Orature as a Characteristic of Mande Literature

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Abstract:
The name “Mande” brings a multitude of peoples and ethnic groups together into a larger unit. Likewise, orature weaves many different literary genres into one. It is a type of literature in which the collective dimension subsumes individualities. This paper defines orature as a specific literary genre and also as a literary theory that favours a criticism of the literatures produced by writers of the Mande region, especially Titinga Frédéric Pacéré and Gnepo Werewere-Liking. It presents orature as an alternative to Western literary criticism and genre theory.

Key Words: Orature, oral and written literatures, mixture of genres, performance, comparative literature, literary theory.

Résumé
Le nom «Mandé» brasse une multitude de peuples et groupes ethniques dans une unité plus grande. De même, l'orature est le tissage en un de nombreux différents genres littéraires. Il s'agit d'un type de littérature où la dimension collective sublime les individualités. Cet article définit l'orature en tant que genre littéraire spécifique et comme une théorie littéraire qui favorise une critique de la littérature produite par des écrivains de la région Mandé, en particulier celle de Titinga Frédéric Pacéré et Gnepo Werewere-Liking. L'orature y est présentée comme une alternative à la critique littéraire occidentale et sa théorie du genre.

Mots-clés : Orature, littératures orale and écrite, mélange de genres, performance, littérature comparée, théorie littéraire.

Introduction

The term ‘orature’ has been coined to palliate the alleged contradiction in the phrase ‘oral literature’ or ‘spoken literature’ because ‘literature’ was understood from its etymology only as something written down, and also to counter the tendency to belittle the art communicated orally and received aurally, which was considered as an inferior art in literature. However, in-depth studies reveal that before writing, there was a literature, which was oral or spoken with drums. The techniques used in this literature to help the memory were mnemonics such as catch phrases, proverbs, and sayings. In her study of oral literature, Stephanie Newell gives the example of a system of mnemonics which the Yoruba *babalawo* (praise-singers) developed and which helped them to recall the thousands of verses of praise-names and genealogies that constitute their praise-poems or *oriki* (72). The written letter was then preceded by these types of ‘letters’ of the spoken word. This is also the argument by Roger Caillois of the French Academy when he writes of the etymology of literature:

> “Literature comes from letter”. To say the contrary would historically be more likely, for it is certain that almost everywhere, literature, I mean a word that is tried so that it may last a little more than those that slip out of the lips, preceded the alphabet. (Ngiyol 97)[1]

[1] The translation is mine. The original version is : ‘Littérature vient de “lettre”. Le contraire serait plus conforme à l’histoire. Car il est certain que presque partout la littérature, je veux dire une parole essayée pour durer un peu plus que celles qui échappent des lèvres, a précédé l’alphabet.’

"Letter" is thus etymologically defined as a "tried word", easy to remember, and different from ordinary words. Not anything written is literature. Similarly, all spoken words cannot be considered as oral literature. Oral literature uses "tried words" for "letters".

This way of thinking brought many literary critics to prefer keeping and using the traditional phrase "oral literature" instead of the suggested term "orature." The term "orature", which I am going to define in detail later, has then been taken up to designate a specific type of written literature at the cusp between oral and written literatures, referring to written fictions that mix different performing genres.

Examples of works of orature are the Cameroonian Werewere-Liking's literary productions. Werewere-Liking wrote in her book *La mémoire amputée: Mère Naja et Tantes Roz* that this book of hers is a "chant-roman" (song book-novel). It mixes two genres: songs/poetry and novel and requires performance. These are the signs that it belongs to orature. Another example is Ngugi's Gikuyu work, *Devil on the Cross.* It uses oration, song, conversation and is of the nature of a fable intertwined with conventional narration. The Zimbabwean Yvonne Vera's literary works are also examples of orature. Studying Vera's novels, especially *Nehanda,* Annalisa Oboe said that she "experiments with ways of retaining the features of precolonial orality" (127). She tries to ensure the survival of the spoken word in the written text. Critics have also labelled the Ghanaian Armah's *Two Thousand Season* as a "simulated orality" (Wright 87) or as "oral utterance to be heard", or again "the kind of 'novel' that a griot would have written if he had access to literary form" (Deandrea 11 et 9). This comment stresses on the performative aspect of this novel. Besides, the Ugandan P'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* and the Nigerian Okigbo's *Labyrinths* appear like compilations of sayings and proverbs, which are "tried words" in oral literature. Furthermore, the novels of the Somalian Nuruddin Farah, such as *From a Crooked Rib*, *Maps*, *A Naked Needle*, *Sweet and Sour Milk*, *Sardines*, *Close Sesame*, have always behaved, writes Derek Wright in his study of orature in Farah's fiction, "as if the oral and written modes existed not only simultaneously but interpenetratively, the one already there inside the other" (87). Also, at the end of his study on Pacéré's poetry, the Ivorian critic Urbain Amoa said that this poetry should be better called "*Drama-poésie"* or drama-poetry (209). He witnesses to the existence of a mixture of genres in this poetry. These are just some examples of works partaking of many European literary genres but belonging to orature in the African context. Consequently, western critical methods cannot evaluate these works. Other critical theories are then called for. Hence, orature as a literary theory.

This paper aims at defining orature as both multi-generic type of literature and theory and illustrating it with some examples taken from the Mande region. Ruth Finnegan in her study of oral literature in Africa names the region of West Africa as the place where one can find literary forms that have dramatic elements; she cites especially "the comedies of certain mande-speaking peoples in the Savannah areas of the ex-French West Africa" (505). Our theory of orature will be illustrated with two examples taken from this region, namely Pacéré's *Poème d'une Termitière* and Werewere-Liking's *La mémoire amputée*.

I. Definition of Orature

Many terms or phrases have been used to refer to literature that is not written. Femi Abodunrin in his critical appreciation of such a literature in Africa says that "oral literature, orature, traditional literature, folk literature or folklore" have been used to describe this specific type of literature (29). The term 'orature' which is mentioned in this list was coined

by the Ugandan linguist Pio Zirimu[2] as a substitute for 'oral literature' because, at the opposite of the German word "Wortkunst" (literally, art of words) which includes both oral and written forms, the term 'literature' privileges writing, leading those who have a book-bound definition of literature to see a contradiction in the phrase 'oral literature'; in their mind literature is nothing but written. In this context, it is not a surprise that this phrase doesn't even appear in some European books on literature. Leif Lorentzon comments on Peter Widdowson's *Literature* (1999) and J. Hillis Miller's *On Literature* (2002) that "there is not even a subordinate clause in either book on oral literature" (2). With such an understanding of literature that leaves no place for orality, 'orature' was invented to get rid of this internal contradiction in the phrase 'oral literature'.

