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African Folklore

An Encyclopedia

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To Our Teachers:

*William Bascom, Richard Bauman, Alan Dundes, Henry Glassie,
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often replete with proverbs, archaisms, idioms, and other rhetorical devices. The speaker's widow's mite may be compared with that of the housefly: "A poor fellow I am, not rich enough to lavish presents; yet even where the housefly had nothing to give, it scraped its offer from its bare limbs." A flowery acceptance speech is also expected from the recipient or his orator.

In Malagasy, marriage requests attract the most elaborate use of *kabary*, ceremonial speech, which is highly allusive. Here, two speech makers, representing both parties, start a contest in which they try to outdo each other in speaking skills (Keenan 1974). Generally, though, rhetoric pervades most verbal interaction. A beggar in Burundi may petition a patron for a new pair of shoes in poetic style, referring to his ragged shoe held together by a safety pin: "One does not hide one's misfortunes; if one tries to hide them they will nevertheless soon be revealed. Now I know a poor old man, broken in health and ill; there is a spear stuck in his body, and he cannot be saved" (Finnegan 1970, 450).

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KWESI YANKAH

See also **Gender Representation in African Folklore; Okyeame; Oral Traditions; Performance in Africa**

ORATORY: POLITICAL ORATORY AND ITS USE OF TRADITIONAL VERBAL ART

Political oratory is the practice of public speaking. In Western societies it is defined as a formal, polished discourse that is usually written down and published. Most great orations in the traditional African context normally are neither written nor published. The fundamental purpose of political oratory is to influence the audience's beliefs and attitudes politically. As in many other societies worldwide, political oratory in African societies is immediate in its relationship to audience response. As a genre, political oratory subsumes such categories as speeches of political leaders, praise poetry, propaganda, and laws.

Okyeame

Africa is a heterogeneous continent that includes thousands of ethnic groups with diverse linguistic, social, political, and economic systems. Consequently, the distribution of the types of

political oratory is varied. The role of the *okyeame* among the Akan of Ghana (Yankah 1995) is different from the compositions and performances of the Shona *marombe* of Zimbabwe (Hodza and Fortune 1979). While the *okyeame* is a leader in his own right, the *marombe*, who is a special praise singer to the chief, appears to revel more in sycophancy than in building alternative bases of authority. These variations among actors in political oratory do not, however, negate the fact that all of them intend to use traditional verbal arts either to transform their audience's dispositions or to reinforce their already held beliefs and attitudes. Through the use of verbal arts, political orators attempt to construct frameworks that encourage favorable responses to their speeches within the broad contexts of their hearers' perceptions and preconceptions.

Political oratory in Africa, past and present, varies from place to place. A category of political oratory is performed according to the situation. Skills that are demanded of elders who preside over worship are not exactly the same as those that are required of a dispenser of justice. Similarly, a panegyric suggests different oratorical expectations than a eulogy. In some cases, however, a political speaker may combine characteristics of distinctive subcategories of political oratory.

The *okyeame* (Yankah 1995) exemplifies a multifaceted political actor who, as the chief's diplomat, counselor, and orator, accentuates the rhetorical powers of the words of the chief. Moreover, the *okyeame* is a symbol who helps to create and sustain the power and mystery surrounding the chief. The *okyeame* (Yankah 1995; Obeng 1997) effects a rhetorical strategy that enables the individuality of the chief to be seen indirectly into the diverse strata of society. The Yoruba of Nigeria have a similar institution. They have a king, *oba*, who is regarded as the representative of gods (Karade 1994). The king rules all living creatures. Due to the preeminence of the king, oratory is used to depict his distinction from other creatures. Like the Ashanti chiefs, the Yoruba king sends messages to his subjects through other people and rarely speaks publicly.

Among the Shona of Zimbabwe, the *marombe's* role is to elaborate, in hyperbolic terms, the authority of the chief, calling him, for example, "Lord of the Sun and the Moon" and "King of the Land and the River" (Hodza and Fortune 1979, 3-4). Masizi Kunene (1979, xxv-xxvi) reports that literature in the era of King Shaka of the Zulu and after was used to reaffirm approval and disapproval of the whole nation. The poet and the singer not only praised leaders but also criticized and evaluated them based on their deeds.

