

Preserving Oral Traditions: Some Reflections on Students' Performances during Cultural Festivals Held at the Polytechnic of Namibia (Namibia's University of Science and Technology) from 2009 to 2012

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Abstract

This paper analyses the role of tertiary institutions in the preservation of oral traditions and cultures in Namibia, with specific reference to cultural festivals held from 2009 to 2012 at the Polytechnic of Namibia. A number of institutions in Namibia hold annual cultural festivals in keeping with the Namibian cultural policy that is based on unity in diversity. The Polytechnic cultural festival reflects the diversity of cultures within the Polytechnic community to represent the multi-cultural environment of the institution. The study argues that, by hosting cultural festivals, institutions such as the Polytechnic of Namibia play a leading role in the preservation of material and oral cultures of people. Preservation of oral traditions is made possible when the performances at such festivals are recorded and used as authentic sources for teaching within tertiary institutions. Interviews with students doing the Bachelor of Communication degree at the Polytechnic of Namibia indicate that if such materials are used for teaching, students are inspired to learn more about such cultures. In addition to teaching, preservation is achieved through publicity in the media, scholarly publications, and social networking. In the study, I employed a descriptive analysis within the framework of ethnography of communication.

Keywords: Oral traditions, preserve, cultural festival, tertiary institutions

Introduction

There is a general consensus among oral literature scholars that oral literature thrives on performance (Finnegan, 1970; Kaschula, 2001; Furnis & Gunner, 1995, Kabira & Okombo, 1994). According to this perspective, without performance there is no oral literature, no continuity from the glorious past, no history. A related view bemoans the uncertainty of the future of oral traditions as, in most modern societies, the traditional performer has been reduced to a company security guard, an office orderly (Omuka in Kabira & Okombo, 1994) and, worse even, a street vendor who fights for the survival of his family on a daily basis with no dignity and often times without shelter.

This pessimism is further exacerbated by the metaphor of a library that burns whenever

an elderly person dies (Hampate Ba in Derive, 2007). The disappearance of fireside gatherings in African societies has caused scholars to generate the view that African oral literature risks annihilation. Another concern emanates from lack of trust for technology-driven modes of transmission and preservation, thereby dismissing them as mummification (Owomoyela, 2007). This view dismisses any form of preservation of oral traditions outside people's cultural, social and geographical contexts.

In this study, I investigate whether institutions of higher learning could develop a model of transmission and preservation of oral traditions through the work done by the annual cultural festivals that take place at the Polytechnic of Namibia. During such cultural festivals, students' performances betray the inclusion of oral literature. Performances are not just limited to language, literature and communication students, but instead all interested students are encouraged to take part. In this study, one notes that inter-faculty performances by Polytechnic students, and the consequent adaptation of such performances for teaching by some lecturers, point to a new institutional-based model (which is also technology-based) form of preservation of oral traditions.

This study is driven by the view that inter-faculty student performances are the micro of the macrocosm for orature which cuts across all spheres of life. As such, students' performances mirror life experiences in their communities, since oral literature is intricately linked to every facet of life (Ong, 1982; Finnegan, 1970). Orature is thus not just about history or past experiences of people.

In this paper I argue that, owing to its omnipresent nature, oral literature must not be confined to the subject "Oral literature", "Oral literature and culture" and "African traditional literature and thought" as seen in many university departments. Oral literature goes beyond the said course titles, both in thought and substance. It is inherent in every aspect of life. Hence, students' performances can be conceived as enactments of past, current and even future life experiences of people in their communities. This study partly confirms this ever-adaptability of oral literature, in keeping with the dictates of its environment, through a reflective-cum-descriptive analysis of its use and its current production and preservation models, within the Polytechnic of Namibia's main campus. It is argued that, "Oral literature is like the wind (the production of sound has something to do with air) moving everywhere at the same time. No particular audience binds it; it sticks and flies away in the breadth" (Omuka in Kabira and Okombo, 1994).

Cultural Festivals as Form of Preservation

Polytechnic students come from all the regions of Namibia and other African countries. The Polytechnic also hosts a number of international students from countries like the United States of America, Germany and Sweden, among others. A number of institutions in Namibia hold annual cultural festivals in keeping with the Namibian cultural policy that is based on unity in diversity. However, the Polytechnic cultural festival mainly represents the unique cultural diversity found among the Bantu and Khoisan people. The study reveals that through the hosting of cultural festivals, institutions such as the Polytechnic of Namibia play a leading role in the preservation of material and oral cultures of people. At the Polytechnic preservation of oral traditions is further enhanced as some lecturers and students derive teaching and learning materials by recording the performances and using them as authentic sources of interactive teaching and learning.