It is in this sense, as a substitution for "oral literature", that Ngugi Wa Thiongo, the Kenyan writer and critic, first used the term "orature". P. N. Uwajeh in his article on orature in literature also uses it in this logic to subsume all various oral forms (297). Rémy Dor too shares the same definition in his reflections on orality and writing where he presents orature as comprising everything that is transmitted from mouth to ear without recourse to writing (30).

But not all literary critics agree to this substitution of "oral literature" by "orature". The rediscovery of oral literature as the antecedent of written literature (See Kesteloot 13) and the realization of the existence of "tried words" as equivalents of 'written letters' account for the persistence of some literary critics in the use of the terminology of "oral literature" instead of "orature" (See Ricard 46). Thus abandoned as an alternative for 'oral literature', the term "orature" has been given another meaning. I use it to mean a multi-generic type of performative literature. Other critics give it this meaning. It is the case of the Kenyan performance scholar, oraturist, actor, director and storyteller, Mshai Mwangola. He said in a presentation on "Completing the Cycle: Stage to Page to Stage" that 'orature' has been re-conceptualized, to mean "an interdisciplinary aesthetic system weaving together numerous genres in the performance of a concept." This second definition of orature lays emphasis on hybridity and performance. Orature mixes different performing genres in one. The same literary work can be poetry, sung music, story and drama at the same time. It is in this sense that the term 'orature' is used in this paper.

In my redefinition of "orature", "oral literature" is partly included in "orature". "Orature" deals with "oral literature" but cannot be reduced to it. Many critics think likewise. Femi Abodunrin tells us, while critically appreciating black African literature in English, that studies on oral traditions show "orature as comprising traditional song, song-poems, various forms of oral narratives, tales, legends, myths, and historical narratives" (17). John W. Johnson too stresses the multi-generic quality of African oral literature, especially of the Mande epic tradition, saying that it has three modes: the narrative, the song and the praise-proverb mode (See Lorentzon 5). In these explanations of orature, we recognize elements belonging to oral literature. But, according to me, the difference is that, while in the former definition of "orature" as a substitute for 'oral literature', each of the elements are separated in both Abodunrin's and Johnson's definitions, in my redefinition of this term, all the elements are together and woven in *written form*. So, mixture of genres and oral and written forms and performance are identifying features of works of orature.

In orature texts, many genres are mixed. This calls for a change in criticism of orature texts. Critics who study such texts say that a better assessment of them can be done in considering them as mixture of genres. The Nigerian Okpewho for example, in his

[2] Evan Mwangi wrote: ' "Orature" is a term coined in the 1970s by Ugandan linguist and literary enthusiast Pio Zirimu to denote oral texts.' Mshaï S. Mwangola also wrote: The term 'orature' originally was coined by Ugandan scholar Pio Zirimu as an alternative to 'oral literature'

constructive book on oral literatures of sub-Saharan Africa, finds the universal (Western) approach to genres unsuitable. According to him, the single, culture-bound approach to literature makes it difficult to understand each society in relation to another (See Lorentzon 6). A multi-generic rather than a single genre approach does then justice to orature.

In addition to mixture of genres, I find that another characteristic of orature is that it goes along with performance. The mixture or collaboration of oral and written forms appears here. Orature is written for performance. This is also expressed in Remy Dor's definition of 'literary orature' as oral arts being written or the gathering of written works that are meant to be performed (31). It is in this sense that we can also understand Lorentzon's saying that " 'the art' of orature has been located in the performance" (8).

I see the importance of performance in orature as coming from the link it has with oral literature. Words are performative in oral traditions. This is what Julia Ogier-Guindo finds when studying oral traditions in A'jië (Nouvelle-Calédonie): word and action are inseparable (24). Joseph Roach's definition of orature, in the field of performance studies, as a literary genre at the cusp between spoken literature and written literature, highlighting the interaction of these modes of communication over time (11-12) is clearly understandable in this context. Orature is in fact a type of print literature, originally drawn from oral literature, and which is called to return back to oral literature through performance. There is then a cyclic transition from simple oral utterance to literary oral utterances in the creation of 'tried words', from oral literature (that uses tried words) to literary orature (that uses "tried words" in written form for performance) and so on.

A good illustration of the interaction between written form and performance is given in Newell's *West African Literatures* where, referring to the poets of the 1980s and 1990s, especially Kofi Anyidoho and Niyi Osundare, she writes:

> The supposed boundaries between europhone and vernacular literature, and between oral and written genres, are challenged by these poets, who make use of African instrumentation, vernacular languages, and oral styles in their English-language work. Echoing *négritude* poets, many of their poems contain instructions for 'oralizing' the form, requiring readers to imagine, if not actually to hear, 'cheerful drumming, with gangan (talking dum) in the lead, then the song (…).
>
> These young poets also frequently stage and record live performances of their poetry, scripting drums, dancers, and local-language choruses into their verse. Confronting the problem faced by Okara and other first-generation authors, of 'how to write an oral culture' (Irele, 2001: 16), these writers look for ways to create a form of printed poetry that evokes sound and inspires the 'earwitness' without denying the status of the printed text (Anyidoho, 2002: 16). For, without music and oral performance, poems are regarded as locked in a suffocating space of print, or what Osundare refers to as 'the prison house/ of the book', a bequest of colonialism which leaves the poet 's-c-r-e-a-m-i-n-g/ for an exit' (Osundare, 2002: 15).
>
> One solution to this sense of imprisonment is to make use of audio-visual technology and to issue sound-recordings with the printed book. (129-130)

Anyidoho opted for this solution and accompanied his poetry with a CD. Pacéré too, whose poetry I discuss, produced a CDROM on drum language on which his poetry is built.

