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Making words stick

What do we need to know to interpret a text? This question leads into the very constitution of the text itself. We are asking what it is that makes a text textual – what enables it to exist, to be recognised or remarked as a text. An anthropology of texts needs to go below the level of documenting genres and relations between genres, defining characteristic styles, and relating these to a social context immediate or distant. Text is differently constituted in different social and historical contexts: what a text is considered to be, how it is considered to have meaning, varies from one culture to another. We need to ask what kinds of interpretation texts are set up to expect, and how they are considered to enter the lives of those who produce, receive and transmit them.

In this chapter and the next I focus on oral texts, because all societies produce them in one form or another, and because anthropology, despite great shifts in the definition of its subject matter, retains a central focus on face-to-face, small-scale societies where oral and popular genres are the norm.

Oral texts are the outcome of a concerted effort to fix words and make them outlast the here-and-now. But they are also a vivid demonstration of the emergent and the improvisatory. So looking at the constitution of oral texts, and at what oral texts say and show about themselves, might shed
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light on a crucial question: how do people simultaneously conserve culture and generate new things out of it? How do they consolidate and innovate in one breath? If “we are all”, as Carrithers puts it, “quite as effective at producing cultural diversity as we are at preserving continuity” (1992: 7), then how do we get at the fact that these two things seem to go on hand in hand? For we are clearly not looking at opposites here: it’s not that you either have plasticity and a proliferation of variations or the preservation of continuity and the constitution of enduring works and traditions. Not only do we all do both: we seem to do both at the same time, inseparably. Until recently, however – in the field of texts, at least – discussion seems to have focused only on one or the other half of the picture. Theories of orality and literacy stressed the importance of fixing – and argued that only writing can really achieve this; while performance theory celebrated fluidity and evanescence, and argued that it is uniquely a property of oral performance. The discussion fell into two halves, but both sides emphasised the gulf between oral genres and written ones. If we pay attention to the mode of constitution of the texts themselves, however, we may be able to glimpse a more integrated view, where fixing and emergence are fused in a single moment.

Approaches to orality/literacy, performance and entextualisation

Influential early discussions of the “consequences of literacy” focused on all the things that writing enables you to do: it makes possible, by virtue of its fixity and autonomy, new cognitive operations. It enables you to make lists, store information in unchanged form, compile large amounts of information in one place, cross-check and compare sources, and thus, according to the exciting arguments of Jack Goody (1968, 1977, 1986, 1987), think in new ways. Goody sees literacy as the factor that, almost unaided, made possible science, philosophy and empire. This perspective has sometimes been taken up in a way that emphasises the enormous gulf
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between oral and written cultures: “writing restructures consciousness”,
to such an extent that literate people can scarcely even begin to imagine
what the world must look like from the point of view of “oral folk” (Ong
1982). Although literacy theory, even in its strongest forms, avoided a
bi-polar, “before-and-after” model by undertaking detailed studies of
the interface between the oral and the written, it has to be said that our
understanding of the written modes benefited more from this than our
understanding of oral modes. Ong’s insightful discussions of the cultural
effects of writing and subsequently print contrast with the extreme
poverty of his picture of “oral folk” and their simple, stereotyped mental
operations. Even Goody, who has a fine appreciation of the largely oral
culture in which he worked over a period of forty years, does not say much
about how the myth of the Bagre is actually constituted as a text, beyond
demonstrating that it is subject to changes over time, and to internal
inconsistencies that would have been edited out in a written work (Goody
1972; Goody and Gandah 1981, 2002). In the “orality/literacy” literature,
the oral is the baseline from which cognitive advance took off, and is
often described in terms of what you can’t do if you don’t have writing.

Attention to the constitution of oral texts came from the other side,
from scholars of oral performance – starting from the great work of
Milman Parry and Albert Lord, who focused on the distinctive capac-
ities and procedures required to generate a lengthy oral epic. The key
mechanism was the use of oral formulas enabling “composition in per-
formance” as opposed to rote-memorisation on the one hand and com-
pletely spontaneous improvisation on the other. Their brilliant demon-
stration of the workings of one oral tradition was taken up as a paradigm
for all orality, and oral formulas were sought everywhere, even in gen-
res that worked according to very different principles from the Serbo-
Croatian epics that Lord’s book *The Singer of Tales* introduced to the
world. This book helped to inspire a revolution in American folklore and
cultural-linguistic anthropology in which the focus shifted from text to
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performance and new attention was paid to the emergent, ephemeral, embodied, interactive and responsive qualities of living genres.

Lord asserted that “composition in performance” makes oral genres utterly different from written ones – so much so that an oral poet, if he becomes literate, can no longer function. This supposition has since been empirically contested over and over again, with studies that show that many oral poets nowadays also compose in writing, without detriment to their oral compositional skills. There are numerous forms of interaction between oral and written modes, even in the work of a single individual.¹

But in the heyday of performance studies, the very word “text” was anathema, because of its associations with written forms, suggesting the imposition of a scriptocentric view of the world. The habit of “reducing” performances to fixed written texts was deplored, and a methodology was developed to capture the performance event itself, rather than some presumed antecedent script – to capture the unfolding moment of performance in its living, richly context-embedded immediacy. Richard Bauman speaks of the severe limitations a “text-centered” approach imposes on the study of oral verbal art (1977). Edward Schieffelin says “performativity is located at the creative, improvisatory edge of practice in the moment it is carried out”; and like Bauman he contrasts the ephemeral, unpredictable quality of performance with the changeless and enduring nature of “text” (Schieffelin 1998: 198–9). Dwight Conquergood elegantly sums up the opposition as a war of vocabulary: “fixity”, “structure”, “objectification”, “reification”, “system”, “distance” and “detachment” are the enemy lexicon, while “improvisation”, “flow”, “process”, “participation”, “embodiment” and “dialogue” are the good guys (Conquergood 1989; see also Drewal 1991).

The shift to performance was and continues to be wonderfully productive. Its potential has been further developed in recent work which has rejected the idea of a dichotomy between “oral” and “literate” cultures, while still retaining an intense appreciation of the “magic of the moment”
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as it is manifested in oral communication in all cultures (Furniss 2004: 1). Creative improvisation is one, indispensable, half of the picture. And interestingly enough, it was from the heartland of performance theory, in American cultural/linguistic anthropology and folklore studies in the 1990s, that there emerged the outlines of the other half of the picture: the ways in which people fix text, make words stick.²

