Stumbling with/over Scripts: Vignettes

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Isn't it doubly stimulating to read about "oral tradition" and "orality" by entrusting it to the print medium? Acts associated with media of communication surely reflect the ontological status of the *verbum*: plural voices, pluralistic voicing, and the inevitable symbiosis of routes and genres. Yes, this is the primary constitution of the "oral," no matter in which specific (?) discipline we locate or discourse it.

Ethnomusicology, my primary field of specialization, has long claimed "the study of music of oral tradition" for itself by ignoring "others." Well, as scholarship and the production of knowledge in various spheres of life have intensified and diversified, we are constantly reinventing ourselves, tongues, and the field of ethnomusicology. In my high school days, I learned the songs of the Beatles and Temptations mainly through their sheet music, the printed matter (and also through "afternoon jumps" or dance sessions). In actual fact, some girlfriends brought the scores to me to play on the piano for their enjoyment. In our field methods and techniques, we (that is, investigator, informant, objects/subjects of the study) probe and respond, employing the primordial oral means. A few of us are preoccupied with the study of "new art music" by Chinese, Japanese, Australian, Korean, African, and African-American composers; not so much because of the perforce and persistence of orality, but because the boundaries, materials, tools, and hypotheses of the contemporary ethnomusicologist are resilient and voluptuous. The glare and lure of the oral are now often overshadowed by the multivocal nature of the objects of study, and by the increased momentum of the production of knowledge (and quality, of course) on what were formerly assumed to be predominantly oral musical traditions.

O.K., let's agree for a while that the music culture of the Anlo-Ewe, for example, is predominantly oral. To what extent can we apply the old canons about oral traditions? My father was the "bookkeeper" for his performing and social groups. He had attended adult (night) education classes in his late youth and could read and write in his local language. He wrote and read records of defaulters, etc. Then there was his close friend,

simply known as "Teacher" because he had served as tutor for some of the "night" classes. But Teacher is a man of oral tradition, par excellence, and he worked hard to foster the cultivation of Anlo-Ewe music and dance. He also made important contributions by keeping song *incipits* (that is, writing down first lines of the group songs ever learned in the oral mode. Only on rare occasions he would bring out his scripts and quote a few headings, just to remind the song leader, during performances.

In my study of the proscribed performance genre known as *haló* (1994), the privileges of literacy were usually co-opted to challenge, chastise, demean, and outperform an opponent group. Such privileges were carefully encoded in scripted statements on company or group banners that were displayed as additional visual and "oral" stimulators. The tradition of *reading* readable banners and scripted satire continues to be a central feature of contemporary rural and urban Anlo-Ewe musical traditions (Avorgbedor 1998).

Of memory and continuities: Well, my grandfather was a town elder who kept vital town records. He did not read or write, but was able to do two things: *read* his old, key-wound clock through his visual identification and association with the chimes and the positions of the clock arms. He was able to read his own name off not just any envelope addressed to him but that one from his son, in particular. (His son, my uncle, has nice handwriting, and the high frequency of the communication between the two allowed his father to develop *automatic reading*.) So, when a seasonal ritual had to be performed for Mamaya, one of the town spirit guardians, my father brought from my grandfather's vaults a half-worn-out manuscript in which my dad had recorded, in fountain pen and ink, details and procedures for the ritual. This one time my dad read out the manuscript to the gathering, who listened attentively. There were a few times he stumbled and fumbled, mainly because of the age of writing, and also due to the fact he was beginning to forget some of his night-class lessons or skills. Of course, this recourse to the readable carries many implications and reflects particular tendencies and needs associated with predominantly oral and postcolonial cultures in transition.

These events or anecdotes related here took place between 1955 and 1967. Today more Anlo-Ewe individuals can read and write, but the quality of their participation in the "music of oral tradition" has less to do with literacy levels than with new socioeconomic opportunities. The levels, frequency, and significance of the print medium or writing have not really changed much in regard to the constitution, identification, and experiences of the Anlo-Ewe "music and dance of oral tradition." Such random notes and anecdotes do tell us not only about the conditions of the performative

(which is always being redefined), but also the actors, investigators, our audiences, and how we negotiate what is relevant or advantageous in our research enterprises in ethnomusicology and related disciplines, as far as "... of oral tradition" is concerned.

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