

DIGITALIZATION OF CAMEROON ORAL LITERATURE: A NEW METHOD IN ORAL LITERATURE RESEARCH

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Abstract

This article examines the application of modern technology in oral literature research. Digital cameras present performances live to the audience which was not at the scene when the event was captured. Through the use of the computer or software such as Power-Point, images and sounds are simultaneously presented to the viewer. It is through technological applications of this nature that the indigenous parameters and set-up of oral literature are changed. Oral literature by its nature is traditionally transmitted verbally. The technological changes that the world undergoes compel oral literature to adapt to the new changes, namely digitalization, for preserving and archiving our cultural artefacts so that they can be passed on to future generations. We argue that the digital revolution offers an excellent chance for scholars, oral performers and librarians to avail the oral text online to regions beyond our borders. We suggest that the technology now allows us to provide the oral text in multi-media, multi-lingual and interactive format for local and foreign consumption. It is time for the oral literature researcher to join the digital world.

Keywords: Oral literature; digitalization; research; modern technology

Introduction

The invention of modern technology to a large extent makes oral literature an endangered species. One consequence of this change is the rapid westernisation of the population which is seriously affecting the situation of oral literature. For example, many Cameroonians are migrating from the villages, which are homogeneous and the natural setting for oral literature as communal art, to the urban areas which are heterogeneous and offer other forms of entertainment such as newspapers, journals, radio, television, internet and the cinema which not only compete with oral literature but dominate it. Since the occasions for the performance of oral literature does not only occur in the village as they used to in the former times, it follows, logically, that oral literature as a popular form of entertainment is gradually falling into decline. However, with the meteoric rise in the use of information and communication technologies, most, if not all, disciplines have to reinvent themselves to accommodate the emergence of this new phenomenon. Oral literature is no exception. Indeed, we submit that technology should not be negatively viewed as an invention that aims at

the total destruction of African culture and tradition. It must not be viewed as an invention that aims at the demolition of the bond that exists between our oral and physical heritage. Rather, it should be positively accepted and properly utilized. It is through modern technology that oral literature can be collected, documented, preserved and disseminated. Today's youth lives in the generation of computers, laptops, CDs and DVDs. This modern equipment can be profitably used in the collection, documentation, preservation and dissemination of oral literature. Mark Bender (2006, p. 1 of 6) opines:

At the present time it is now possible and desirable – where economically feasible – to make full use of the digital recording technology in the recording and preservation of oral literature performance – combining audio-visual technology with print mediums for delivery in combination book/CD format, online computer formats, by CD, or in museum exhibits – as is now occurring worldwide.

From the above observation, we argue that the Cameroon oral literary critic and researcher also needs to move into the cyberspace/digital world as the space in which oral literature is composed, transmitted, performed and consumed.

Digitalization of Oral Literature

Our living heritage is now adapting to digital technology for preserving and archiving it. The new technological and institutional strategies are invented to hand over our cultural artefacts to future generations. Peter Layman and Brewster Kahle (2007 p. 2 of 4) state the following on the digitalization of oral literature: 'Digital documents are both ubiquitous, by virtue of their global range, and are universal medium for archiving the record of culture, by virtue of their size and ability to represent cultural expressions in all other media.'

The significance of digitalization and preservation of oral literature is echoed in the report entitled *Report of the Delos-NSF Working group on Digital Imagery for Significant Cultural and Historical Materials* which says that:

Digital preservation and archiving activities in the area of arts should not focus on traditional works of art (paintings, sculptures, architectural monuments, works of decorative art, etc) but be broad enough (and prepared to) include new forms of art that are also in need of preservation. Thus, archiving and preservation of computer-generated art (computer graphics, animations, web art) video art, movies, artistic installations, landscape art, art performances should also be considered.

Our cultural heritage is normally based on something that we do. This is a performance that usually fades into memory and ends up disappearing. When we speak of the record of culture, we look into the artefacts that we, as a nation, produce; something that persists but inevitably decays. Digital cultures are at the same time performances and artefacts, but they are profoundly different from physical artefacts. What is fascinating about digital cultures is that these are digital documents which are observed by electronic signals and are dramatically different from those in other media. Through this invention, cultural performances and artefacts now enter the digital realm such as classroom lectures, lecture notes and scanned paintings.