While performance theory stressed the emergent moment, “entextualisation” theory focused on the ways in which fluid discourse is fixed, and made available for repetition, recreation or “copying” – and thus for transmission over space and perpetuation over time. Bauman and Briggs made a pioneering move in this direction when they referred to entextualization as “the process of rendering discourse extractable, of making a stretch of linguistic production into a unit – a text – that can be lifted out of its interactional setting” (1990: 73). They still remained committed to a focus on performance, maintaining that it was the heightened awareness of the act of speaking fostered by performance that demarcated stretches of discourse for special attention as texts.³ Other studies, however, including Silverstein and Urban’s influential volume (1996), suggested that stretches of discourse are disembedded from the context of utterance through grammatical and structural means as much as through the modalities of performance. Essentially, what is involved is the removal of deixis – references to the immediate context of utterance, where the meaning depends on the listener sharing the same time and space as the speaker. As an extension of this procedure, narratives can be put into the remote past tense, detaching them from the lifeworld of the listener; and they can be put into the third person, thus escaping the tendency of first- and second-person discourse to suck the listener into a dialogic engagement with the speaker. Furthermore, structural properties of the text can encourage repetition and thus, by definition, detachment from a single original context – for example, the text can be structured from a series of parallel formulations which, by establishing internal patterns of repetition, encourage the repetition of the whole
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text. In this view, the more impersonal, remote in its time reference, and structurally patterned a stretch of discourse is, the more it is dis-embedded. In the South American cultures that provided the material for Urban’s pioneering work on these questions, the most disembedded texts – and hence the strongest candidates for survival as tradition – are myths. Myths supply his main oral/traditional data in several stimulating and dazzling studies of cultural transmission (Urban 1991, 1996b, 2001), and the emphasis is thus on the effort to produce text that can be faithfully repeated or “copied” because it is remote, impersonal and detached from the here-and-now.

Entextualisation as freezing

A beautiful case study that develops the idea of entextualisation as the production of remote, “frozen” discourse is Kuipers’s study of Weyewa ritual speech (Kuipers 1990). The Weyewa, an ethnolinguistic group living on Sumba Island in Indonesia, produce a spectrum of ritual speech styles from informal/fluid to formal/fixed. Ritual speech at its most fixed and monologic is the words of the ancestors. It is produced at the culmination of rituals intended to restore the world after a catastrophe, which is itself often precipitated by people’s neglect of the ancestors’ words. The climax of such rituals of atonement and placation is when “a man sings or chants in the centre of the village, each verse punctuated by an antiphonal chorus. Speaking in the voice of the ancestors, the performer enacts a text that is held to be among the most sacred, closely guarded, and authentic in Weyewa culture” (1990: 6). As in Urban’s South American myths, what makes this speech authoritative is above all its formal pattern and its detachment from the speech context by the removal of indexical features such as demonstrative and personal pronouns. In informal conversation, an utterance might include “Well, what you said yesterday interested me very much . . .” where the reference of “what”, “you”, “yesterday” and “me” depends entirely on who is addressing whom, when, and in what
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countext. Ritual speech would be signalled by patterned couplets and an absence of this kind of reference to the context of the utterance:

horn that cannot be clipped
tusk that cannot be cut . . .

(Kuipers 1990: 72)

where the formulations evoke a person (“an invincible, irrepressible person”) without locating him in the space or time of the speaker or relating him to the present situation. The utterance “points away from the particulars of the immediate performance situation, toward other texts, toward its own internal coherence relations, and toward other times, other identities, and other places” (Kuipers 1990: 62).

In Weyewa thought, the abstraction and fixing of text brings it closer to the time of origin and of the ancestors, which was a world of utter stasis: there was no death, no change, no alternation of day and night. Degeneration into a world of movement, change and time was a punishment for changing the word of the ancestors, and the point of the rituals is to get back to immobility and permanence (1990: 36–7). Entextualisation, here, fixes text in order to fix and reinforce the hierarchical relations between living people (disorderly, catastrophic) and the world of the Creator and the ancestral spirits (orderly, unchanging). Humans who utter ritual speech are immobilised as individual agents: they become a conduit of ancestral power, speaking and acting “under the auspices of someone else – usually one’s forebears – as a delegated voice, bound by a ‘sacred’ (erri) commitment to the source” (1990: 37).

Kuipers stresses that we are looking here at a continuum, not a binary divide. There are many degrees of entextualisation even within ritual speech. All utterance is to some extent contextual (and, on the other hand, one could add, all language to some extent transcends the here-and-now – through the establishment of categories and the use of lexical items that have been used before and will be used again). But the entextualisation of ritual speech foregrounds – develops and draws attention to – the
potential of utterance to be decontextualised, abstracted and formalised (1990: 7).  

**Entextualisation and fluidity**

Freezing and abstracting speech, however, is not the only mode of entextualisation. Utterance can be given boundaries and identity, such that it can be re-created, transmitted and apprehended as text, in many other ways. Some modes of entextualisation are associated with individual, private memory rather than the constitution of communal power and authority. And in some traditions, “reified” text can be re-inserted into highly fluid, dialogic performance modes. Genres like these bring us, in a rather dramatic way, face-to-face with the conjuncture of innovation and preservation, of fixing and variability.

The examples I will discuss here are simply that – examples – and are not intended to be representative of modes of oral text-constitution everywhere. Entextualisation takes myriad forms. But the questions that arise – the things to look out for – can, I believe, be profitably drawn from one body of material and applied to another. In this chapter and the next, I focus particularly on African oral praise poetry, which occurs across the continent and could be called Africa’s master genre, profoundly associated with people’s sense of the past, community and self.

Praise poetry is notable for its fluid, disjunctive form, its vocative, second-person address and its simultaneous evocation of the past and the present, bringing the powers and potentials of dead predecessors into the centre of the living community. It is assembled out of discrete, name-like formulations which are brought together in fluid and variable combinations. A praise text seems, in the words of Patrice Mufuta, describing Luba kasalà, like “a mosaic made up of little autonomous pieces juxtaposed and interchangeable” (Mufuta 1969: 65, my translation). In many praise genres, the “autonomous pieces” were composed by different people, at different times and with reference to different events or
observations; what unites them is the fact of being addressed to the same subject. The gaps between them are similar to the gaps between a person’s names where, as in many African cultures, names have meanings, often couched in the form of an entire sentence. A Yoruba child could be named Babátúndé (Father has come back), Èkúndayò (Weeping turns to joy), Adéribigbè (The crown has found somewhere to stay). Each of these names refers to something in the circumstances or aspirations of the family into which the child so named was born; but there is no necessary connection or syntactic link between the three sentences. What links them is that they all converge on the same person.

Praises are often produced by a linguistic process of nominalisation, in which a phrase, sentence or even an extended passage is turned into a name-like form by the addition of a prefix meaning “One who –”. Thus for the Yoruba praise name of a great drinker we can get bùmùbùmùsàgbàlòngbòlòngbó (One who scoops and drinks, scoops and drinks, [and] makes the barrel slosh noisily). The name-like formulations make for a text whose components are essentially independent of each other, and can therefore be assembled in different orders and linked in different ways. This potential for fluidity is exploited to different degrees by different genres of praise poetry, but is a fundamental characteristic of all of them.

In this, African praise poetry is unlike the remote, rigid, sacred genres of the Weyewa or Chamula. Text is consolidated and rendered detachable from its immediate context – but only so that it can be re-activated and re-embedded in a new context of utterance, where it has an effectual engagement and dialogic force. Thus, “fixing” chunks of text is the condition of possibility of a poetics of fluidity.

