who tries to raise people’s consciousness towards social construction, showing also that Africans used animals to express the shortcomings of human life as in Jean de La Fontaine’s fables. The oral elements are saved through the act of collecting, memorising, transcribing and transmitting the memory of Acoli people, a particularly rich oral Ugandan culture. Okot P’Bitek’s objectives in translating these tales are met, in the sense that they are saved from disappearance as the urbanisation and modernisation of Africa is well under way, including destructions due to wars and genocides. The duality, translation / transmission of oral Ugandan culture into written English shows the benefits of using a foreign language, the coloniser’s language, to save an oral culture first for the Africans themselves but also for the rest of the world at this historical postcolonial point. In the case of *Hare and Hornbill* African orality is expressed through a coloniser’s language, producing a useful and sound literary text, a ‘Black Skin’ in a ‘White Mask’, to borrow Frantz Fanon’s title which proves to be positive in this case. This mode of transfer of oral traditions is a necessity today which must be undertaken in a spirit of openness and sharing as Walter Ong argues: “Orality-literacy dynamics enter integrally into the

modern evolution of consciousness toward both greater interiorization and greater openness”²⁵. In this sense, the interaction between orality and literacy works perfectly in *Hare and Hornbill*, thanks to an aesthetic transfer which encourages ‘the quest for relevance’²⁶ in today’s transcultural Africa.

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¹ See Ngugi Wa Thiong’ O, chapter entitled : ‘The Language of African Literature’ in *Decolonising the Mind*, London: James Curry, 1986, pp. 4-34.

² Ngugi Wa Thiong’O, *op-cit*, 13.

³ Ngugi Wa Thiong’O, “Penponits, Gunpoints, and Dreams”, in www.leftcurve.org, 3.

⁴ Okot p’Bitek, *Hare and Hornbill*, London: heinemann, 1978.

⁵ In Charles Bodunde, *Oral Tradition and Aesthetic Transfer*, Bayreuth African Studies, 2001, 3.

⁶ In Charles Bodunde, *op-cit*, 3-4.

⁷ G. A. Heron, ‘Introduction’ to *Song of Lawino*, London: Heinemann, 1984, 3.

⁸ That thesis was completed in a British university in 1964.

⁹ Okot p’Bitek, quoted in *Song of Lawino*, *op-cit*, 4

¹⁰The translation of this title is : ‘Are Your Teeth White ? Then Laugh.’ In *The Writing of East and Central Africa*, London: Heinemann, 1984, 144.

¹¹ Okot p’Bitek, *Hare and Hornbill*, *op-ct*, xi.

¹² Okot p’Bitek, *op-cit*, xi.

¹³ Okot p’Bitek, *op-cit*, xi.

¹⁴ Okot p’Bitek, *op-cit*, xii.

¹⁵ Okot p'Bitek quotes Luckyn Williams who writes: "We should be wary, if not sceptical, of tales which have been gathered and set out by school boys, who may repeat stories they have read in books."

In 'Sources of African Stories', *Hare and Hornbill*, op-cit, xii.

¹⁶ Okot p' Bitek, *op-cit*, xv.

¹⁷ In Charles Bodunde, *op-cit*, 4.

¹⁸ Okot p'Bitek, *Africa's Cultural Revolution*, Nairobi : MacMillan Books, 1973, vii.

¹⁹ Fourth page cover of the book, *Hare and Hornbill*, London: heinemann, 1978.

²⁰ Charles Bodunde, *op-cit*, 8.

²¹ Term used by Walter J. Ong, in *Orality and Literacy, The Technologising of the Word*, London: Methuen, 1982, 26.

²² Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, 'Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams', an interview by Charles Cantalupo, in leftcurve.org, 3.

²³ Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, *op-cit*, 95.

²⁴ Kwabena Nketia, "Akan Poetry" in *Introduction to African literature*, op-cit, 32.

²⁵ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy, op-cit*, 179.

²⁶ Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, *Op-cit*, 87.