In addition to these technologies, literate people have been used to ensure the passage from printed text to orality. Not many are actually needed. Just a few is enough as Newell explains in her reflection on oral literature: "The presence of one or two book-reading individuals in a small community is sufficient for textual interpretations and printed opinions

to circulate widely among non-literate people" (71). She gives the example of Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* which was passed on this way to non-literate audiences who even incorporated references to it in their own oral genres.

The performance of Ngugi's novel, *Devil on the Cross*, also illustrates the circulation of literature from orality to writing and back to orality. "The appropriation of the novel [*Devil on the Cross*] into the oral tradition" (*Decolonising* 83) of storytelling around the fireside was done through reading aloud for audiences by literate people. The novel was then received collectively. The tradition of group reception of a work of orature is important here as it enhances the aesthetic pleasure and provokes different appreciations and discussions.

To make performance of orature texts possible, orature writers write and have to write with this in mind, trying to create a form of printed text that evokes sound. Orature writers do subscribe to this obligation. It is the case of Yvonne Vera for example. Studying her works, Annalisa Oboe explains that

> Vera makes sure that all her works stave off the threat of silence by moving (though not unproblematically) between orature and literature, so as to blend rather than juxtapose them. Vera's fiction aims to maintain the spirit and language of oral forms, by centring on word and voice, debating the question ideologically, and creating phonocentric texts, which we are invited to "hear" as well as read". (128)

The phonetic transcription is a help for performance. In other orature works, there is the introduction of aural elements, such as onomatopoeia that make the text sound louder, or the suppression of punctuation marks, as it is the case in Mabanckou's *Verre cassé* et *Mémoires de porc-épic*, which, according to Massoumou who studied the orality in Mabanckou's works, is helpful in the process of transition of the written narrative into orality (176).

To come back to the specific case of Ngugi's *Devil on the Cross*, which I mentioned earlier, it can be said that the transition from written literature into oral literature was made possible partly due to the way the novel was written. It is no wonder that during the writing of *Devil on the Cross*, Ngugi complains that "words slip and slide under [his] eyes… They would not stay in place. They would not stay still" (75). To write down the spoken word is indeed to crucify it, to nail it on paper. Ngugi finds this crucifixion difficult. Not all the spoken words have been crucified, as his text "beats with life and energy" (*Devil on the Cross*, 93). It is an example of orature.

The comparison between orature texts and simply transcribed folktales also show that to borrow from oral narrative is not sufficient to make a text an orature text. An orature text is a text in which life and energy are represented or in which performance is suggested. Ngugi for example describes his Kikuyu novels like *Devil on the Cross* as 'living' and 'authentic' novels, whereas his 'Afro-European' novels such as *Petals of Blood* presumably have no true 'living' dimensions (see Wise). He means that there are some differences in the writing or nailing of the 'living' dimension of orality in both novels.

In my view, the presence of the various aids to performance makes the difference between orature texts and simply transcribed folklore texts. Writers of orature are creative, not mere scribes. Studying transcription of folktale from orality to written form, Porter comes to the conclusion that "The folktale that you observe in written form has always already been distorted" (229). He says that the codes of gesture and declamation, the infinite variability of performance, thanks to which the *griot* supplements the bare text of a narrative, are replaced with a proliferation of adjectives of evaluation and adverbs of manner (232). Orature texts have aids that assist the performer to ensure the passage from writing to orality whereas simply transcription of folklore texts kills the oral text, suppressing performative elements, in order to preserve it.

Texts of orature are then like plays: they are simply extant as acting scripts, as only the basis for performance. Many orature writers indeed lay emphasis on the need for performance. It is the case of Yvonne Vera for example. Talking about the motives behind her novel *Nehanda*, she rightly mentions the need for performance: "The legend, the history is created in the mouth, and therefore survival is in the mouth. That's what I wanted to capture in *Nehanda*" (quoted in Oboe 128). She says this because she is convinced that her

> people know the power of words. It is because of this that they desire to have words continuously spoken and kept alive. We do not believe that words can become independent of the speech that bore them, of the humans who controlled and gave birth to them. […] The paper is the stranger's own peculiar custom. Among ourselves, speech is not like the rock. Words cannot be taken from the people who create them. People are their words. (*Nehanda*, 39-40)

In this way, survival being in the mouth, she advocates performance of texts of orature. They belong to orature insofar as they are or can be performed. The genealogy for example, which on paper looks nothing like literature, Thomas Hale has shown in his study on *griots*, that it "takes on a particular rhythm when it is called out, one that is quite distinct from other genres" (123).

Performance requires, according to me, because of the hybrid nature of orature text, some kind of training. It is not always enough to know how to read to be performer of an orature text. The American scholar Valerie Lee has a similar conception. She shows in her study of African-American women writers, that to hear more readily the orality of black women's texts we need to learn to "read double-dutch", that is, "jumping in the space between orality and literacy" (quoted in Oboe 129). According to Lee, reading double-dutch allows the reader to see how the turning of several narrative ropes simultaneously creates intertwining cultural performances.

My conception of orature is that it brings together or intertwines the live, dynamic, flexible, repetitive and mnemonic qualities of spoken literature and the permanent features, especially the letters, of written literature. While the oral and aural dimensions of spoken literature are often lost when the folklorist transcribes spoken traditions into print, the artist of orature, in contrast to the folklorist, uses different typographic techniques in order to preserve the oral-aural elements of spoken literature. Some critics express a similar view. Adeeko Adeleke for example, while reviewing Micere Mugo's book on African orature, defines orature as 'the creative and imaginative art of composition that relies on verbal art for communication and that culminates in performance' or at the very least appeals to readers for performance. Thus, I can say that orature underlines the fact that the spoken and written traditions are not mutually exclusive. It lays emphasis on the transfer of aural aspects of spoken discourse to writing.

While the written word cannot 'live' in the same way as a spoken word, can all written words be resurrected, as some writings are only meant to be seen (Dor 31)? The written text whose resurrection makes it be like the spoken text from which it was transcribed is what I call an orature text. It can be said that in orature the essential element of the spoken word is not the story per se but is the orality itself, the oral aspects which are more or less reluctant to crucifixion at eyesight. These enable the re-entry of any text into the oral world, which is what is called "resurrection". What favours this re-entry is characteristic of orature texts. Christopher Wise, in his notes on Ngugi's theory of the oral-aural novel, underlines this aspect when he calls good news the fact that "the affixed word, the spoken word chirographically reified upon a flattened surface, may of course be resurrected within a community setting, so long as its 'reading' community retains the ability to decipher (or translate) its meaning." In other words, texts of orature are what Newell calls "printed texts

regularly performed aloud, incorporated into oral literature, or re-oralized by authors and poets" (73).