Interviews with students doing the Bachelor of Communication degree indicate that the use of such materials for teaching motivates students' learning efforts and consequently they become more aware of the opportunity for development inherent in their own cultures. In addition to teaching, preservation is achieved through publicity in the media, scholarly publications, social networking and the students' initiated notice board type of publication called *Polysh* and the Polytechnic students' newspaper called *Echoes*.

African knowledge systems are constantly evolving and so are the modes of preservation and consumption of oral traditions. A few years ago it was unthinkable to talk about e-resources as possible replacements of hard copies of books. According to Macluhan (2009: 277) "the power of printed words is over". Steinberg (2009: 277) adds her voice when she argues that electronic media have provided communication that involve "various senses and as a result, communication in the global village resembles communication in preliterate societies" whereby message production and consumption processes are no longer linear.

Hardly two centuries ago in many African countries, there were no books or schools. Educationists were female and male teachers educated through socialisation processes inherent in African oral cultures of the time (Finnegan, 1970). Today we are in the information age dominated by extensive use of the internet (Steinberg, 2009). The world has now become a global village with village heads positioned mainly in Western capitals and ably supported by media houses, hence the need to reflect on the preservation of African oral cultures with the view of utilising them in developmental processes in the continent.

Namibia has a population of slightly less than 2 million people. Namibian institutions of learning such as the Polytechnic of Namibia (Namibia's University of Science and Technology), the University of Namibia, the International University of Management and the school system have embraced the central government's commitment to Namibia's oral traditions and cultures through the hosting of annual cultural festivals. In addition, newspapers such as *New Era*, *The Namibian* and *The Southern Times*, have all taken the initiative to preserve and disseminate information on Namibian cultural festivals held by institutions in Windhoek and other regions of Namibia.

From the perspective of the events characterising the Polytechnic of Namibia during the cultural week and thereafter, one discerns that Ruth Finnegan's (1970) definition of oral literature as literature that is transmitted from generation to generation by word of mouth has, in essence, been revisited. The cultural festivals demonstrate that, in addition to the word of mouth, transmission is now being done through videos, WebQuests, Wikis, ring tones and blogs. Technology takes centre stage in preserving oral traditions to benefit future generations. In addition, oral literature is now evident in library books, cultural festivals, rites of passage (e.g. marriage ceremonies, engagement parties, graduation ceremonies), students' assignments and examination scripts.

Data analysis and interpretation

In this section I describe and analyse data associated with students' performances during the week of the cultural festival at the Polytechnic of Namibia. During the cultural festival, various groups of students stage performances in which they exhibit pertinent issues in their cultures. In such performances, for example, various student artists enact aspects of cultural practices associated with the Ovambo, Tswana, Ovahimba, Ovaherero, Nama, San and Baster groups of people.

The main thesis of this section is that students' performances relate to theories of preservation of oral traditions as examined by Bender (2010). These theories are discussed as the analysis unfolds. One such theory contends that oral literature's dynamism makes it adaptable to its environment and realities. However, I argue that students' preservation of orature and its adaptation for teaching by some lecturers at the Polytechnic of Namibia should be understood as being reflective of its dynamism and adaptability. It is further argued that the human agent can still play an informed role in the preservation of oral traditions through the use of technology now accessible to the majority of people in Africa. Furthermore, I argue that if traditional story tellers were captivating in their formidable role of transmitting and preserving oral traditions

through performance and by word of mouth, the modern student–lecturer preservation role lies in the harnessing of technology in oral literature transmission, performance and preservation.

The technology–based model of preservation does justice to the concerns raised by a number of theoretical positions regarding oral literature production and consumption standards. For example, one such theory is propounded by Mutahi (1988) who posits that songs transmit customs, culture and history. Thus the songs that students sing during the cultural week at the Polytechnic of Namibia are endowed with historical and cultural significance.

Performances such as those associated with the cultural week at the Polytechnic of Namibia, meet the Parry–Lord theory of preservation which emphasises the need to pay attention to style, form and performance when selecting a preservation model (Bender, 2010). So, as they sing, dance and engage in performances, students pay attention to this three–fold preservation criterion, such that their product becomes a true reflection of the original, the micro of the macrocosm.

To shed more light on the authenticity and historical underpinnings of students' performances, I give an example of the performance by the Ovaherero group below.



The Ovaherero group of student performing artists donned traditional military regalia reminiscent of that of the German regiment that defeated and tortured their ancestors.