Public Debates

Political oratory in traditional African societies was also employed in public debates. In complex land disputes, perpetual marital disagreements, or clan quarrels, each party of the contending groups invested its victory or the possibility of being heard honorably in the oratorical prowess of its representative or representatives. Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* (1964) dramatizes a protracted land dispute in which the rhetorical supremacy of Ezeulu (the principal character) determines its conclusion in favor of one of the villages. The village of Okperi wins the case because Ezeulu fearlessly and eloquently testifies in its favor, notwithstanding the fact that he hails from the enemy village of Umuaro. In the same vein, Jomo Kenyatta (1938) uses his

oratory to defend Kenyans' land rights in the face of its alienation by the British.

Ceremony

Finally, political oratory is employed to fulfill ceremonial functions. An orator may speak in recognition of a leader's achievements or on an important occasion. Conversely, an orator may speak deprecatingly about a leader or a situation. The Xhosa of South Africa have imbond yezizwe, literally, "the voice of the people," whose duty it is to praise and criticize as the circumstances demand (Diko 2001).

To Communicate Political Agendas

Contemporary African leaders have used traditional verbal art during the struggle for independence and after to communicate their political agendas effectively. Kwesi Yankah (1989) demonstrates how Nkrumah's post adopted and adapted traditional formulas and expressive devices to talk about current sociopolitical events. Nkrumah's speaker graced presidential functions with appellations meant to boost the image of Nkrumah and elicit fear in his opponents. In pursuit of this goal, the poet scrutinized the appellations of all other chiefs in Ghana and applied them to Nkrumah. Yankah reports that it is against this background that Nkrumah got his title *Osagyefo*, which means "savior at war." Although the title was originally identified with the King of Akim Abuakwa state, it was relevant to Nkrumah because of his opposition to British colonialism.

Poetry

In Tanzania, traditional poetry was also molded anew and employed to agitate for political freedom. Saadani Kandoro (1972) wrote an anthology of poetry in Kiswahili entitled *Mashairi ya Kandoro*, ("Poems of Kandoro"). Traditionally, Kiswahili poets could compose poetical epistles to their friends for any number of reasons, including expression of love, hatred, and apology. In one such poetic letter, Kandoro (1972, 138) informs a fellow poet about the political happenings in Tanzania. The image of the colonialist that Kandoro creates is embodied in a snake, which is being attacked by numerous insects (fighters for independence) united by their common objective of immobilizing the snake. In the late 1960s, during the politicization and mobilization of the Tanzanian citizenry to embrace socialist politics, the same poetic traditions were employed. An example of such a poem is titled "Which Type of Punishment":

Adhabu gani tuwape, wenye kosa la kunyonya
Wanyonyaji kama kupe, wagande wafe kunyonya
Hawauchi hata kope, vipi tutavyowaonya
Adhalni gani tuwape, wanyonyaji Tanzania?

(Honero 1980, 29)

How do we punish them, those whose crime is to
exploit
Those who exploit like ticks, how do we freeze and kill
them
They don't spare even an eyelash, how do we chastise
them

Which punishment do we give these, exploiters of
Tanzania?

(author's translation)

The metrical pattern of this poem is a popular traditional rendition, which was developed and popularized by the nineteenth century Kiswahili poet, *Muyaka wa Muhaji* (Abdulaziz 1979). Here, however, it is used to preach the policies of socialism as enshrined in the ideals of Arusha Declaration of 1967 and, at the same time, attack opponents of the new political and economic dispensation.

Songs

Songs are also used rhetorically to communicate political messages. Crane (1971) points out that, during the struggle for independence in the Democratic Republic of Congo, a religious group, *Kimbangu*, was suspected of composing the following subversive song:

Greetings, Lulua people
The white people came and put us in a fence
We who stand a strong column of the Congo
We have our own meetings
Our president walks around with white people
But our chief Kalarnba is only a puppet
He is like a leopard who is fed on dog meat instead of
goat

(1971, 42)

Traditionally, it was a humiliation for a leopard, a traditional symbol of royal power, to eat dog meat, the food for beggars. This song was among other messages that were sent across the country and culminated in the 1959 riots in the Congo.

