

Ruth FINNEGAN, *The Oral and Beyond. Doing Things With Words in Africa*

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RÉFÉRENCE

Ruth FINNEGAN, *The Oral and Beyond. Doing Things With Words in Africa*, Oxford, James Currey/Chicago, University of Chicago Press/ Pietermaritzburg, University of Kwa-Zulu Natal Press, 2007, 258 p., paperback. ISBN 978-1-86914-125-7

- 1 This dense and rich book, made up of four parts, twelve chapters, a comprehensive bibliography and index, echoes that of *Oral Literature in Africa* (1970) and responds to it across time, with the two books standing side by side and summarising a lifetime of fieldwork and Finnegan's passion for orality. As she writes in the preface, "this book grew from my experience of reflecting on how the study of oral forms in Africa has changed since nearly half a century ago" (xi). The chapters, compiled from earlier separate publications and extending earlier positions, chart changes in the study and practice of African verbal arts and in the way scholars looked at Africa, language and performance within the past fifty years. They take readers from the author's first Limba fieldwork onto wider, comparative issues, bridging the gap between oral and popular cultures with the mention of praise singers on TV, Nigerian video production, carving of proverbs in figurines and masks, poetry on video and the web, pop groups, rap bands, trade union songs, praise on football grounds and graduation ceremonies, and AIDS-related performances. Finnegan's survey includes an acknowledgement of the work done in France by Paulme, Görög-Karady, Seydou and others. Focusing on African languages but including the broader study of orality in both scholarly reflection and daily practice, she looks at the way people interact with words to "formulate and interpret the world" (p. 3). The two pictures on the cover page – the expert yoruba *oriki* poet Sangowemi from Okuku, Nigeria, and Funky Freddy, a Sierra Leonean from the Jungle Leaders rap group – summarise the book: old and new, rural and urban orality.

- 2 Finnegan surveys the emergence and development of orality studies. She discusses (p. 190-196) the words used to describe the oral – orality, oral cultures, the verbal arts, orature, auriture, oraliture, orality, oraurality and oral language as a form of action, of art and of reflection, and remarks that “there is no good reason to deny the title of literature to African forms just because they happen to be oral” (p. 95). The main quality of her book is its tackling of stereotypes, its questioning of accepted boundaries between genres and disciplines and her opposition to the binary opposition of oral and written, traditional and urban, that “may seem initially plausible – but only until one looks hard at the facts” (p. 105). Considering circumstances surrounding the performance, she takes on board the potentials of tonal languages and drumming, and the time factor, musical themes, interludes and contributions from audiences to prove that there are “no clear boundaries between composer, performer and audience, between analyst and artist, between the local exponent, the encriber and the interpreter of texts” (p. 137). Revisiting the question of authorship on oral literature, she shows the importance of hidden actors as she studies performances, individual input and interaction with audience, highlights problems associated with the translation and appreciation of unfamiliar cultures and the researchers’ input in the study of oral forms.
- 3 The book title finds its explanation on p. 200: “to understand what have in the past been regarded as ‘oral texts’, we have to go beyond just the ‘words’ and just the evanescent moment, into a host of multiplexities.” Denouncing ethnocentric worldviews, the author encourages scholars across academic divides to revisit oral composition, narrative and new and emerging genres. She continually invites them to relocate “outside Western academics and networks” (p. 72) to be able to challenge compartmentalisations and widen their vision for a more rewarding study of African genres – a point illustrated with a long discussion of African epic (p. 150-153). Reflecting on how her first book was written “to make a point of countering that prevailing mind-set” and make oral literature “more visible as a scholarly subject” (p. 140), she says she was driven by a passion to share her interest for African cultures and to increase “the visibility and worth of African literary forms on equal terms with those from anywhere else” (p. 145). This second book, that takes readers “beyond just ‘words’ and beyond just ‘Africa’” (p. 226), certainly burns with the same flame.