The group's performance was characterised by military drills and the only difference with a true military outfit was that the student group lacked guns with live ammunition. However, in the contemporary Ovaherero society such cultural performances are often accompanied by real guns, real horses and realistic economic, political, religious and social events. Performances by this group of students are the micro of the macrocosm. They reflect performances by the Ovaherero people. Thus, Ong (1982: 44) is right to argue that "orality situates knowledge within the context of struggle". This implies that orality is intricately related to life.

The Ovaherero come from three regions in Northern Namibia, namely the Omaheke region close to the Gobabis border with the neighbouring Botswana; the Otjozondjupa region in the central north of Namibia; and the Kunene region which borders Angola. The Kunene region is where the Ovahimba group of the Ovaherero people lives. The Ovaherero people speak Otjiherero.

The performance by the Ovaherero group demonstrates a historical-cum-cultural drill which commemorates the 1904–1907 genocide in which many Ovaherero people were massacred by the Schutztruppe, a German army led by Lieutenant-General Von Trotha (<http://www.jstor.org/stable>). As put by Kamutuka (2004), the genocide resulted in "...65, 000 or 81 % of the Ovaherero / Ovambanduru deaths" (<http://ovahererogenocideassociationusa.org/images>).

This historical drill is now done amidst pomp and fanfare as the Ovaherero people bond with their fallen, gallant heroes of the past. The dance creates an opportune time for the Ovaherero people to rediscover their heroism to have ever resisted a well trained and well equipped German battalion. The march thus offers the Ovaherero group a sense of belonging, as it reminds them about their history. In addition, student artists indicated that such performances unite them as an impeccable group with a unique character, social and political will and cohesion (interview with student performing artists, 15 August, 2009).

Another theoretical position reflected in students' performances is the Richard Bauman and Robert Abrahams performance theory of the 1970s (ibid). It stresses the aspect of context. Based on the students' performances, one deduces that the inclusion of material culture characterised, in some instances, by colourful traditional outfits, material possessions (e.g. calabashes), traditional containers of grain and food and head gear all decorated by relevant gestures, as was the case with the highly attractive Ovambo group, transforms the Polytechnic setting into the micro of the macrocosm. Below is a

picture depicting a scene involving the Ovambo cultural group.



The Ovambo people hail from northern Namibia. As can be seen, bright colourful skirts and kopdoeke(head scarves) reflect their aesthetic values. The Ovambo girls who were part of the Ovambo performing group carried traditional tools, some of which were used mostly by women to produce food. Some of the traditional grain containers were carried on their heads that were covered in colourful kopdoeke. The artistic displays of these girls captivated the audience, because despite the rapid vibrations caused by their rhythmic dances, the traditional grain containers did not fall to the ground. Being a group that hails from the semi-arid region of northern Namibia, their main crops on display were sorghum and mahangu (burlrush millet). The performances by the Ovambo group of students partly reflected the history and economic system of the Ovambo people.

The other theoretical perspective that can be used to interpret students' performances as a mode of preservation of orature is Denis Tedlock's ethopoetics approach (Bender, 2010). This approach argues that native speakers must be involved in the preservation of oral traditions. All the groups of student performing artists were native speakers of their respective languages, such as the Kavango group who also performed at the 2010 cultural festival. This group hails from the Okavango region in Northern Namibia. The group performed the Kudana dance whilst chanting the Vakavango (Rukwangali) traditional song that praised the Kavango people and culture. The group was dressed

in vihiho (traditional wings) and maudewe (traditional skirt). Their traditional dance was done amidst pomp and fanfare as they chanted whilst ritualistically presenting a live duck to their traditional religious leader. The highly rhythmic Vakavango song goes thus:

Vakavango vahewa, vakavango share ngavapiko?

Mudewe shetu vahewa ani, mudewe share ngavapiko?

Vihiyo vyavo vahewa ani, vihiho vyavo share ngavipingo?

Kudena khavo vahewa ani, kudena ghare ngawupingo?

Ani mpo yetu vahewa, ani mpo yetu share ngayipingo?

(Source: Transcription by a Bachelor of Communication student, Polytechnic of Namibia, 21 August, 2009)

English translation by students together with the author:

The Kavango, they are gifted, who can dare challenge them?

Who will inherit their traditional skirts, their traditional wings?

Who will inherit them? Our beautiful dress, who will inherit it?

Who will ever inherit our precious culture?

As can be seen, this song praises the Kavango culture, their dances and the Kavango traditional dress as cultural masterpieces. Thus the song markets the Kavango culture to the next generation. Through the song, the youths are urged to admire their culture through taking it forward, and thus preserving it.