The following can be given as both the advantages and disadvantages of digitalized works.

Advantages

- Saving the vanishing data
- The use of digitalized work is not dependant on time or place
- The use of material is fast and easy
- Several researchers can use the material at the same time
- The original material is safe for use and copying
- Distributing these works to millions is possible in seconds
- Saving these works is relatively inexpensive and compact
- Organizing these works is easy because they can be searched and recorded in seconds
- Collaboration in making these works is possible between people all over the world
- Finally, processing these artefacts directly with a computer opens the possibility of building a library of human knowledge that can find patterns that people would be unlikely to find.

Disadvantages

- What is to be preserved is the totality of a dynamic performance consisting of both text and context
- Digital cultural artefacts are not the property of cultural elites, for this medium is profoundly democratic – millions of people are creating cultural artefacts in intangible forms, using computers and networks.

Location of Cameroon

Geographically, Cameroon is located on the Western coast of Africa just north of the Equator. According to Delancey (1989), Cameroon is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean to the Southwest, Nigeria to the west; Chad and Central Africa on the east; Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and the Republic of Congo to the south. Lake Chad forms the short northern border, and portions Equatorial Guinea lie off the Atlantic coast. Cameroon is not a large country, totalling some 475.000 square kilometres and stretching 1.232 kilometres north to south and 720 kilometres east to west (Delancey, 1989, p. 81). The population of Cameroon is estimated at about 20 million persons most of whom still live in rural areas and practice subsistence agriculture. The economy relies heavily on the export of such crops as coffee, cocoa, banana, rubber, palm produce and timber. Cameroon started exporting petroleum in 1982 and is now expanding its industrial programme.

The differences in ecological conditions in Cameroon and the fact that the country has for long been a crossroads for the extensive migrations of many people have led Cameroonians, especially tourist officials to claim that the country is a microcosm of Africa, an “Africa in miniature” wherein one can find all the major cultural types on the continent. In fact, a 2001 linguistic survey claims that there are more than 250 different languages in Cameroon thereby suggesting that there is, indeed, an extremely heterogeneous ethnic mosaic in Cameroon (Kouega, 2007, p. 3).

It is evident that in the face of such cultural and linguistic diversity, it may not be easy to make a generalised statement, nevertheless, the widely observable continuities, especially in the domain of aesthetics suggest that Cameroon is also blessed with a rich cultural heritage which is reflected in the great varieties of art forms, the most popular being oral literature.

Oral literature in traditional Cameroon as elsewhere derives its material from the realities of the society and is used as an instrument for the examination of individual experience in relation to the normative order of society. Sone (2008) remarks that:

The individual expresses through language his joys and his sorrows, his expectations and his disappointments, his plans and his achievements, his judgements on things physical or philosophical, temporal or eternal. His expressions are temporary or heightened; simple or difficult, pithy or aphoristic or diffused or discursive, poetic or dramatic or exaggerated, and easily forgotten or memorable. Whenever man has something significant to say about any of his preoccupations and he says it effectively in language, literature is in the making. Ideas and concepts together with the sayings that accompany them become the corporate property of the community. Such ideas may be social, cultural, political, religious, moral, artistic or scientific. They in turn constitute the contents of oral traditions, stories and folklore, the components of oral literature (Sone, 2008, p. 81).

The implication of Sone's remarks is that the relationship between an individual and his community constitutes the main focus of oral literature. Seen in this light, oral literature is socially conditioned and inevitably reflects the social norms of the society from which it emanates and within which it functions.