Other Rhetorical Devices

Many rhetorical devices are used in political oratory. Tropes such as proverbs, euphemisms, evasion, circumlocution innuendo, hyperbole, irony, metaphor, periphrasis, paradox, and personification are applied selectively and opportunistically to bring the points home. These tropes are highly intertextual in that they rely on other texts, which are either being affirmed or subverted. Furthermore, the intertextual nature of political oratory is manifested in its semantic and pragmatic vagueness, ambiguity, and indirectness (Yankah 1995; Obeng 1997). The proliferation of these devices in political oratory enables actors within it to construct cognitive structures with alternative ramifications, possibilities, and combinations as the observer encounters new situations. Yankah (1995) discusses third-party talk as a pervasive system of rhetorical indirection in West Africa, expressing itself in circumlocution and metaphorical and proverbial speech.

Samuel Obeng (1997) subscribes to the same view when he observes that politicians, when talking about risky topics, avoid the direct and obvious and communicate obliquely in order to protect their interests and gain leverage over their foes. They do so by engaging in indirect references. Besides using oblique speech, politicians use circumlocution and evasion to avoid responding to questions or situations without apologizing.

Metaphorical language in political oratory has two functions, which in some cases are mutually exclusive. It may be used to vivify

a point affectively, it may also be deployed to conceal meaning. Kenyatta fabricates a fairy tale in *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938, 47–52) and allegorically uses it to describe how Kenyan lands came to be alienated through the insidious trickery of hypocritical treaties initiated by the British. The fairy tale is Kenyatta's explanation of the causes of the two world wars and of Kenya's fight: for independence. So many stylistic devices in political oratory are associated with traditional verbal art that each political event marshals its own as the context demands.

History of Scholarship

Political oratory, and its use of traditional verbal arts, is finally receiving serious scholarly attention. Nonetheless, the power of traditional oratory was recognized as early as 1888 (Freeman 1958, 13). Freeman reports on how highly developed an art form oratory was in West African societies. E. W. Grant (1929) and G. P. Lestrade (1935) have done studies of praise poetry directed to chiefs and sung by official bards in Southern Africa. Ruth Finnegan (1970, 1992) has amplified scholarship in the field by identifying and analyzing various types of oratory in different parts of Africa. Specifically, Finnegan analyzes the formalized praises, directed publicly to kings, chiefs, and leaders, which are composed and recited by members of the king's court (1970, 111–46). D. P. Kunene followed closely with his *Heroic Poetry of the Basotho* (1971), in which he describes the heroic deeds of warriors and kings. Early scholarly efforts in political oratory mainly focused on the thematic and formal characteristics of the genre.

By far, the most significant work after these early efforts is that of Maurice Bloch and others (1975). Bloch's study is intended to demonstrate how traditional oratory indexes the unquestionable and unchallengeable nature of traditional authority. In traditional societies, argues Bloch, authority is suggested and evoked by the very language that is evoked by speakers. Bloch begins his discussion from the assumption that the notion of a conscious exercise of power is not applicable in a society where socialization permeates in an unconscious and acceptable way. Consequently, formalization of oratorical discourse, the repeated emphasis of topic, adumbrates the absolute authority of elders over other members of the society. For example, in Bloch's view, there is a direct correspondence between fixed formal styles among the Merina of Madagascar and the stringent social control that obtains in that society.

Other studies disagree with Bloch. According to Paine (1981), even in communities that are said to be authoritarian, language is used in a flexible way. Paine insists that formalization is a rhetorical device through which speakers stimulate audiences to go on listening to them. Formal oratory creates and sustains the power of royalty, and any political center has symbols that help it to extend power beyond its immediate confines. These symbols may be verbal or physical objects, which are either handed down traditionally or constructed in the course of time or both.

Kwesi Yankah's study of the *okyeame* (1995) is perhaps the most authoritative statement to date on political oratory and its use of traditional verbal art. Applying insights drawn from pragmatics, anthropology, and folkloristics, Yankah demonstrates that the study of communication is governed by culture-bound rules. The description and analysis of the role of the

okyeame in the context of message production and reception foregrounds the significance of senders and receivers of messages as primary actors in communication. Beneath this sender/receiver relationship, there is a dynamic that traditional verbal arts are perpetually subjected to as contexts of communication change. Based on insights gained from linguistic anthropology, such as Durant (1997), and Yankah's studies, researchers in political rhetoric, such as Samuel G. Obeng (1997), seek to illustrate how metaphors and other devices of speech are opportunistically used by political functionaries, speak without taking responsibility for the many conflicting interpretations of their speeches that may be result.

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ORIGINS AND CULTURE HEROES: NILOTIC PEOPLES

Broadly considered, folklore refers to cultural traditions that are passed from generation to generation. This brief essay attempts