Everywhere in African orature there is evidence of a will to fix speech, to give it the compact solidity and durability of a material object. Oral texts in Africa are often actually attached to or secreted in material objects. The Luba lukasa board, Zulu bead messages, Dahomeyan récades or message-staffs, Asante adinkra symbols, gold weights and umbrella finials, and
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a host of other material repositories and memory-prompts operate in

different ways to transcend time, to fix or trap text in a material form. Kwesi Yankah describes a system by which in certain parts of the Akan-speaking area of Ghana, newly-coined sayings were “registered” by being associated with a mnemonic object which would then be hung on a string from the ceiling of a proverb-custodian’s house. For example, a woman divorced and remarried three times to the same man coined the ironical saying “The hollow bone – when you lick it, your lips hurt; when you leave it, your eyes trail it”. The proverb-custodian registered this saying by hanging an actual bone up on his string. If visitors asked about the bone, it would prompt the proverb-custodian to give an account of the woman and the circumstances in which she coined the saying, as well as the saying itself (Yankah 1994). The proverb is thus triply objectified. It arises out of a material object – the bone (or the idea of the bone) which inspired the woman’s metaphorical utterance. It is recalled by an equivalent material object – the bone on the custodian’s string. And it is reactivated by a contextualising discourse which takes the proverb as itself an object – the object of attention, explanation and evaluation.

The object – the bone on the string – is more than a mnemonic. It seems to present itself as a puzzle and a challenge: why is it there? What explanation can be given for its presence on the custodian’s string? The suspended objects prompt questions from visitors which the custodian seeks to answer as fully as he can. In turn, the proverb attached to the bone itself provokes and requires explanation. Like the bone, it is presented as an opaque object whose meaning only becomes apparent when it is bathed in a sea of contextual and historical detail, which is not encoded within the object or the proverb but is transmitted in another genre – the personal narrative – that runs alongside them.

Many other African oral genres, including praise poetry, are made object-like without the need for attachment to actual physical things. They are constituted as objects of attention and recognition, in two main
ways: first, by constructing stretches of discourse to be quotable, fostering the perception that these formulations pre-existed their present moment of utterance and could also continue to exist after it; and second, by constructing stretches of discourse to attract or require exegesis, so that they become the focus of sustained attention and discussion.

**Quotability**

“Quoting” draws attention to the fact that the formulations being uttered have been uttered before: they pre-exist the immediate context. Thus, for example, the quotedness of proverbs is explicitly signalled by introductory formulas, such as “As the elders say . . .” The pre-existence of the proverb is what gives the words their authority and their point (Penfield 1983). But quotability can go far beyond the use of proverbs.⁵ Textuality in general can be seen as a field of quotations – a shifting, mutating field of citations and incorporations which ranges from definite relaying of authoritative utterance to unremarked intertextuality. In African praise poetry a quality of quotedness is imparted when epithets are explicitly vouched for as being appropriate to the person to whom they are being attributed. In the Luba kasàlà genre, a praise poet says of his subject

Écoutez
Comment [il faut] pleurer [ce] héros
Il ne piège pas les rats
il ne construit pas pour les termites;
il ne défriche pas les champs;
il n’aiguise pas sa houe de jour
[ce] “Mois-des-termites, pluvieux” [fils]
de Mukendi.

Listen
how this hero must be lamented
[praised]:
“He doesn’t trap rats
he doesn’t build huts for termites;
He doesn’t clear the fields
he doesn’t sharpen the hoe for his day’s work
This ‘Month of termites, rainy’, son of Mukendi”.

(Mufuta 1969: 201)
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The prefatory “Listen/how this hero must be lamented” has the effect of turning all the subsequent attributions into quotations: the formulations are not just said, but are presented as belonging or being appropriate to the subject, a man so wealthy that he does not need to engage in common-or-garden subsistence activities. He is judged worthy to be attributed with the nickname “the month of termites, rainy” because, like the rains, he prevents people from doing their own work – implying that he keeps sending them on errands or demanding their attendance on him (see Mufuta 1969: 231). In the very act of attribution, the performer draws attention to the pre-existence of the formulation, to its character as already-constituted text.

Quotation also takes place between genres, when one genre incorporates chunks of other genres and subsumes them to its own project – but in such a way that they retain recognisable features. In this way the performer highlights them as a resource that already existed and was available for use when he/she undertook the performance. Yoruba praise poetry – oríkì – incorporates divination verses, riddles and proverbs, in each case displaying them as recognisable genres while using them to redound to the honour of the person being praised. Strongly marked, immediately recognisable genre characteristics are retained – for example the characteristic question-and-answer format of riddles, the chain structure of arò poems where a small incident leads inexorably to huge consequences in a tightly-controlled sequence, or the unvarying narrative pivot of Ifá verses in which a string of named legendary diviners “did divination for” a named client (see Barber 1991a, 1999a). The open weave of oríkì allows great chunks of other genres to be incorporated with their genre markers intact – but only so that their foreignness can simultaneously be recognised and partially overcome. With brilliant dexterity, the performer turns the imported text to the project of the oríkì, which is to enhance the reputation of the addressee. These strategies underline and consolidate the “text-ness” of the materials incorporated. By being
recontextualised within another genre, their characteristic features are thrown into relief and their pre-existence as text is affirmed.

The power of the concept of quotation is that it captures simultaneously the process of detachment and the process of recontextualisation. A quotation is only a quotation when it is inserted into a new context. Thus in the very act of recognising a stretch of discourse as having an independent existence, the quoter is re-embedding it. This helps us to understand how “text” (the detachable, de-contextualised stretch of discourse) and “performance” (the act of assembling and mobilising discursive elements) are two sides of one coin, inseparable and mutually constitutive.

**Obscurity**

Even more pervasive than quotedness in African praise poetry is deliberate obscurity – an obscurity that demands explanation, and thus presents the text as an object of attention. Almost every genre of praise poetry in sub-Saharan Africa is said to be enigmatic or difficult to decipher. It is sometimes suggested that they are obscure only because, with the passage of time and erosion of oral traditions, the original context, which would have made the meaning plain to all, is lost. It is true that the explanatory hinterland is often forgotten; but this happens partly because the texts were opaque from the start, with explanations known only to a privileged few. There is extensive evidence that opacity is deliberately created and positively valued. Asante *apaie* praises, performed only for Akan royalty and chiefs, are couched in a special vocabulary to “conceal the messages”, and are sung “like the humming of bees” to render them incomprehensible (Arhin 1986: 167). The *ajogan* songs of the kings of Porto Novo were “deliberately allusive, even hermetic” (Rouget 1971: 32). Baganda poets told Susan Kiguli that their linguistic condensations were not merely allusive but “a deliberate device to disguise meaning” (Kiguli 2004: 223). Ila elders in Zambia will regard a praise poem “which is immediately
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self-evident and which lacks layers of allusion as ipso facto uninteresting” (Rennie 1984: 530). Mbiimbi, the dynastic poetry of the Yaka-speaking Lunda conquerors in the southwest of the Democratic Republic of Congo, “insinuates the facts rather than describing them, rather than relating or explaining them in the manner of an historic recitation” (N’Soko Swa-Kabamba 1997: 152).