This possibility of recycling of literature in orature shows the interaction that exists between the living or spoken word and the written word. Written materials are lifeless artifacts, ontological things that are only later resurrected as spoken words within an oral-aural setting. The particularity of orature texts is that in it the spoken word is killed but potentially living because of its particular transcription which makes it be opened to performance. Orature deals with both oral and written words.

Another particularity of orature is that it is never performed in the same way twice, but instead varies according to each new audience and setting. Orature texts incorporate new elements, like mere oral texts. They expand, continually absorbing new materials. They are continually updated with additions from printed and other sources as well as with the innovations of performers. Many critics have underlined this aspect. Newell for example observes that innovative performers "often insert current affairs and moral debates into historical narratives without ruffling the audience's sense of 'history'; meanwhile, audiences often reserve their literary appreciation for the manner in which an individual *griot* re-assembles familiar elements and reworks the well-known genre" (59-60). This is also what Awuor Ayodo notices while studying Luo women's orature. He realizes that "Orature is not based on set notions about social reality. Like society, it is a constantly changing form that reflects not only the changing times, but also individual interpretations and views (128). An example is *Traits and Stories of Irish Peasantry* by the nineteenth century Irish writer William Carleton I studied as part of the corpus of my doctoral thesis. It has been edited many times. At each edition, the author introduced new changes in the details of his stories almost in the same way storytellers make changes in their stories from one retelling to the other. In addition to showing that orature is not confined to Africa—Ngugi "talk[s] about Asian, African, European, Pacific and Latin American orature" (*Notes* 7)—, this example also shows that in orature the written text is an aid to performance, leaving room for free improvisations. It is in this sense that Rémy Dor says, and I agree with him, that orature differs from literature by its mode of transmission, that is, there is no absolute fidelity to an original. While there is rigor in literature, orature is docile; the spoken word flows, but the written one is forged (30).

All these characteristics of orature texts show that there is need for a critical theory for a better criticism of such texts. An appraisal of orature works requires a critical theory in which "conventions of [oral literature] and [writing] cohabit to highlight the relationship between orature and chirography" (Abodunrin 19). I call this critical theory by the name 'orature'; hence, the critical theory of orature.

As a critical theory, orature advocates the assessment of orature texts with the above spell-out considerations in mind, that is, "far from the critical norms which govern literary appreciation in contemporary western locations" (Newell 59). This is what Oyekan Owomoyela, while examining the impact of western criticism on African literature refers to, while talking about "African writers' wariness about European (and American) valuation of their works" (26). In fact, critics like Jahheinz Jahn who looked at African literature with western critical norms called it "apprentice literature" and the writers as "apprentice writers" (Owomoyela 26). They looked at the literature from the standpoint of assimilation. And it is true that, during colonization, as Laurence Porter observes, "to be sanctioned and preserved by the dominant culture, the 'native' culture must don the decent clothing of assimilation" (229). At that time, African writers who choose to write in European languages were subject to pressures and tensions, including an immersion in the European tradition and literary canon in order to produce texts that look like those of their masters. It is actually such texts that Gareth Griffiths sets out to study in his book on Eastern and Western African literatures in English. In his introduction, he says: this work "inevitably concentrates mainly on the

interrelationship between the European forms, structures and poetics imported along with the notion of a literature in English, and less on the equally important effect of the many and diverse local oral traditions" (2). Orature as a literary theory asks for quite a different consideration of orature works.

African writers, especially Achebe, reacted against this kind of western criticism of African literary works. Achebe said that "The Latter-day colonialist critic… given to big-brother arrogance sees the African writer as a somewhat unfinished European who with patient guidance will grow up one day and write like every other European" (quoted in Owomoyela 26). The valuation of all African writers' works from the point of view of assimilation does not do justice to them but creates problems which Leif Lorentzon points out in the following words: "Ever since the late nineteenth century, scholars [who] have collected African oral literature (…) followed a Euro-American literary/critical tradition. This caused problems, as the literature they encountered was most often radically different from the one they were trained to study" (3).

It is a fact that not all African writers accepted assimilation. Some, like Ngugi, Kunene, Anyidoho, and Pacéré, to cite but a few, even reacted against and went so far as writing their creative works in their mother tongues, because they realize that "through writing in foreign languages, literature has suffered the same bastardizing fate as politics and the economy" (Abodunrin 14). The new position they took advocates a better consideration of African literature. Therefore, a valuation of African literature from the standpoint of assimilation is damaging and doesn't give due respect to the genius of writers of orature.

Another strategy adopted by some African writers to fight against the assessment of their works with western literary canons is to give African names to the genres of their productions. They realize that if they still call their works "poetry" or "novel", it is understandable that critics try to assess them with criteria pertaining to these imported genres. That's why, as Leif Lorentzon explains, in order to avoid this problem, some African "Scholars prefer to use indigenous terms for the genres they study, turning their critical attention on their vernacular languages and verbal arts" (4). It was an effort to avoid Western terms but without ignoring them completely. Orature comes in to solve this problem of terminology.

The newness in orature as a literary theory is that it is not preoccupied with whether a work by a writer is derivative of oral traditions, but rather considers writers as thinking architects rather than prisoners of a cultural heritage or assimilated to another tradition. We cannot rightly look at orature texts with western critical norms but with conventions pertaining to the genre of orature.

I will now illustrate the theory of orature with Werewere-Liking's *La mémoire amputée* and Pacéré's *Poème d'une termitière*. These works are said to be difficultly understandable with European conventional criteria; hence, a critical analysis of them is necessary to make them less hermetic. The present study will show how these works from different parts of the Mande regions have characteristics of orature, namely the mixture of spoken and written tradition and of many genres.