Archiving of oral literature

The archiving of Cameroon oral literature started with the German colonization of Cameroon in 1884. On the social and cultural planes, the German colonial administration entered an unholy alliance with the Christian missionaries and, together, they systematically suppressed and, in some cases, altered Cameroon's social and cultural life to suit German conditions. Yet it is ironic that the very Germans who sought to exterminate indigenous Cameroonian culture were also the first to develop an active interest in archiving and studying Cameroon oral literature. Paul Radin (1952) says that "pioneer German scholars like Leo Frobenius and Carl Meinhof, for instance, not only brought Cameroon oral literature to the attention of German audiences as early as the late 1980's, they also took the bold and unprecedented step later on of comparing Cameroon oral narratives with the German *marchen* collected by the Grimm brothers" (Radin, 1952, p 1-2). In addition Tala (1996) observes that the overall reaction of the German audience to that iconoclastic and somewhat sacrilegious act was, understandably, one of utmost incredulity and scepticism. He further claims it was acknowledged that when a collection of folktales from the Cameroons was published in Germany in 1888, many of the white people who had lived in daily contact with the natives for many years protested quite vigorously and indignantly and insisted that no Negro could possibly have composed them (Tala, 1996, p. 6)

Thus, it could be said that German colonial rule, that defined the political entity in Cameroon, formed the basis for the study and archiving Cameroon oral literature. Since then, much has been done in archiving, collecting and publishing of books in Cameroon oral literature by both local and foreign scholars. During this era, archiving of oral literature was predominantly observed by the relationship of authority and expertise versus objectivity and subjectivity on the part of both the researcher and the oral source (local informants), respectively. Researchers shared their oral sources to provide additional comments and reflection. This view is endorsed by Milena Dobрева and Nikola Ikonov (2008, p. 24) who both conducted a study on the archiving of folklore amongst the Bulgarians, Slavs and the Greeks of Eastern and Western Europe, respectively. The earlier methodology of archiving oral literature discouraged active participation from the side of the oral source. At the end of the day the outcome of the research is biased, as the sources are influenced by the position of the researcher in the entire interview, as well as in the analyses and interpretation of the data.

The invention and introduction of electronic equipment such as tape recorders, digital video camcorders, computers etc. brought about a modern approach to the archiving of oral literature. The new approach brought about new methodological and practical challenges as well as new ideological problems in the archiving of oral literature. Tape recorders were used to record the sound without visual images. The invention and introduction of video cameras modified and improved the work captured with a tape recorder. It is through equipment of this nature that sound and performance were recorded simultaneously. Modern methods of research capture sound and events at the same time.

The archiving of oral literature, especially in Africa, does not have a long history. The process started in earnest in the early seventies by Ruth Finnegan when she became the first Western scholar to openly admit that African verbal art is, without doubt, literature in its own right. In fact, Finnegan went beyond making a prima facie case, to dictate the future course of oral literature research. The literature and research of the preceding scholars basically aimed at the following:

- To introduce students to the study of oral literature
- To introduce the different theories in the study of oral literature.
- Claiming of space in the study of oral literature for declaring it an independent discipline.
- To introduce the structural approach to the study of oral literature.

Oral literature was, therefore, documented through publications that mostly were school materials concentrating on oral narratives and poetic forms as recommended in the Mvolye conference on Cameroon oral literature in 1975, the Yaounde conference of 1977 and the International Symposium on oral literature in Africa Today held in Yaoundé from January 28th to 1st February 1985. It was observed in all the three conferences that oral literature plays a primordial role in the lives of Cameroonians and that it is a factor of unity and equilibrium. As a result, it was strongly recommended that oral literature should be taught at all levels of the Cameroonian educational system. It was also agreed that researchers should redouble

their efforts in collecting, transcribing, editing and documenting of oral literature materials.

Studying and conducting research in oral literature, to some extent, contributed a great deal to the archiving of oral literature, especially with regard to school material. At institutions of higher learning, students participate in archiving through articles, dissertations and thesis for their honours, masters and doctoral qualifications. This plays a significant role, as our libraries have material and references through such publications. It is through efforts of this nature that the study of oral literature keeps the fire burning.