We saw in the last chapter how Rwandan court bards create deliberately obscure dynastic poems where the referent is concealed by a process of “making disappear”. Every line and phrase of a dynastic poem is constituted as an object of the most acute attention, belying the notion that in oral cultures the flow of speech can never be arrested or objectified. The most common form of obscurity, however, and the hallmark of African praise poetry, is the laconic formulation that can only be interpreted in the light of a narrative or a highly specific circumstance that is not implicit in the words themselves, but has to be supplied by an interpreter drawing on a separate, parallel tradition. In Akan royal praises, according to one of Anyidoho’s informants, “the composition of each apae was motivated by a particular historical event. Therefore, apart from committing texts to memory, a good performer should also have a grasp of the incidents that motivated them” (Anyidoho 1993: 119). The performer has to learn two repertoires, two genres, not one. Where the parallel explanatory tradition is inaccessible or lost, the praise texts remain opaque: for example in the Kuba kingdom, where songs in praise of the monarchs, taught verbatim to the royal wives by a female official, often “consist of allusions”, whose “explanation . . . is not a part of the teaching itself” so that “it is difficult to use them” for historical reconstruction (Vansina 1978: 23). In Lunda-Yaka dynastic praise poetry, heroic ancestors are evoked through formulations which can only be explained with reference to another genre, the nsámu mya tsyá khulu or “tale from other times” (N’Soko Swa-Kabamba 1997: 152). It is in the “tales from other times” that one finds an explanation for lines like these:
Oh he-who-floats-across-the-river
shoot that floated in the company of the aquatic reed
oh chameleon, what did you see in me, Nteeba?

We are told that they refer to a king, Muloombo, who was deported by the Belgian authorities after he decapitated two of their indirect rule chiefs in the early years of the twentieth century. The nominalised form “he-who-floats-across-the-river” and the expansion of this, “shoot that floated in the company of the aquatic reed”, allude to the fact that Muloombo was exiled by river. “Chameleon” alludes to Muloombo’s majestic walk. The story of Muloombo’s exile could not be deduced from the lines of praise poetry in themselves: they point away from themselves to the narrative genre.

There is thus a division of labour between two genres – the enigmatic poetry and the expansive narrative – which is common in African orature and is often symbiotic. On the one hand, the compact and enigmatic formulations of praise and dynastic poetry rely on a parallel narrative tradition to expand and explain the allusions. But on the other hand, local oral traditionists whose role is to narrate histories also often depend on the gnomic formulas of the praise poetry to serve as markers, triggers and reminders of their narrative. In the historical narratives told by “men of memory” in the central African kingdoms of the Luba, almost every episode of the early, mythological phases of the history, as recounted to Thomas Reefe, is anchored in a praise epithet, proverb, or a present-day popular saying or custom whose folk etiology lies in the myth. As they narrated, the men of memory seemed to move from one of these reminders to another.

For example, the Luba founding culture hero, Kalala Ilunga, has a praise epithet “The wild dikoko fruit, though it has blotches [signs of coming ripeness] it does not ripen quickly; people wear a path in going to look for its fall”. This served the men of memory as a reminder for
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a myth episode in which King Nkongolo, Kalala Ilunga’s brutish uncle and predecessor, challenged him to a game of masoko (“the Luba version of marbles”). Kalala Ilunga, aided by a magic iron ball given to him by the ancestor-deity Mijibu-Kalenga, unexpectedly won the game and thus avoided death at his uncle’s hands. In the moment of triumph he proclaimed the proverb-like formulation in his own self-praise, in order to assert that “he was invincible and that people would have to wait a long time before he died” (Reefe 1981: 27). The praise epithet functions as a kernel of a narrative which explains the epithet’s origin, and the myth unfolds as a series of expansions of such kernels. The praise epithets or proverbs in themselves cannot yield the richly detailed narratives that the specialists recount; but without them, it seems, there would be no way to move the narration forward. Exegesis is integral to the constitution of historical narrative, just as obscurity is integral to the constitution of praise poetry.

The Luba ethnography shows that in constituting text as object-like, both through quotation and through exegesis, the praise-singers and historians were navigating through an extensive and sophisticated web of knowledge and memory in which material objects, textual objects, gesture and ritual all participated. It has been argued that the Luba empire extended itself over subordinate polities not solely through force of arms or the imposition of administrative control, but also by providing models and narratives of royal power, carried in complex and multiple mnemonic systems (Reefe 1981; Nooter 1991; Roberts and Roberts 1996). Among the material bearers of memory were sculptured ancestor figures, royal staffs, divination instruments, beaded necklaces and headdresses, and a host of other objects, above all the lukasa board used by those men of memory who belonged to the secret Budye society. The complicated configurations of beads and shells on the lukasa boards were used as pegs on which to hang historical narratives and accounts of political relationships. These material loci of memory did not function as a writing system in which each element had a consistent and determinate function.
Different categories of specialists (chiefs; titleholders; Budye society members; diviners) would each “read” the configuration of signs differently, to reflect their own special concerns as a group, but using a common repertoire of interpretative procedures (Nooter 1991: 79–80). “Luba memory devices do not symbolise thought as much as they stimulate and provoke it” (Roberts and Roberts 1996: 44). One reminder led into another, in a network of layered allusions.

The lived environment was thickly studded with such reminders, and not only in the ritually-charged atmosphere of the Budye society which existed to sustain the power of the king. If in the course of an ordinary conversation you laugh out of turn, you might be told off with a proverb: “It was a dreadful laugh that Nkongolo’s mother laughed” – alluding to another episode in the myth in which Kalala Ilunga defeats Nkongolo at a game of bulundu (a ball game) and Nkongolo’s mother laughs at him, enraging him so much that he has her buried alive (Reefe 1981: 27). Your loud laugh is a reminder of the proverb; the proverb is a reminder of the legend. One item opens out into another; each in turn functions as a marker, a device from which others spring in a lateral movement which is comprehensible because they circle within a common ideological terrain, that of the emblems and glories of Luba kingship.

Making a mark, leaving a trace is what Luba praise poetry is about. This is strikingly confirmed in Mufuta’s discussion of the meaning of the word kasala, the praise chant. The etymological derivation, he says, is from kusala which means “to pierce the skin with a pointed instrument” – either to cure an illness of the head, or to adorn the body with marks (Mufuta 1969: 47). Kasala should be striking, should make an impression, and should “leave marks like the scar of a healed wound” (Mufuta 1969: 76). This extraordinary formulation confirms that kasala praise epi-thets are understood as marked discourse, set down to endure and to be remarked. And more than this: the praise genre is compared with body-scarification, a permanent mode of mnemonic inscription in which “the boundary is fixed, the ‘I’ precipitated, and the social person is defined in a
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tegumentary text ready to be ‘read’” (Roberts and Roberts 1996: 98). Likewise, the enduring marks of the kasàlà genre fix and bring forward the distinctive social being of their subjects by being offered to listeners for “reading” and interpretation.

Thus praise epithets, proverbs and narratives are not only attached to material objects, like the Akan proverb to the bone, but also themselves function in the same way as material objects, as part of a distributed field of reminders and allusions. The object-like, mark-like verbal formulation is set down in order to be interpreted, commented upon and explained through an ancillary narrative which may in turn lead on to other reminders, other texts or objects.

