Multimedia Research and Documentation of African Oral Genres: Reflections on Partnership

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Scientific and ethical problems involving the making and diffusion of the video publication:

Verba Africana No. 4
“Hogbetsotso: celebration and songs of the Ewe migration story (Ghana). Interview with Dr. Datey-Kumodzie”

What kind of material/knowledge do we (want to) return to the source communities?
“Verba Africana” series on CD/DVD format

2005 - …: Verba Africana: Video Publication series started by D. Meraola thanks to Leiden/Naples cooperation

Project aim
The integration of technology into a novel approach of the study of Oral Literature

African Oral Literatures in this specific case

Online “Verba Africana” series at
www.hum.leiden.edu/research/africanliteratures
Portal: www.hum2.leidenuniv.nl/verba-africana/

• video documentation
• research
• teaching and e-learning
Problems and Theoretical questions

- Video documentation is not the “ultimate solution” (see selection etc.)
- Technology is not only a mechanic tool, but it contributes to change what it is recorded

Network Projects started at Leiden University in cooperation with international institutes
Main Applicant: D. Merolla
Coordination: J. Jansen and D. Merolla

2006-2009
African Oral Literatures, New Media, and Technologies: Challenges for Research and Documentation

2010-2013
Multimedia Research and Documentation of African Oral Genres: Connecting Diasporas and Local Audiences

Partner Institutions
Leiden University
Institut National des Langues et Civilizations Orientales (INALCO) (Paris)
Language Centre, University of Ghana (Accra, Ghana)
University of Hamburg
University of Naples L'Orientale
University of Bamako (Mali)
School of African and Oriental Studies SOAS (London)
School of Languages of Rhodes University (South Africa)
The World Oral Literature Project
Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO)
Network Projects: activities
- Workshops and conferences on Technological Problems and Theoretical Questions
- Publications of video materials and research in “Verba Africana” series

Network Projects: main areas of discussion until now
- ‘free’ technical tools for documentation and research
- “new orality” and what happens when oral forms transmigrate from the one genre/media to the other one (“oral” contexts and new media such as films and the Internet)
- concept of “authorship” and copyrights
- opportunity to reach the cultural owners of the collected oral genres through the Internet

Scientific and ethical problems involving questions of selection, authorship, and audience in:
At the beginning…

Research Project by Felix Ameka, Kofi Dorvlo, and Daniela Merolla on
Ewe migration stories and the Hogebetutso festival (Ghana) in which these stories are re-enacted

2007-2009

Series of meetings and interviews in Accra and the Ewe (Anlo) area

Reflections on the Interview

• Introduction: secret knowledge
• “tapping and stealing”
• the UNESCO is afraid of (t)this knowledge
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A powerful performance

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Attempt to interpretation

- His narrative: a convoluted mix of Ewe migration stories + creation stories, evolutionism, historical knowledge, and popularising fictional narratives on the Lost Continent of Mu

- “Ewe-centric” perspective: Ewe language fertilized the most known civilizations of the whole world

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Questions and Problems

- What is not a problem: Heterogeneity and ethnocentric view as narrative performance

- What is a problem for the Verba Africana series: The interviewee is and presents himself as a researcher looking for (academic?) legitimation of his narrative
- We do not want to be ‘incorporated’ in his personal agenda by endorsing his complex narrative as ‘scientific’
- nor do we intend to publicize his agenda or spread it as “history” among (Ewe, Ghanaian, international) students and among Ewe people

Ethical problems
- Respect for our interviewee’s discourse vs caution in publicizing his personal narrative “as such” (see effect of certain legitimacy)
- Unbalanced power relationship between interviewers and interviewee

Theoretical reflections
- On ‘giving voice’
  – narrative criticism of ethnographic works
  – misconstruction of the distance established between subject and object of research
- On authorship
  – intellectual property and rights of “indigenous people”
  – collaborative authorship (the interviewee is author together with the interviewers)
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'Participant structure'

- 'Participant structure' introduced by the sociologist Erving Goffman (Forms of Talk, 1981)

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Triadic participant structure

- a Principal (who is the source of information or text)
- an addressee or recipient
- an 'animator' (or intermediary) who "words" the information:
  e.g. in the analysis of the role of the West African 'griot' (the bard who speaks for his chief)

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Researchers as griots

- a Principal (the interviewee)
- the outside world - the addressee
- Animators/editors:
  Daniela and Felix shape and retouch the interview in more palatable language and communicate it through the medium of Verba Africana
At the end: more questions

• unbalanced power relationship remains
• Intellectual property and indigenous rights: individual vs collective?

Personal or shared cultural knowledge?
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**Personal or shared cultural knowledge?**

- Personal interpretation/re-creation of cultural knowledge
- Collective knowledge stimulated by textbooks at school
- Internet and (new age) discourse: Ewe/Togo group (in what connection with the Principal?)

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Thanks!