Still Camera

The introduction of the still camera as a research tool enhanced the study of oral literature. It is through the use of this equipment that pictures of different performances such as story telling, poetry recital or indigenous dance are taken. The picture taken can form part of a document such as a book or an album. The document can be taken from one place to another. People who were not at the scene of the action can be brought there through the pictures. However, the demerits of this method of documenting are that the action is not brought live to the viewer. The picture needs to be accompanied by footnotes or explanations for effective communication.

Video Camera

The invention of the video camera improved the situation in the sense that the performance which is initially recorded on a video camera is transferred onto a VHS cassette. The performance cannot be viewed on television before transcription. After transferring the performance from the video camera to a VHS cassette, the performance can then be viewed on the screen using a VHS machine. Sounds and pictures are simultaneously beamed to the viewers through the video machine and television screen. Each time the cassette is played, the performance is presented live to the viewers. The data collected can also be edited by the researcher. More important it can also be kept in the archives for future use. This method of collecting data differs from using a still camera. It appears as an advanced method of collecting, especially in oral literature, as it records both the sound and action.

Digital Video Camera

The invention of modern equipment such as the computer, digital camera and digital video camera, enhanced the development of research in oral literature. Through this equipment data is collected in the field through the use of a digital video camera. This equipment uses a memory stick and a video cassette to store data. The advantage of this is that the data collected is stored differently either in the memory stick or in the video cassette. This implies that, even in terms of usage, the data kept in the video cassette can be used as described under the heading Video Camera.

The digital video camera takes sound and images at the same time, like the video camera. This is a new invention that makes digitalization of data more scientific and more easily accessible. The term digital refers to a process whereby images taken are accompanied by sound. Sound and images are further transcribed and copied into electronically modified and advanced equipment. The data collected is stored in the memory stick which ranges in size from 128 MB to 1GB or more. When the memory stick is full, the data is downloaded into the computer and is edited by the researcher and saved in the computer. In terms of the new technological development that the world is undergoing, the data can be copied into a CD or DVD through a CD or DVD writer. Once the data has been stored, the information can be shared and accessed. The performance becomes live, as it can be seen on the screen of a computer. Through the use of MS Power Point software, the performance can be displayed on a flip chart. Images can be reviewed on the chart while the sound is produced by a computer.

Today's youths are the youths of computers, CDs, DVDs and the Internet. Their lives are deeply absorbed in this world of technology. When CDs, DVDs and the Internet bring information about their culture and tradition, the youths will love and support this venture. As the youths view and download the information, they will learn more about their culture and tradition. It is also fascinating to note that the data stored can be sent electronically to researchers or anyone interested through e-mail. This method of collecting and preserving data is scientific and advanced. Furthermore, the approach is in line with the current technological advancement that the entire world is undergoing.

This method of collecting data is being used in a research project entitled UNESCO Digital Preservation Project on Indigenous Music and oral literature in South Africa (2000) Cameroonians can learn much from such projects The project is co-funded by UNESCO and the South African Ministry of Arts and Culture. The mandate, as spelt out by the Ministry and UNESCO, is to collect, document, preserve and disseminate indigenous music, literature, indigenous food and indigenous dress of previously marginalized groups. As a research team, the project leader and his colleagues came up with the idea of organizing district cultural forums, in which different music ensembles, instruments, attire and foods are displayed. As groups come to perform in their different categories, each group displays its identity in terms of tribe, language and the kind of performance. When one sees a woman putting on her indigenous attire and beads, one could recognize that she belongs to a particular group which is Lotswi. It is through attire and beads that one can differentiate a Tsonga woman from Venda women. This attire is furthermore used to differentiate the type of music that is going to be performed by this performer. This is something common to the entire country of South Africa. As the nine provinces are dominated by the indigenes of each province, attire, indigenous food and instruments are not the same. To a large extent each province has its distinct attire and indigenous foods. Limpopo appears more complex, compared to other provinces, as it consists of a number of different ethnic groups. These dominant indigenous groups of the province are the Basotho ba leboa (who are more than five sub-groups), Vatsonga, Bavenda, Mandebele and Maswazi. As mentioned earlier, the living heritage of the different indigenous groups of the province is reflected in their cultural performances, indigenous attire and food.