In these case studies, then, textuality is distributed or dispersed, and at several levels. The components out of which a performance of praise poetry is assembled may have been composed by numerous different people. Each component is to some extent autonomous, and points outwards, towards its own narrative hinterland, at least as much as inwards to other components within the performance. The narratives which complete its meaning may belong to another genre, transmitted by a different body of specialists on different occasions. The process of exegesis is a kind of digression. It involves a journey away from the words of the text, into other texts, and into elements of custom and practice, each of which in turn can be the starting point for an exegetical journey of its own. The procedures by which such enigmatic texts are deciphered have not yet been well studied, but it is clear that interpretation is a creative art on a par with the generation of the text which triggers it. It has its own mode of progression through resemblances, puns, folk etymologies and etiologies.

This is especially clear when the link between text and explanatory narrative has faded to the point where two specialists can offer radically different explanations of the same text. The text becomes a starting point for ingeniously elaborated hypotheses. A Yoruba example that I have discussed at length elsewhere (Barber 1999a) is “Mojà-àlekàn”, a
core epithet from the *oríkì* of a large, dispersed group claiming common origins in the ancient city of Ìwàtā. The specialists consulted by Adeboye Babalọla told him that it meant “Ọmọ Jàá, à-lè-kàn” meaning “Child of Jàá, someone who can be found [where we left him]”, i.e. someone who holds his ground in battle, Jàá being one of the kings of Ìkòyí, the seat of the Old Óyó metropolitan army (Babalọla 1966: 46, 48). Wande Abimbọla, the noted specialist of Ifá poetry, offered a wonderful and quite different explanation in the form of a long Ifá divination narrative about the king of Ìwàtá, his sixteen barren wives and his fertile concubine (àlè). The concubine, left to carry a huge firewood log home from the forest, dropped it with a crash (kàn), upon which all the wives magically became fertile and the King of Ìwàtá’s children became as plentiful as fish (Ọmọ èjá). Both these explanations reveal a close attention to the expression “Mojà-àlekàn” and a willingness to analyse it syllable by syllable in order to find a way to make it yield meaning – or to attach meaning to it. Both are ingenious and depart from intuitively available interpretations – the first by bending the tonal pattern (“Mojà” does not readily suggest “mọ̀ Jàá”), the second by distributing the syllables of the epithet across a lengthy narrative, like the clues to a treasure hunt distributed around the garden. The text, here, seems to exist as a stimulus to creative acts of narration and explanation rather than as a bearer of narrative meaning in itself. It provides the stimulus for a journey into other genres (the Ifá story) and the artful exercise of etymological speculation.

The ways in which interpretation is done, the strategies of exegesis, the kinds of argument practitioners think of as convincing or incontrovertible – these are part of the textuality of the text and need to be recorded just as carefully as the text itself. Too often, scholars have either ignored the web of references in which such oral texts are suspended, or have sought to supply explanations from history books rather than investigating the oral practitioners’ own modes of exegesis. Studies which collect and present just the praise chants, or just the historical narratives, as if they were self-contained genres, cannot do justice to the way text is constituted as text.
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In some praise poetry traditions, the compacted, “objectified” utterances I have been discussing can be mobilised in performances of extraordinary fluidity, dynamism and dialogicality.

So intense is the addressivity of the Luba kasàlà performance that at funerals it is believed to have the power to awaken the dead. The performer of Yoruba oríkì locks the addressee into a one-to-one relationship, maintaining unwavering eye contact and frequently calling upon him or her to listen: “Ajálà son of Bíléwumọ, do you hear me? It’s you I’m talking to!” The more material she can heap upon her subject, the more his or her aura will be expanded. This leads her to raid available repertoires and assemble a heterogeneous, composite flow of materials which incorporate quotations from numerous sources and which are often compacted, incomplete and obscure. The constitution of oríkì elements as object-like, available for repetition and recontextualisation, is what makes the oríkì chant so intensely a performance in the here and now – emergent, variable, and forged moment to moment as the performer seizes materials with which to respond to the presence of her addressee.

In African praise genres, then, we see very clearly the inseparability of creative improvisation and the art of fixing and consolidating words as text.

Division of textual labour and ownership of knowledge

What we are looking at is a mode of textual constitution which is distributed across several genres; which involves several distinct agencies; and which affords differential access to different sections of the listening community. This raises fundamental questions about how texts exist, and how they are held to have meaning, in the cultures in which they are produced.

Praise epithets depend, for the constitution of their meaning, on a parallel narrative tradition; historical narratives depend on praise epithets
for their mnemonic kernels. The two genres may be learnt and transmitted by distinct categories of people. This I found to be the case in Òkukù, the Yoruba town where I studied oríkì. There, it was obinrin ilé – the wives or women of the household – who were the main performers of praise poetry, but it was the male elders who were the custodians of itànn, the historical narratives of lineage and town. If I asked a woman to explain an obscure oríkì, she would often direct me to the head of her husband’s compound to get the story; but if a compound head quoted oríkì in the course of his historical narration, he might well interrupt himself to recommend that I go to one of the women who could, he said, give me the full version.

Not only this, but each of the compounds/lineages that made up the town would deny all knowledge of other compounds’/lineages’ oríkì and itànn. Such knowledge belonged to the group and was bound up with its identity. No elder from a commoner lineage would take it upon himself to tell the history of the town as a whole, for the town belonged to the king and only members of the royal family had the authority to speak of it. The praise formulations encapsulating the distinctive origins, emblems, customs and achievements of each descent group were among the group’s most valued attributes; they were valuable because they were “deep knowledge” – which if it had been generally known, would not have been “deep”. The segmentation and distribution of knowledge was bound up with its value.

There are professional Yoruba praise singers who know the oríkì of a large number of lineages and towns. Their agency and skill are remarkably foregrounded, but they are not considered to be the originators of most of the praise poetry realised in a performance. Praise epithets are composed by numerous people, and accumulated over a subject’s lifetime. The text is not considered to belong to the praise singer, and still less to the numerous, dispersed and anonymous creators of its constituent elements. It is considered to belong to its addressees – the person, family, lineage or town being praised. It is they who are entitled to tell the stories
that explain its obscurities, and it is they who may on occasion attach to it special, private meanings. Some addressees have more scope to do this than others – elders more than juniors, stay-at-homes more than migrants, the interested more than the incurious. The same formulation could thus have a widely-accessible meaning to most of the audience and an additional, special meaning to an inner circle of “owners”. There is a praise-epithet belonging to a family in Ókukù which runs “Meet-me-at-the-dye-pits’. If people don’t find me in the place where they boil ijòkùn dye/They’ll meet me where we go early to pound indigo”. This would be understood by most people as a conventional formulation to praise the subject’s wealth, represented by indigo-dyed cloth and freshly-decorated house spaces. But an elderly woman of the family which owned this orìkì told me that to them, it served as an allusion to a specific, scandalous story about a daughter of the family who married the king, eloped with a drummer, and refused to come home, instead living with one lover after another (so that to them it meant “if you don’t find me in one man’s house, you’ll find me in another’s”) (Barber 1991a: 32).