The Tswana group of Polytechnic of Namibia students who come from Botswana, also performed during the cultural festivals. They were dressed in well designed animal skin outfits well known among the Bantu people of Southern Africa.

The Batswana song is as follows:

RE BATSWANA

Re Batswana

ljaho-o!

Ba Botswana	Ijaho-o!
Iyaho -o! Ijaho-o! Hei mama	Ijaho-o!
Ga re thethe	Ijaho-o!
Rea bina	Ijaho-o!
Iyaho-o Ijaho-o Heiu mama	Ijaho-o!

(Source: Transcription by members of the Tswana group of students, Polytechnic of Namibia, 21 August, 2009)

We are Batswana	Ijaho-o!
From Botswana	Ijaho-o!
Ijaho-o! Ijaho-o! Hei mama	Ijaho-o!
We are not just proud	Ijaho-o!
We dance	Ijaho-o!
Ijaho-o! Ijaho-o! Hei mother	Ijaho-o!

NTSHIELA METSI

Ntshiela metsi wee ke tswa ko masomo.

Ntshiela metsi ke tswa ko mesimo.

MAY I HAVE SOME WATER

May I have some water please; I am coming from the lands.

May I have water, I am coming from the lands?

The Batswana song inculcates good communication skills, politeness and diplomacy, mainly among the youths. Some scholars have bemoaned that Africa's main problem is the sheer inability of our educated people to talk to one another (Bukonya, Kabira & Okombo, 1994 and Kabira & Mutahi, 1988). Therefore, among other things, the Batswana song teaches people about the need to be able to say "Please...", "Excuse me" and "Thank you" to one another. It is a song that enhances negotiation skills, diplomacy and

social co-existence. The performing artists indicated that such performances are meant to unite people. Additionally, students performing artists indicated that this song helps people develop a sense of pride in their culture and become more confident in daily life. To spell out how students perceived the cultural week and its impact, I analyse how 25 second year Bachelor of Communication students responded to a questionnaire on the "In their own words" sub-section below.

In Their Own Words

An analysis of a purposive sample of 30 second year Bachelor of Communication students' responses to the questionnaire on the cultural week testifies to the fact that students value the cultural week, as they see in it learning and socialising opportunities. For example, in response to the question: "Did the cultural festival relate to your culture? If yes, state why." some students responded thus:

1. Yes, I liked the way they danced, and I just couldn't resist, I joined them.
2. Yes, I learnt a lot about my culture, its different aspects and activities that I was not aware of.
3. Oh yes. I loved it, I now understand my culture much better and I think it is unique.
4. It has really put me in a mood to remember my culture.
5. Not really, everything that happened there is what I already know.

Students responded positively to the question, focusing on the use of learning platforms such as Moodle to engage in reflective and interactive learning about various aspects of the cultural festival. The students also indicated that such learning can be extended to blogs and Facebook, both of which are popular with students. However, one respondent bemoaned current restrictions at the Polytechnic associated with the use of Facebook during the busy hours of the day. Students' responses, coupled with their performances during the cultural week, demonstrate their interest in their cultures and their tolerance of cultural diversity within the institution. Their interest in technology is indicative of the pivotal role that technology can play in the preservation of oral traditions.

The technology–model of preservation involves performance, teaching and technology. Within the framework of the model, oral literature performances by students should be preserved for teaching using, a variety of strategies and technologies. For example, learning platforms such as Moodle can be used for interactive teaching and learning.

This use of technology would both preserve orature and facilitate teaching and learning. Arguing in this line, Dyjik (2006) points out that digitalisation could lead to acceleration, visualisation and large quantities of culture. It could lead to the creation of culture by the new generation.

At the Polytechnic of Namibia, in courses like Group Dynamics and Communication, Introduction to Communication, Intercultural Communication and, most importantly, Oral Literature in Namibia, students have been exposed to both traditional and interactive learning. In some cases, discussion forums have been opened in Moodle for students to share information and complete tasks based on relevant aspects of the Polytechnic of Namibia's cultural festivals held in 2009 and 2010 respectively. Students' participation demonstrated enhanced motivation to deal with relevant issues emanating from the cultural festival in which they participated either as performers or the audience who clapped hands, whistled and even ululated.

What emerges from this study is that through cultural festivals institutions could contribute in the preservation of orature through performances by the students. This could present opportunities for lecturers to exploit students' interest in their cultures to teach oral traditions and related subjects, thereby contributing in the preservation of such traditions through technology that would be used to disseminate information.

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