These cultural forums, to a large extent, have played a significant role in showcasing the living heritage of the Limpopo Province in particular and South Africa in general. What is significant about the forums is that even political leaders of the districts, namely, executive mayors, showed interest and made financial commitments. Both the political and traditional leaders are passionate about restoring the country's culture and tradition for reclaiming the rightful position of Black culture, which was disturbed by the invasion and colonization of Africa by the missionaries.

The Role of Library Institutions and Oral Literature Librarianship

Anaba Alema (1993) holds that oral literature as an information source has gained increasing recognition throughout the world especially in the United States, Western Europe and Canada where there are a growing number of oral literature projects and programmes that have been established in universities and research institutes. He goes further to say that these programmes [and projects of oral literature] are devoted to the collection, preservation, documentation and dissemination of oral literature information. A considerable number of these programmes and projects are attached to academic libraries. (Alema, 1993, p.17)

From the above observation, we suggest that each university in Cameroon should initiate oral literature projects and programmes, taking into consideration the different ethnic groups and cultures in a particular region or regions, and start the digitalization process. Librarians, archivists, literary scholars and other information professionals should be called upon to organize and service these collections. But to adequately perform these services, professionals need an understanding of oral literature as an information product. There should be an understanding of the product's ingredients, how those products are processed, who makes the products possible, and why. Raphael Ndiaye (1988,) states that "the library, the memory of the written word today has the capability to be the memory of the spoken word, and to aid in the creation of organisations whose role will be to collect, preserve and [digitalize] Oral Literature" (Ndiaye, 1988, p. 45). Oral literature presents an important and challenging new ground which librarians cannot afford to leave to professional scholars only. The least librarians attached to public, private and university libraries in Cameroon can do is to act as catalysts for digitalization of oral literature by developing strategies with interested scholars.

In Cameroon, like in any other African society, oral literature is a national treasure. It is, and has always been, "a solid bedrock for a life that invigorates and is in turn invigorated" (Kofi Agovi, 1989, p. 44). Even though about 70 percent of its population is literate in the Western sense, Cameroon is a country where oral transmission of knowledge is the most effective medium of communication. In countries like Mali, Senegal and the Gambia, the griot has become a national institution, a historical museum and a verbal tradition that sings of the mystery of mankind. Therefore, as Kofi Agovi states although new perceptions, new ways of expressing sensibility and new priorities will continue to emerge as they must in a community of change and transition, they will always be absorbed and merged in permanence of oral tradition (Agovi, 1989, p. 53). Unfortunately, for librarians in Cameroon in particular, this oral material has been largely neglected in our libraries.

We understand some critics of library involvement in the recording, archiving and digitalizing of oral literature may argue that it is unwise to divert resources to the acquisition of sophisticated digital technology equipment and materials and the employment of staff to record, transcribe, index and digitalize oral literature when there are not even sufficient funds to cope with the more traditional and conventional library functions, and when libraries continue to deteriorate and disintegrate for lack of adequate resources. The involvement of librarians in the recording and digitalization of oral literature is further decried in view of the librarian's lack of expertise in the area. While we agree that the Cameroonian librarian has professional limitations in the handling of oral sources, we must also acknowledge that the recording and digitalization of oral literature is a skill that can be acquired, that the librarian with knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of existing collections in many of our libraries, could be in a position to learn the skills and exploit oral literature resources meaningfully.

We also acknowledge that budgetary constraints might prevent many of our university libraries from fully realising their increasing responsibilities. In spite of these constraints, however, it is felt that in an environment such as ours in which our oral traditions are known to be rapidly disappearing, or are being transformed beyond recognition, and when no other agency is prepared to accept responsibility for gathering the material, then the libraries have a duty to intervene, however inadequately, to ensure that our oral literature can be recorded, preserved and digitalized.

