

The Global and the Local with a Focus on Africa

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Among those characteristics shared by all human groups, language is ranked very high. When referring to the informal use of language, we often use the label “talk.” Through various genres and forms of talk, people share their interpretation of events and experiences, public and private. Each social/cultural group labels these varieties of talk with its own terms, but certainly narrative is one of the most prominent forms that occupies a position of great significance around the globe. By whatever individual names the forms are known, the full range of prose and poetry, when communicated primarily through oral performance for an audience familiar with the genre, constitutes a large body of oral tradition, whether the performance is in a face-to-face group, on the radio or television, recorded, or, today, posted on the internet as well. Of equal importance in the communicative repertoires of social life are events in which participants perform symbolic actions through the ritual genres, engaging in celebration, commemoration, transformation, dramatization, and other forms of enactment. In these culturally specific performances, groups of varying identities express their history, preoccupations, and aesthetics, including music, dance, drama, and culinary forms. Whether formal or informal, when the event is familiar because it is rooted in social life and people are free to make commentary, it may revitalize or criticize or reveal or transform the strengths and weaknesses within the group. These events also qualify as oral tradition because they provide the stage on which people can gather to enact the forms that express the shared and the familiar juxtaposed to the strange and exotic. Such performance events create, or sometimes destroy, social bonds because they reveal the significant features of the group and each person’s place within it through actions designed for participants to witness and interpret within the framework of knowledge familiar to them.

In studies of African oral traditions two topics have emerged as significant in recent years. The first concerns the interweaving of concepts and practices defined as traditional or indigenous with those originating in the paradigm of modernity, while the second identifies the relevance and the

power of gender and sexuality. Contemporary scholars, educators, and filmmakers have now recognized that African societies combine and interweave customary practices with innovations originating in the paradigm of modernity. It is not surprising, then, that systems of customary law coexist alongside the legal systems imported from the West and that of Islam, and individuals make use of the system best suited to their purposes. Equally familiar to fans in Africa and in the West, music from South Africa, Ghana, Morocco, and other locations integrates the rhythms and sounds from the African continent with those from other parts of the world.

More difficult to identify and comprehend are those situations in which gender and sexuality are central. Not limited to gender roles, concepts of female and male may serve as a metaphorical resource for categories of social organization not directly linked to gender. Closely linked to relations of power, whether or not they are apparent, expressions of gender and sexuality may be influential in social and political life, as when, for example, women collectively express political action with their bodies. In another development, over the past decade women's rights have been linked to human rights. An unfortunate schism has developed in some instances, placing those who argue for "customary practice" in opposition to the forces working for better conditions for women. The claims made under the guise of custom have often been shaped by years of contact with the West or with Islam, both of which have privileged males in African societies and ignored or denied the roles and powers of women. One of the most dynamic issues characterizing social life in contemporary African societies, this rupture distinguishing custom from modernity provides the focus for a wide range of political activity while at the same time other dynamics are integrating the traditional and the modern, as we see, for example, in the films of Sembene or television from South Africa.

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