II. Werewere-Liking's *La mémoire amputée* as Orature

The literary works of Werewere-Liking Gnepo are expressive of the traditional environment in which she was brought up. In fact, though she was born in Cameroon in 1950 and traditionally brought up by her great grandparents, since 1978, she has been living in Ivory Coast, which is part of the Mande region. Living in Ivory Coast, she started researching on Black-African traditions and aesthetics. She tried her hand at various arts: writing, painting, drama, cinema, poetry, etc. Since 1980, she developed, with Marie-José Hourantier,

what she called “a ritual theatre” to make it different from the genre of western theatre. Her artistic creation in this new genre follows the Ki-Yi Mbock initiation movement which advocates the re-birth of African arts and its recognition in the whole world. She is the founder of the Ki-Yi M’Bock theatrical group.

She wrote many “chant-romans” (chant-novels), poems, plays and short stories. Her chant-novels include *À la rencontre de…*(1980); *Orphée Dafric* (1981); *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail (Journal d'une Misovire) (1983)*; *L'Amour-cent-vies (1988)*; *La mémoire amputée* (2004). In poetry, she wrote *On ne raisonne pas avec le venin* (1977). Some of her plays are *La Puissance de Um* (1979); *La Queue du diable* (1979); *Une nouvelle terre* (1980); *Les mains veulent dire* (1987); *Un Touareg s'est marié à une Pygmée* (1992); *La veuve dilemme* (1994); *L'Enfant Mbéné* (2003); *Le Parler-Chanter - Parlare Cantando* (2003). *Liboy Li Nkundung* (1982); *Contes d'initiations féminines* (1983) are part of her short stories.

Even though she uses denomination belonging to genres of European or American literature such as “poetry”, “play”, “novel”, her works belong to orature. *On ne raisonne pas le venin* for example was first written as poetry. She later put this poetry into music (musical show), turning them thus into songs. Later, she removed the music before publishing it. She also said she was inspired by the art of painting in which she was making her début when she was writing it. Thus, *On ne raisonne pas le venin* is poetry, music and painting to some extent. She combines print and performance as her work was first written, then performed in the form of music and then reduced to mere poetry on paper like a painting to be kept as support for later performance. It is a mixture of genres and uses the oral and written continua.

Werewere-Liking is usually at the look-out for new forms of conveying literature. When she was asked during an interview whether she likes reading the works of African authors, she said that she reads everything that they produce, but sometimes simply glimpsing at them when it is not a new form of writing, for she is not interested in the story per se but much in new forms of writings. She reads such works to see the new writing strategies created by her peers as she herself is embarked on a similar agenda, producing works of orature (Magnier 20).

When she was also asked during the same interview which of the different literary genres was her favourite, she answered that she never liked the division of genres:

> I do not agree with the systematic division of genres. Negro-African textual aesthetics is actually characterised by a mixture of genres. It appears to me that it is only by mixing genres that one can reach different registers of language, different qualities of emotions and approach different levels of consciousness where one can express everything… In one of my latest publications, *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail*, all the genres are mixed: poetry, novel, theatre…[3]

From what she says herself, there is no doubt that her works belong to orature or “écriture nouvelle” (new way of writing) in her own words.

She was helped in this task of creative new writing by her multiple talents. In fact, her biography and her works show that, with regard to western subdivision of genres, she is a novelist, poet, playwright, painter, choreographer, and performer. All the various aspects of this rich personality have their marks in anything she produces. Hence, many genres are mixed in her works, making them works of orature that require performance.

[3] The translation is mine. The original version is : ‘Je n’adhère pas à la scission systématique des genres. L’esthétique textuelle négro-africaine est d’ailleurs caractérisée, entre autres, par le mélange des genres. Et ce n’est qu’en mélangeant différents genres qu’il me semble possible d’atteindre différents niveaux de langues, différentes qualitées d’émotions et d’approcher différents plans de conscience d’où l’on peut tout exprimer… Dans mon avant-dernière publication *Elle sera d jaspe et de corail*, tous les genres se rencontres : poésie, roman, théâtre…’’

Werewere-Liking tries to be faithful to traditional African textual aesthetics which according to her is characterised by a mixture of genres but also by collective production. *A la rencontre de...*, for example, is produced by her and Hourantier. The same story is told by the two. Looking at the two versions, some changes can be noticed in style and in details, like in the performance of orature works. In Werewere-Liking's version, the story is about two young men; in Hourantier's one, it is about one man and one woman, the two symbolizing Africa and Europe. The reader is brought back to storytellers complementing each other in telling a narrative. Another example is *Orphée Dafric* which has been transformed into a play of ritual theatre by Hourantier and the two published as one book, one support to performance.

La mémoire amputée is yet another example of orature but with a new style. After cooperating with Hourantier to tell the same story in *A la rencontre de*, then after making a novel and a play out of the same story in *Orphée Dafric*, Werewere-Liking combines both the novel genre and poetry or chant in *La mémoire amputée*. It is a piece of orature. The title itself refers to memory, the place where stories are stored for performance in oral traditions. *La mémoire amputée* is a weaving of prose, epistolary narrative and poetry. The following chart shows the recurrence of poetry in this literary hybrid work.

Pages	Chants/Poems
24	Chant 1
27	Chant 2
43	Chant 3
48	Chant 4
50	Poem
53-4	Poem with refrain
87	Chant 5
90	Chant 6
95	Poem
101	Poem
120	Chant 7
146	Poem
153	Chant 8
158	Poem
158-9	Poem
173	Poem
180	Chant 9
189	Chant 10
202	Chant 11
239	Poem
243	Chant 12
261	Poem
267	Poem
273	Chant 13
328-9	Poem
329-30	Chant 14
335	Chant 15
341-2	Chant 16
359	Chant 17

379	Poem
399	Poem
409	Chant 18
412-13	Poem

This table shows the spreading of chants and poems in the book. In-between the chants there are prose narratives which constitute the 'novel' as a genre. The eighteen (18) numbered chants and the forty-seven (47) unnumbered chants and poems which are separated by prose narratives make of the book a collection of 65 poems altogether. The forty-seven unnumbered poems belong partly to the prose narrative in which they have been inserted but also to poetry because of their structural form. In this position, they appear like mortar that helps cement the two genres together to constitute a new genre called 'orature'.