Where composers do claim to have the last word on what a text alludes to, this can sometimes be because they composed the text in order to air a private grievance known only to them. Liz Gunner explains that women’s praise poetry in Zululand “usually recalls an unspecified event in the life of the poem’s owner known possibly to no one except the owner . . . Usually, however, an allusion is cast in language that gives it some significance for others even though the private origin of the allusion may be the secret of the composer” (Gunner 1979: 240). This is an effective way of keeping a grievance alive for years. A woman may compose izangelo praises for one of her young children, in which she refers to a grievance in general terms – but aimed at a specific target – so that whenever she praises her child the insinuation will be aired again, as if innocently. Here the “owner” of the praise – the child – may never know the private reason for the epithets he bears, but for his mother he functions as a living reminder of a long-cherished resentment.
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Differential entitlement to attribute meaning to formulations, established through the use of deliberate obscurity, often has an obvious political dimension. Obscurity could be used by a ruling group to flaunt the existence, while guarding the content, of secrets which were understood as the basis of their power. The royal dynastic poetry of Rwanda was a court art requiring the cultivation and leisure that only the Tutsi aristocracy enjoyed. Exclusion from the “veiled” allusions of igisigo was exclusion from the circles of the powerful nobles and their hangers-on. The purpose of Luba mnemonic devices was “principally political” – to encode information “in esoteric, ambiguous terms that could not be read by ‘outsiders’ or non-royals, thus serving the interests of those in power” (Nooter 1991: 50). In the court of the Asantehene, as Arhin explains, the songs performed by “minstrels” “are public only in the sense that they are sung at public gatherings: they are not understood by the whole public” (Arhin 1986: 167). Asante praise poetry (apae) of royalty and chiefs, though intended to remind the rulers, their subordinates and the populace at large of their respective roles and duties, do so in a deliberately oblique fashion, in some places using vocabulary “known only to a few courtiers” (ibid.). This use of language enables the performer to articulate distinct messages, public and private, simultaneously, maintaining the mystery of royalty while displaying the Asantehene’s power to the populace. The fact that the reciter of royal apaе is the king’s executioner speaks for itself. Conversely, obscurity in praise poetry could be used as camouflage for discreet criticisms of royal and dynastic power (Vail and White 1991) or more generally for talking about aspects of politics that were forbidden, as in Buganda during the outlawing of the old kingdoms in the period 1966–86, when public comment on the Kabaka (king of Buganda) was prohibited (Kiguli 2004: 229).

But obscure texts, and especially texts that could be understood at different levels by different categories of listeners, also flourished in relatively humble settings. Bisíwééré, a Muslim woman from a Chamba village in the far northeast of Nigeria, became well known locally as a composer of
dance songs that made frequent reference to the minute local knowledge of a village community where everybody’s business, even the most trivial, is scrutinised, commented on and remembered (Boyd and Fardon 1992). Her songs had what Boyd and Fardon describe as a “purposive indeterminacy”. They were deliberately composed to be interpretable at different levels, depending on the listeners’ knowledge of the circumstances. The following song, for example, could be taken to be the voice of a woman lamenting her husband’s departure, separated from him by a river, and fearing to follow him despite her desire to do so:

I stand and lament on the bank of the Mayo Ini [river]
Bísíwéérí went down to the bank of the Mayo Ini
I have not the courage
I stand and lament on the bank of the Mayo Ini
Bísíwéérí’s husband is the one who has done me ill. When I walk, my legs no longer carry me
Let them take me and carry me across the river . . .
My husband is away in Yola town

(Boyd and Fardon 1992: 23–4)

In a commentary on her songs, recorded many years later, this is the interpretation Bísíwéérí herself favoured. Taken in this way, it could be adopted by other people as a general expression of sorrow and longing, and as a way of giving voice to their own emotions – the reason, perhaps, for the success of Bísíwéérí’s most popular songs (Boyd and Fardon 1992: 18). But her sons remembered that within the family this song had always been understood to refer specifically to a rather embarrassing incident. Her wealthy and influential husband Aliyu, setting off on a journey to Yola with all his wives and his two donkeys, tried to take them all across the river Mayo Ini by canoe. But he quarrelled with the ferryman in mid-stream, snatched the punting pole and threw it in the river. Other canoes that came to the rescue refused to take the party across. The wives were left standing on the bank while Aliyu went upstream, swam across, and made fresh arrangements for their transportation on the other side. In
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this interpretation, the line “Bísíwéééri’s husband is the one who has done me ill” could be taken not as the grieving words of a wife but as the angry words of the ferryman. Boyd and Fardon suggest that this is a deliberate indeterminacy which plays a useful role in a social situation full of tension and conflict arising from old and new causes: competing demands of close kin and affines, rivalry between co-wives, religious differences following conversion to Christianity or Islam, social competition sparked by the emergence of new colonial elites. “‘Indeterminacy’ provides a way of giving simultaneous expression to divergent and sometimes contradictory points of view” ((Boyd and Fardon 1992: 18–19).

Richard Fardon has shown that lack of knowledge – what people say they don’t know or can’t explain – is just as significant as what they do know, and that the pattern of distribution of knowing and not-knowing may vary systematically from one community to another according to patterns of social organisation and perceived social history (Fardon 1990). “Secrets” confer or encapsulate power; but, as has often been shown, it may not be the content of the secret itself that is important, so much as the exclusion of certain sections of the community, often along lines of gender or age, from access to it. In textual economies of allusion and insinuation, the power associated with knowledge is increased not through increasing knowledge but through restricting entitlement to interpret a formula, a narrative, an allusion: for possession of secrets creates reputation and reputation attracts adherents who bring power. “Deep words” are often blanks. The secrecy is not in the words, but in the absence of meaning from the words, which need to have exegeses attached to them. The gate-keeper of the secret is the one authorised to control the attachment of the exegesis. The opacity of many of the textual forms discussed in this chapter does not arise from the covering-up of a determinate content. Rather, the forms are constituted to indicate an absence, and to trigger a journey into another narrative, another symbol or proverb. The question is not so much “What is the real meaning?” as “How is exegesis controlled?”

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Where obscure texts and their elucidation are constituted to uphold political hierarchies, as in the royal genres of the Rwanda, Asante, Abomey and Luba kingdoms, authorised exegesis is strictly confined to palace officials. Where texts belong to descent groups that participate on a more-or-less equal footing as co-constituents of a polity, as with Yoruba lineage oríki, exegesis is distributed on the basis of mutual, voluntary exclusion. You can’t know my history, and I would scorn to know yours. Where texts are individual compositions commenting on personal experience, as in Zulu women’s izangelo or the songs of Bisíwééri, the obscurities may remain forever unexplained (and even unsuspected) to everyone but the composer or her most immediate associates, while a more general, appropriable meaning may be open to everyone in the community and may provide the grease of ambivalent commentary to sticky, conflictual local situations.

