

ORALITY AFTER INTERRUPTION

On the recovery, preservation and future of oral knowledge

Nkata Ana · Proposition

Orality will reclaim its place as one of humanity's most sophisticated communicative technologies.

Literacy is an extraordinary human invention. It is precise, durable, portable and remarkably effective at what it does. But it is also a technology of compartmentalization. It extracts language from the living moment and gives it independent form.

Orality operates differently.

It is not simply speech in the absence of writing. It is a fully integrated communicative ecosystem. It exists between speaker and listener, memory and place, gesture and sound, repetition and variation, the living and the ancestral. It dialogues with what is seen and unseen, felt and unfelt. Meaning does not reside only in words. It resides in relationship.

The mistake was never the invention of literacy.

The mistake was allowing one technology to become the measure by which another was judged.

Once literacy became synonymous with knowledge itself, societies whose intellectual traditions were structured through orality could be described as societies without knowledge, without history, even without civilization. The instrument of measurement had quietly become the definition of what was being measured.

We must learn again to distinguish between these things.

To recognize the sophistication of orality does not require the rejection of literacy. It requires that literacy be returned to its proper place: as one powerful human technology among others.

But there is another truth we must confront.

Orality did not operate alone.

It was sustained by institutions.

Communities whose civilizations were structured around orality developed social systems that allowed oral knowledge to function at its fullest capacity. Knowledge had custodians. Memory had structures. Transmission had occasions. Repetition had purpose. The community itself provided the architecture through which knowledge was carried from one generation to another.

Much of that architecture has now been dismantled.

Dispersal, migration and technologies structured around human-made systems have radically altered the conditions within which orality once operated. Institutions that served as its custodians have weakened, disappeared, or been relegated to the realm of lore—ghost institutions remembered but no longer fully functioning.

Under these conditions, orality must adapt or risk obsolescence.

This is where the particular qualities of literacy become indispensable.

Knowledge that once remained secure because its human carriers lived within functioning systems of transmission must now become portable. It can no longer depend entirely upon the presence of the elder, the gathering, the ritual, the storyteller, the initiate, the practitioner or the community that once ensured its continuity.

This is where we continue to fail ourselves.

Every unwritten knowledge asset that remains locked within a human carrier is vulnerable. When that carrier dies without the knowledge having been decoded, recorded and archived, an inheritance can disappear with them.

The answer is not to replace orality with literacy.

It is to use literacy—and every other technology available to us—to preserve the knowledge that oral institutions once knew how to keep alive.

The archive must therefore become a new instrument of continuity.

What was once carried through uninterrupted human transmission must now also be recorded, documented and made portable—not because the oral system was inadequate, but because the world that sustained its highest capacities has been profoundly altered.

A CALL TO CIVILIZATIONS OF ORALITY

For Africans, and for all peoples whose civilizations were substantially carried through oral structures, the task is not to prove that our ways can approximate someone else's.

The task is to understand our own.

We must become confident enough to say:

This is our way of knowing.

It worked.

It carried philosophy, history, law, genealogy, medicine, cosmology, ethics, ecological knowledge, language and social memory across generations. Its survival is itself evidence of its capacity.

We do not need proximity to another civilization to establish our legitimacy.

We do not need to search elsewhere for ancestry, influence or validation in order to make ourselves worthy of serious consideration.

We must take our position.

Orality is among the most complex communicative technologies of the natural world, and African societies developed extraordinary mastery within it. Our capacity to bend, absorb, improvise and regenerate language—the emergence of pidgins, creoles, patois and other living

linguistic forms—should not automatically be read as linguistic deficiency. It may also reveal something about the extraordinary adaptability of the oral mind.

But recovery cannot mean nostalgia.

Nor can preservation mean freezing oral knowledge into text.

The task before civilizations of orality is therefore twofold:

Recover the intelligence of orality.

Build new structures capable of carrying it forward.

We must understand what these systems were capable of before deciding what they lacked.

We must safeguard what remains.

We must decode what remains.

We must record what remains.

We must archive what remains.

And then we must develop it.

Fidelity to orality cannot mean allowing knowledge to disappear because the institutions that once protected it no longer exist.

Ancient technologies must be allowed to become contemporary again.

The form may have to change so that the inheritance can survive.

Okpara House

A House for the Recovery of Selfhood