La mémoire amputée is a chant-novel (chant-roman) as it is written on the title page of the book itself. A deeper investigation reveals that it is actually more than a chant-novel. There are also proverbs and epistolary narratives (cf. 267, 295, 310, 331-334) in this literary work. Michelle Mielly of Cambridge, in her foreword to this book, points to the mixture of many more genres in this literary work which she describes as a "roundabout of poetry, essay, autobiography and historical narrative"[4] (7). She further makes her point precise in saying that "*La mémoire amputée* is autobiography and poetry, novel with a thesis and initiation to the *Bassa* thought system of the author's native Cameroon" (*La mémoire amputée* 10). This observation of hybridity of genres in this work leads Michelle Mielly to the conclusion that in *La mémoire amputée*, "We are dealing with an innovating genre in which narration and poetry, soliloquy and *Bassa* women's traditional songs such as *Mbée* or *Nding* are interwoven." (11)

Such an observation from a Western critic is important; it highlights the novelty of the genre of orature. It is something new in western literary world which is accustomed to the single literary genres of epic or fiction, drama and poetry. It is then difficult for western critics to objectively assess a work of orature in which epic, drama and poetry are interwoven. A new theory is then called for, which is also called orature.

With the critical theory of orature, one can say that *La mémoire amputée* belongs to orature, being fiction and poetry. The different poems are about different topics (description of a character, death, life events, love, despair, etc.) but the recurring one is that of fatality or walk to one's gloomy destiny. Here are some excerpts. In chant 5, we read :

Yes, all the forces of nature are in service Of a fate when it has to take effect When it becomes forbidden to forbid When fate and chance are bound by a blood pact When it was my turn to receive my strike of fate. (87)	Oui, toutes les forces de la nature se mettent au service D'un destin quand il doit s'accomplir Quand il devient interdit d'interdire Quand sort et hasard se lient par un pacte de sang Quand ce fut le temps pour moi de recevoir mon coup du sort. (87)

The narrator even sees death and birth as synonyms : "Death here is rebirth in another place/ And to be born here corresponds to dying somewhere else." [« La mort ici est renaissance ailleurs/ Et naître ici équivaut à mourir ailleurs » (180)]. In chant 11, she says that her destiny is bound to someone else : "My fate was in your hands/ You whose name will stick to my

[4] The translation is mine. The original is :"Carrefour de la poésie, de l'essai, de l'autobiographie et du récit historique".

skin.” [« Mon destin était entre tes mains/ Toi dont le nom me collera à la peau. » (202)]. Also in chant 12, she writes that “This thing called destiny or fate/ Is saved in my memory. (…)/ Everyday’s walk brings us to the only true place of reflection and destination/ Our destiny.” [« Cette chose nommée destin ou fatalité/ Ma mémoire l’a enregistrée. (…) / Marcher chaque jour conduit au seul vrai lieu de réflexion et de destination/ Notre destin. » (243-244)]. Then she repeats the same idea with a slight change in chant 13, saying : “Everyday’s walk to the following day/ brings us inevitably to the only true place of destination/ Our destiny...” [« Marcher chaque jour jusqu’au lendemain / Conduit inéluctablement au seul vrai lieu de destination : notre destin… » (273)]. These examples show the recurrence of the theme of destiny that runs through the different chants or poems.

The themes developed in the poems mirror in some ways the ups and downs of the main character in the prose narrative. This is explicit when we hear the main character say, using a poetical form: “I went towards my fate/ With ten francs in my pocket and an umbrella in my hand/ I went towards the uncertain/ Ready for a life without tomorrow…” [Je suis partie vers mon destin/ Dix francs en poche et un parapluie en main/ Je suis partie vers l’incertain/ Prête pour une vie sans lendemain… » (267)]. This thematic similarity helps the symbiosis of the different genres in the work.

The position of the chants or poems within the work strengthens this symbiosis. The poems appear in initial position, sometimes in the middle of the narrative or at the end. Concerning the eighteen numbered chants, the first two appear in the middle of the narrative, thus breaking it, then chants 3 and 4 appear in initial position. Next, we are back to the middle position with chants 5, 6 and 7; then again to the initial position with chants 8 to 13 and 15 and 17. Chants 14 and 16 appear at end of narrative. Lastly, we finish in the middle position, where we started, with chant 18.

Each chant is not a logical continuation of the narrative but is developing its own idea, which means that we are moving from one thing to another. The situation is like a collective celebration where there are poet musicians, storytellers, dancers, dramatic performers telling different things at the same time, as in the sketch below. The eyes of the spectator or the ethnologist moving from one entertainment to the other is what Werewere-Liking tried to represent in this literary work. The story is told through the eyes of one spectator who moves from one type of entertainment to another.

This sketch was done by Mongo Sisé. Illustrating Manga Bekombo's 'Le regard des ethnologues', it was published in *Magazine Littéraire,* 195 (mai 1983), 37. It can be taken here as an illustration of orature in the Mande region. The ethnologist with his magnifying glass on his right hand and a document wallet on the left represents an outsider, a man of writing, looking at a culture of orality. His memory is his document, whereas the memory of other performers is their heads. The different daily activities (fetching water, cooking, hair dressing, etc.) are portrayed. As far as the cultural entertainments are concerned, a component of which is spoken literature, one can see a mixture of performative storytelling, music and dancing. In this wide range of perfomative arts happening together, spectators have an open choice, their eyes can move from one thing to another. It is this holistic art that Werewere-Liking tried to represent in her chant-novel. The reader who wants to follow everything finds it impossible. Yet the reader who focuses on one element, keeping the other at the background, finds it interesting.

What reinforces this interpretation is the time period used in the book. The different sections are called 'time' (temps) instead of 'chapter'. They remind us of Ahmadou Kourouma's novel, *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*, which is also divided into night entertainments (veillée) instead of chapters. This time-division of the work gives the impression of a gathering of stories told at different periods of time, at the evening time around the fireplace for example. So, different sections or groups of stories unite to make a whole, likewise the different poems are brought together to make a collection, and the two collections are brought into one. One can see in this presentation that *La mémoire amputée* belongs to a given culture. It is culturally bound. It is Werewere-Liking's way of expressing the literature of her culture, which entails that, to appreciate it, one needs a key, which I have tried to provide.