Instantiation and repertoire

The meaning of these texts, then, is created not by individuals so much as between individuals, and a text exists only as part of a distributed field or network of other texts. Exegesis is one way of tracing a path through this network, undertaken by the interpreter; quotation is a second way, undertaken by the performer. The roles of interpreter and performer can be conflated or can be distributed among several people. The “object” that text resembles is a peg or a stepping stone, from which the interpreter can proceed to other texts, stepping laterally through the field of associations. Both composition and interpretation trace a transverse journey, or as Ôlabiyyi Yai puts it, are a matter of “constant departures” (Yai 1994). Exegesis brings specialised resources to the text including other, existing texts, the nature and perhaps even existence of which, in many cases, could not have been inferred from it. The distribution of these interpretative resources is inherently uneven. Some people are always more in the know than others, because that is how text is made into text – it is made to be
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subjected to exegesis depending on specialised knowledge, usually at several levels.

Exegesis, then, is an art akin to the art of composition; and we need to see any given instantiation of a genre in relation to the whole field of verbal resources through which the interpreter navigates. Although my focus has been on entextualisation – on the art of making words into texts that outlive the moment – it is clear that in some traditions it is the genre’s whole field of resources, rather than any individual instantiation of the genre, that is valued for its capacity to transcend time. A vivid example of this is the gurna songs of Tupuri people in the Extreme Northern Province of Cameroon. The Tupuri up till today still maintain a traditional youth association, the Gurna Society, which initiates its members and forms a camp outside the village for several months every year in order to learn and practise gurna dances and songs. The centrepiece of their activities is a long song of 70-odd stanzas (each stanza being 4–9 lines long) composed by a specialist, whom the camp selects after vetting several alternative composers’ offerings. A representative of each camp is sent to the chosen specialist to learn the song by heart (or, nowadays, record it on tape), and he then teaches it word for word to the entire camp. At the culmination of the gurna activities, all the camps that selected the same song gather in a great circle and perform it in unison, in a massed gathering that expresses the key gurna values (at odds with everyday village experience) of abundance, peace, order, male solidarity and sobriety.

Though the songs are composed by a single specialist who has a reputation for distinctiveness to maintain, they are not unified in terms of content – rather, they are assembled from a variety of materials from different sources, including stories of scandals and secrets assiduously researched and contributed by Gurna Society members during the period of preparation. The composer may incorporate oblique allusions to events he does not know much about: “because the song functions as a sort of community bulletin board, the composer’s knowledge can at times be partial”
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(Ignatowski 2006: 101). Different parts of the text are fully understood by different people: no one understands it all. Immediately after the great, unanimous performance in the camp, the Gurna Society members begin to perform outside in the villages, at funerals and other events (this is referred to as “publishing” the song). With wider exposure, less of it is understood, and the song then begins to disintegrate into morsels of scandal and praise that circulate independently, each following a path amongst a particular, interested constituency.

Thus the song emerges from a sea of shared verbal resources – praises, names, greetings, witticisms and sly allusions to scandalous events – is solidified into an impressively lengthy text of fixed form and wording, is performed in unison by a large group, and is then immediately allowed to dissolve back into the verbal sea, enriching it in the process. No attempt is made to preserve the song in its entirety, despite the availability of tape-recorders and literacy, for it has served its purpose and the following year a new song will be composed. The focus of the performers is on making the song transcend space rather than time. The gurna camp dance events at which the songs were sung were enormous; they brought together clans and villages, and people travelled for days to reach them. Conversely, the songs themselves were described as travelling, their circulation compared with transmission by telephone and telegram to emphasise how far and fast they move. The idiom suggests an aspiration to reach a kind of virtual public beyond the local community.

While the individual songs are seen as moving far across space, what endures over time is the genre as a whole. Gurna as an institution is highly valued, and is seen as an enduring bulwark of Tupuri values set against the corruption, mutability and disorganisation of postcolonial modernity. The songs criticise both outside influences – the impact of western education and economic change – and internal misbehaviour that reflects and further exacerbates the dissolution of traditional mores. In an idiom typical of the African postcolony, they use analogies with imported technology to affirm the value of indigenous traditions.
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Making a lasting mark, then, does not necessarily or always involve the creation of a permanent individual text. Some genres which look quite monumental at first sight turn out to be warrens of criss-crossing pathways through a shifting field of verbal resources. Many of the African epics discussed in Chapter 2 are like this. The term “epic” suggests grandeur of scale, and the Ozidi, Woi and Mwindo epics are indeed immense, multi-episodic narratives of heroic or mythical proportions. But they are never performed in one go. Different selections of episodes are told on different occasions, so that the “epic” itself is more like a repertoire than a work. Similarly the Yoruba corpus of Ifá divination verses, always noted for its immense size, rigorous organisation into 256 “chapters” and the invariant form of each constituent verse, may be better understood as a field of argumentation – an exceptionally well-stocked and well-organised field, but a field nonetheless, through which diviners navigate in order to deal with particular issues or frame particular arguments (Barber 1990).

These cases offer a wonderful site for revisiting long-standing questions about the possible relations between the work and the tradition, between the instantiation and the genre. Bakhtin suggested that complex literary genres are “composed of various transformed primary genres (the rejoinder in dialogue, everyday stories, letters, diaries, minutes, and so forth)” (1986: 98). These primary genres of everyday life, when they are absorbed and digested into a complex secondary genres such as the novel, “are altered and assume a special character”, losing their everyday significance and “enter[ing] into actual reality only via the novel as a whole, that is, as a literary-artistic event and not as everyday life” (1986: 62). In other words, they are decontextualised, and re-assigned a new context within the novel; it is now the novel as a whole that functions as a contextualised “utterance”, in dialogue with preceding works and oriented towards a response from readers and from subsequent works. Bakhtin’s model suggests the possibility of a sociology of literature that moves from the ground up, a generative approach that traces the building of complex
forms from everyday ones, rather than treating valued, large-scale works as intrinsically different from other genres.\footnote{11}

The processes of expansion and linkage which make possible the creation of salient, culturally valued works such as praise poetry, epic, Ifá divination poetry or the gurna song are inseparable from reflexive, interpretative activity. The “little genres of everyday life” that go into their composition – naming, quoting proverbs, coining sayings, offering blessings or speeches of thanks – are themselves recognised genres, attended to by culturally competent participants. It is sometimes possible to see how the seeds of new verbal art sprout in the rich loam of social interaction. In Herskovits’s classic ethnography of Dahomey, he describes how the bridegroom gives his wife a new name on their wedding day – a name not usually related to her condition or qualities, but celebrating or acknowledging something in his own history such as a triumph over rivals, or the help of his father-in-law (Herskovits 1938, I: 150–1). The name would be aphoristic and allusive, and during the ceremony, the bridegroom would expound its meaning:

high minded or humorous sentiments, rhythmically phrased, are spoken to explain the name, or cite the parable from which the name stems; and the dramatic sense of the Dahomean turns this naming eulogy into a declamation of a picturesque metaphor (Herskovits 1938, II: 326)

Here we see as clearly as anything the basic procedure of text constitution that underlies all the praise and dynastic poetry this chapter has focused on. The bridegroom lays down a compact segment of opaque, dense allusion. He then brings to bear on it a highly-developed exegetical technique – in this case, as formalised as the allusive name itself – to expand the text by supplying a narrative context, which can include journeys into other genres such as the parable.