Geographical Migration of Oral Literature in the Digital Age

By geographical migration we are referring to the fact that the performance of oral literature is no longer solely located in the rural areas. This is not to say that there is no orality in our villages but that the text is equally present in the urban areas. Rural – urban migration means that people have moved from the rural to urban areas but, in so doing, they also migrate with their cultures because culture is part of the people's lives. Part of that culture involves how they conduct marriages, burials, nationalistic narratives, initiation and many other activities. The city introduces a variety of challenges and opportunities amongst which are space, resources and language. In rural areas and traditionally, as Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) correctly observes, "the oral text was performed in the field or outside" (1986, p. 46). Sometimes the performance would take place in a hut while the participants sat around a fire. In the city that space has become a street corner, a pub, a church, a club, a studio and theatres, amongst a possibility of many others. We should not forget that information and communication technology has also opened cyberspace as one more option for the space in which the performance of oral literature takes place. The rural-urban migration dynamic introduces challenges and opportunities for the oral artist.

It is clear that digital technology has transformed the way in which oral literature is created and consumed. Internet technology is providing a vibrant environment for composing, archiving, accessing and sharing the oral text. We believe that some Cameroonian oral literature researchers have not yet exploited this technology to the full, as they should. Indeed digital technology is not limited to the Internet alone, which might make many argue that since connectivity in Cameroon is very

low, the technology is inappropriate for the time being. There are ways in which Cameroonians can exploit digital technology already cheaply available in Cameroon to enhance the enjoyment and study of oral literature. For example, while traditionally the oral text was entrusted to memory and therefore largely remained geographically fixed in those areas where the oral artist was able to reach physically; digital technology enables the oral performer to have his work put into tapes, DVDs, VCDs and other soft copies that can be sold to would-be consumers. The same can be put into university libraries where students can access the video recording of the same nature rather than trying to read accounts of such performances. Digital technology is continuing what Walter Ong (1988) calls “technologizing the word” in reference to putting oral texts into print. In the past, most of our Cameroonian musicians like Lapiro de Mbanga, Eboa Lotin, Misse Ngoh Francois and many others sang songs that were not accessible visually to critics. This was because they merely produced magnetic tapes that are aural rather than visual. New technology has made it possible for the new generation of scholars in oral literature to have recaptured the songs, interpreted them and captured their performances in motion pictures so that they are now accessible audio-visually. Because of digital technology, it is possible to locate a text in a multiplicity of geographical locations at the same time.

Conclusion

Digitalization is a new paradigm in the collection of data in oral literature research. This method of collecting data that appears in the form of images looks more convenient and appropriate, when judged in terms of the technological innovations the entire world is undergoing. The advancement of new technology should be properly and fruitfully utilized in the collection, preservation, documentation and dissemination of oral literature. Newly-invented technological equipments should be positively used for the preservation of African intangible culture. As technology becomes advanced, research must ensure that oral literature is not left behind, as it forms the basis of African culture and tradition. It is through oral literature that identity and history are properly nurtured. Digital material is more fragile than physical material. Therefore, if it is not effectively managed, it will be difficult for it to survive for use by future generations. Collecting and managing digital material needs specialist skills. We should also bear in mind that, as society becomes transformed by information and communication technology, the oral text too is becoming transformed. This affects the way we store, transmit, study, and consume the oral text. The oral text in print is a dead text. Therefore, we re-echo Karin Barber’s (2007, p. 24) assertion when she argues that “an oral texts when [cut] off from their performance context, are like the dry bones of skeletons.” That is why modern researchers are placing emphasis on the oral text-in context rather than on the text in isolation. This cannot be done without new technological equipment like the Video Camera or Camcorder. Modern oral literature scholars, critics and researchers should fully embrace New Information and Communication Technologies in the business of studying, collecting, storing and sharing of oral texts. These technologies enable us to store the oral text in a multi-media form so that at the click of a button they (researchers) are able to access the video format, a transcription of the original text and a translation of the same into English or other languages of formal education.

We suggest that websites form an ideal forum for the dissemination of the oral text to the wider community but that, in the absence of such, CD-ROMs can form a viable alternative. We of course appreciate that computers are not as widely spread in the Cameroon as other places but we also believe that we belong to an international corpus of scholars with whom we must make every effort to engage.

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Note

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