Werewere Liking is not the only writer of the Mande region to produce works of orature. At the end of the chant-novel, through the voice of the main character, she says that

she is only giving her contribution: "… like a field of anthills/ where each ant adds its mortar to the building/ I have done my part…" [« … comme un champ de termitière/ Ajoutant chacune de la terre à la terre/ (…) J'ai fait ma part ... » (413)]. This idea of ants giving their contribution in the building of the anthill is also what Pacéré Titinga from Burkina Faso has chosen as his own motto. It runs like this: "If the anthill is living, let the ants build it up". Werewere Liking and Pacéré are building up the same anthill in different ways as it can be seen in the presentation of Pacéré's *Poème d'une termitière* as Orature.

III. Pacéré's *Poème d'une termitière* as Orature

Frédéric Titinga Pacéré was born in Burkina Faso in 1943. The word "Faso" means "fatherland" in Mande language, which shows that part of the country is in the Mande region, as is part of Ivory Coast where Werewere-Liking lives. Both belong to the Mande region, are also born at the same period, even though they don't necessarily speak Mande language. What is important for consideration is the similarities of traditions in which both have been brought up.

The variety of Werewere-Liking's production shows her talents. Like her and before her, Pacéré tried his hand at many arts. He produced poems, plays, essays, music, film, and miscellaneous works on economy, sociology and law. He produced mostly poems, whereas Werewere-Liking wrote mostly plays and chant-novels. Pacéré's writing style, like Werewere-Liking's, can also be said to be a novelty or "écriture nouvelle" in Werewere-Liking's own terms. It is certainly this common aspect between the two writers which accounts for the fact that *Notre Librairie* devoted a special issue (# 79) on them as well as on Sony Labou Tansi and Yodi Karone, interviewing them to learn more about their styles of writing.

The novelty in Pacéré's poetry is that it imitates the *Moaaga* traditional poetry of the *bendre* or tom-tom. Pacéré's poetry is centred on *Moaaga* culture in Burkina Faso. In all his collections of poetry, *Quand s'envolent les grues couronnées* (1967), *Refrains sous le sahel* (1967), *Ça tire sous le sahel* (1967), *La poésie des griots* (1982) *Saglego ou le poème du tam-tam pour le Sahel* (1994) *Des entrailles de la terre* (1990), *Poèmes pour l'Angola* (1982), 'Reflets de New York' and *Poèmes pour Koryo* (1987), *La poésie des griots* (1982), *M Ba-yir weogo : Poésie des animaux d'Afrique et sagesse des hommes* (2007), *Poème d'une termitière* (2007). In all these works, Pacéré uses the pattern of the poetry of tom-tom of his country folk, taking care to respect its rhythms and cadences.

Poetry of tom-tom belongs to orature. Text in this type of orature is a weaving of *zabyuya*. *Zabyuya* is the plural of *zabyuure* in Moore language.. It is a motto or proverb that is usually drummed before being orally translated for the non-initiated in this language of drums. It is better called 'spoken literature' because the drums speak without using any mouth. Refrains and *zabyuya* constitute in this literature the threads that make up the fabric or text of the spoken literature of the *bendre*. Pacéré reproduces this text by using the same threads.

It is also characterized by a mixture of genres. Theatrical aspects appear within his poems. I have shown in my article on Pacéré as the demiurge of orature that "*Des entrailles de la terre* is poetry, music, story and drama" (Kaboré 35). It is like Kolyang Dina Taïwé's *Le Sahel: ses femmes et ses puits*, a collection of poems of which Clément Dili Palai upon studying orality, writing and innovation in North-Cameroon, discovered that there are dialogues between characters in the poems so much so that the poems appear like plays (52). In addition, the typographical layout of some collections present them as museum objects of art to be looked at. This reminds us that not all writings are meant to be read. In his study on turco-ottoman materials, Rémy Dor said that he is convinced that initial Turkish writing was

not meant to be read but to be seen (31). Likewise, typographical disposition in Pacéré's poetry is to be seen, as it cannot be read.

In *Poème d'une termitière*, Pacéré uses the refrains, which are always visually put in bold characters, to present it as a collection of poems. The refrain plays the role of the capital letter which start a sentence and of the full stop which ends it to start another sentence or stanza. The main refrain, which opens and closes the poem (collection) as if to create a frame, gives it unity. The other refrains, which are each repeated within a portion of the poetry, present it as a collection of poems, and function as lines of demarcation. *Poème d'une termitière* is, judging from the number of refrains, a collection of fifteen poems. *Poème d'une termitière* is a weaving of the following refrains:

Le soleil s'endort	The sun sets down
Et	And
L'homme s'endort. (26)	Man goes to sleep.

This is the main refrain (MR) that appear at the beginning and end of the poem or collection. It has some variants: "Nature rests/ And/ Man rests" [« La nature repose/ Et,/ l'homme se repose » (32)]. In some instances, it is preceded by some addresses, like "Son/ Son of the land" [« Fils,/ fils de la terre (27)] or "Sons of my fathers,/ When/ All will be dead/ And/ Cold,/ Bring me back/ Bring me back to Barma" [« Fils de mes Pères,/ Quand/ Tout sera mort/ Et/ Refroidi,/ Ramène moi,/ Ramène moi à Barma" (114)]. But in all cases, the core of the refrain is identical and always recognizable. These small changes illustrate our definition of orature texts as changing from one performance to another. The refrain is changing here from one repetition to another but is still recognized as such by the audience.

This phenomenon of minor changes within the refrain is more explicit in the other internal refrains. An example of variations within one internal refrain is given the chart below:

Page #	Refrain (my translation)	Refrain (original French version)
35	<u>Variant 1</u> **Grand-mother,** **Grand-father,** **If,** ***All is ripe and cold,*** **I'll go,** **I'll go** **To the waiting room of the ancestors,** ***I'll go,*** ***I'll go to Barma* ;** <u>Variant 2</u>	<u>Variant 1</u> **Grand-mère,** **Grand-père,** **Si,** ***Tout est mûr et refroidi,*** **J'irai,** **J'irai** **Dans l'antichambre des aïeux,** ***J'irai,*** ***J'irai à Barma* ;** <u>Variant 2</u>
36	**If,** ***All is ripe and cold,*** **I'll go,** **I'll go** **To the waiting room of the ancestors,** ***I'll go,*** ***I'll go to Barma*.**	***Si,*** ***Tout est mûr et refroidi,*** **J'irai,** **J'irai** **Dans l'antichambre des aïeux,** ***J'irai,*** ***J'irai à Barma*.**

	Variant 3	Variant 3
37	**Mother,** **Grand-mother** **When *All is ripe and cold,*** **I'll go,** ***I'll go to Barma* ;** **When *All is ripe and cold,*** **Make for me a bracelet** **That suits my wrist.**	**Mère,** **Grand-mère** **Quand *tout est mûr et refroidi,*** ***J'irai,*** ***J'irai à Barma* ;** **Quand *tout est mûr et refroidi,*** **Confectionnes-moi un bracelet,** **A la mesure de mon bras.**
	Variant 4	Variant 4
39	**Mother,** **Grand-mother** **When *All is ripe and cold?*** **I'll go,** ***I'll go to Barma.***	**Mère,** **Grand-mère** **Quand *tout est mûr et refroidi ?*** ***J'irai,*** ***J'irai à Barma.***
	Variant 5	Variant 5
40-41	**Grand-mother** **If *All is ripe and cold,*** **I'll go,** ***I'll go to Barma* ;** **To make a bracelet** **That suits my wrist.**	**Grand-mère** **Si *tout est mûr et refroidi,*** ***J'irai,*** ***J'irai à Barma*.** **Confectionner un bracelet** **Aux dimensions de mon bras.**

Here, there are five variants of the same refrain. What is common in all five variants is what we put in italics: "All is ripe and cold,/ I'll go,/ I'll go to Barma" ("tout est mûr et refroidi,/ J'irai,/ J'irai à Barma"). The first two variants are slightly identical; so are variants 3 and 5. Variant 4 appears like the summary of all four. This variation shows the dynamism of spoken literature; it isn't told identically twice. There are always slight changes that don't totally alter the story.

What is common in all five variants also functions like the first words of a *zabyuure* in the spoken literature of drums. In fact, in the spoken literature the *bendre*, the citation of the first words of a *zabyuure* or proverb was equivalent to quoting the full *zabyuure*, as Pacéré explains in the introduction to his poetry *Saglego*: The *zabyuure* "The small tamarind trees do not yield something insipid" (Les petits tamariniers ne produisent pas quelque chose de fade) is often referred to by "The small tamarind trees" when addressing learned people (Saglego 18). Consequently, the mention of "Tout est mûr et refroidi,/ J'irai,/ J'irai à Barma" is enough to recognize the whole refrain. These observations lead us to say that Pacéré transfers into printed literature a process of citation proper to *Moaaga* spoken literature.

The changes are also ways of preserving aspects of live performance of spoken literature that are refractive to crucifixion. They remind one of Makhily Gassama's comparing the spoken word to "a travelling pigeon refractive to domestication" (22). They constantly call to mind that what is killed and preserved in written form is meant to be a support to performance and that, while resurrecting them through reading or performance, they should not be content at reading only what is written but may feel free to add some changes as suggested in the variation of the refrains.

Another example is the substitution of "empire" respectively by "pouvoir" (power) and then by "famille" (family) in variants of the following refrain:

At that time	**En ce temps-là**
The *empire* belonged	**L'*empire* était**
To head-dented people (47)	***Aux* têtes cabossées (47)**
At that time	**En ce temps-là**
The *power* belonged	**Le *pouvoir* était**
To head-dented people (50)	***Aux* têtes cabossées (50)**
At that time	**En ce temps-là**
The *empire still* belonged	**L'*empire* était *toujours,***
To head-dented people	***Des* têtes cabossées (52)**
At that time	**En ce temps-là**
The *family still* belonged	**La *famille* était *toujours***
To head-dented people (55)	***De* têtes cabossées (55)**

I have put the French variants (aux, des, de, toujours, empire, pouvoir, famille) in italics. The refrain is recognisable as almost identical in all four instances. One may not even notice the slight changes as they appear on different pages and between one variant and another there are pages of stanzas.

A reading of the different refrains reveals the main ideas that are developed in the poetry. The main refrain wraps the poem from beginning to end. The presence of secondary refrains, which signal internal poems, shows the whole poem as a collection of poems, the refrains being the titles of individual poems and the main refrain the title of the entire collection. The main refrain brings the performer back to the cemetery where Mathias of Barma sleeps; he is the man for whom this poetry has been written. Seen in this way, Pacéré's poetry challenges Western criteria of what constitutes a collection of poetry by giving the outward impression of being one long poem and yet, to those who can read it metaphorically, it reveals itself as a collection of poems. Thus, Pacéré mixes strategies of spoken literature in print literature.

He also combines two typographic systems: written punctuation and the punctuations of the spoken literature of tom-toms. The *bendre* uses refrains as full-stops for the listening audience (Cf. Saglego 18). The change of a refrain means the beginning of a new poem. It can then be said that *Poème d'une termitière* is drawn from the spoken literature of the *bendre* and written in such a way that its performance should reflect the initial performance. It is mixture of spoken and print literatures as well as mixture of performing genres.

Conclusion

The definition of orature as genre as well as literary theory and its illustration with Werewere-Liking's *La mémoire amputée* and Pacéré *Poème d'une termitière*, lead to the realization that literary genres are produced within specific cultures and are therefore not understandable when looked at with conventions pertaining to another culture. Within Moaaga cultural tradition, Pacéré has produced written but orally conscious poetry meant to be performed. Likewise, Werewere-Liking has, within *Bassa* tradition, produced a chant-novel. Poetry on the one hand, 'chant-novel' on the other hand, these diversities illustrate the many facets of orature. These different genres in western conventions become one in orature.

Both Werewere-Liking and Pacéré have tried to create techniques that would ensure continuing performance of their works, that is, their circulation into the spoken traditions from which they were born. The techniques they invented stem from their belief in the power of the spoken word. They certainly agree with Newell that if 'the pen is mightier than the sword' in western Europe, the word can *be* the sword in West Africa" (Newell 63). Werewere-Liking and Pacéré have placed spoken words inside written material and they reveal mightier than writing that tries to kill them and succeed to live posthumously through performance.

The two examples and the viewpoints of numerous critics I referred to show that orature is a literary genre that is found in the Mande region but it is not limited to this region only. I have shown in my doctoral thesis how *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* by the nineteenth-century Irish writer William Carleton also falls within this category (Kaboré).

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