Interestingly, in view of Bakhtin’s suggestion, it is the case that many African oral genres are internally constituted by just this same procedure.
A compact and challenging formulation is presented; an elaboration which at least partly provides a context follows. Thus, in Asante *apae*, “almost every line begins with some nominal which is then explained or elaborated in the form of a succeeding adjectival clause” (Anyidoho 1993: 372). For example, *Okoro-man-so-fone* ("The one who goes to a town and causes everyone to [become] emaciate[d]") is elaborated with *A wo ne no twe manso wofon* ("If you have a legal battle with him, you [become] emaciated[d]"). The second line explains the context – litigation – in which the subject’s devastating impact on other people is felt; without this elaboration, the praise epithet would be completely baffling. These internal expansions present and consolidate the text without fully constituting its meaning. In this and many other parallel genres from elsewhere in Africa, it seems that there are several kinds of expansion, elaboration and exegesis built up in layers around a core nominalised epithet – some within the text and some carried in a parallel narrative tradition outside it. This highly flexible and creative practice goes beyond the division suggested by Bakhtin into “primary” (simple) and “secondary” (complex) genres. Difference in scale does not necessarily mean qualitative difference; epics involve assembling a greater array of resources, more elaborate amplification and nesting of epithets, proverbs and narratives, but is not necessarily different in kind from the Dahomeyan husband’s creative naming and elaborating on the name. It may be that our desire to find “great” texts – monumental works of great complexity and significance – has distracted attention from the fact that the epics, praise poetry and other salient, valued works are constituted out of a repertoire of materials and compositional strategies practised constantly in everyday life. This is not to belittle the great achievements of master composers and narrators, but to affirm the creativity of everyday life in which their art was formed. The elements which leave the most enduring traces, “like a scar”, are within everyone’s reach, incised into popular memory.
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Local intellectuals

The processes of textual constitution that I have discussed in this chapter lend themselves to the establishment of a category of local intellectuals. In every community there seem to be people who you get sent to, to explain obscure texts that other people are baffled by. And some of these local intellectuals, as we have seen, make exegesis into an art comparable to poetic or narrative composition. In the context of anthropological fieldwork, such people often come to function as mediators between local and external interpreters of texts. Exegesis, so central to the constitution of African oral texts, is highly adaptable. In the ethnographic encounter, Muchona-like figures emerge who are adept at turning the exegesis towards the questions the ethnographer is likely to want to ask and who function as intellectual midwives, expounding as they present the cherished, obscure texts of their traditions. In the process, they may develop a distinctive mode of inquiry of their own. Often, and rightly, treated more as highly respected colleagues than as informants, such “contact intellectuals” deserve to be given credit for original thought, rather than found wanting as impure bearers of authentic traditions.

Tayiru Banbera was one such intellectual, who simultaneously performed and expounded the epic of Segu for David Conrad (Conrad 1990). Banbera was trained as a jeli, a hereditary, professional bard of the Mande culture area. But like many of his calling, he was unable to make a living purely from performance in traditional contexts, and his work with researchers was an important part of his own vision of his continuing role in his profession. The translation of Tayiru Banbera’s narrative is strikingly easy and entertaining to read. It unfolds at a leisurely pace, is full of interesting digressions, and moves forward steadily with no vital steps omitted, and with everything carefully explained. It is poignantly, attractively transparent. This is largely because Tayiru takes care to gloss his own formulations as he goes along. His narrative is full of sequences of internal translation – he first sets out a piece of information and then
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proceeds to explicate it. Sometimes the explanations are simple, for example when he provides a gloss to enable the listener to grasp a metaphor, but there are also more complex forms of internal exegesis. These include etiologies and etymologies explaining the origin (and hence the import) of a particular name, title, custom or saying. There is a passage about the death of King Monzon in which the name of Tinyetigiba Danté, the griot who became head of the artisanal castes of Segu, is explained. On his deathbed, Monzon sent for his favourite son and asked Tinyetigiba to recite the royal genealogy. Tinyetigiba did this so successfully that people commented “Eh, there is no limit to the word of this man! Is his word not accurate? Is his word not true? Is the form of his word not just right?”:

\[\text{\textit{dan t'i ka kuma na}, “There is no limit to your word”.} \]
\[\text{That became a family name.} \]
\[\text{The word of this man was good,} \]
\[\text{There was no limit to his word.} \]
\[\text{Tinyetigiba Danté, “Big Possessor of Limitless Truth”} \]

(Conrad 1990: 168)

This explanation of “Danté” as deriving from an abbreviation of “\textit{dan t’i ka kuma na}” uses a familiar creatively-etymological strategy, expanding on a condensed point within the text (for a similar moment in Sunjata, see Innes 1974: 311). But Tayiru makes his explanation painstakingly full and clear, in a manner reminiscent of the schoolroom. The text thus participates in the kind of transparency and “virtual literacy” that characterises the whole domain of modern African popular culture (see Chapter 5). P. F. de Moraes Farias and S. Bulman have suggested that the conjuncture, in Tayiru’s work, of inherited traditions, personal imagination, and historical approaches from outside the sphere of oralcy opens up the possibility of insights into the past that have eluded both the more conventional oral traditionists and academic researchers, producing a totality which is “not to be dismembered”, for it “articulates two different orders of historical production and historical knowledge” (Moraes Farias with S. Bulman 99).
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1991: 545). In this view, the possibility that Tayiru may have shaped his narrative to meet Conrad’s requirements is not to be seen as a contamination of a pure tradition, but more as the opening up of a third space where new historical knowledge may be released or generated.

The nature of textual meaning

It will have become apparent that entextualisation in the cases discussed in this chapter is not confined to making single, boundaried texts “object-like”. Rather what has been achieved is an entire field or network of textuality which has the properties of “out-there-ness”, a network of formulations that exist in the world prior to the utterance of a speaker or the exegesis of an interpreter. Composers, performers and interpreters traverse these fields of formulations, making links and constructing layers. The sense of text being something recognisable, something whose elements can be identified and discussed as if they had an existence independent of the speaker and hearer, is established not only through making texts the object of attention (in quotation, in the exegesis of obscurities), but through the distributive mode of the constitution of textual meaning. When the constituents of textual meaning are carried in two separate genres like *oríkì* and *itàn*, each of which depends on the other for its completion; or when a symbol leads to a proverb which in turn becomes a praise epithet which forms the kernel of a myth episode, as in Luba exegesis, text is *made apparent* as a network pre-existing the expressive or interpretative activities of any individual.

Paul Ricoeur spoke of textual “autonomy” – the establishment of textual forms that in some sense have an independent existence – as being above all the achievement of writing. The potential of language to achieve “semantic autonomy”, he says, remains “nascent and inchoate in living speech”. It is writing that confers upon verbal constructs an objective and enduring independent material form, such that the “text’s career escapes the finite horizon lived by its author. What the text means now
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matters more than what the author meant when he wrote it” (Ricoeur 1976: 30). Thus Ricoeur opened the way to the science of hermeneutics (see also Gadamer 1984), and to the idea of text as a model for the social sciences (Ricoeur 1971). Text represents the capacity to produce meaningful forms outside any individual’s immediate volition – forms which can be apprehended and criticised: and it can thus provide a model for all reflection upon social institutions and social action. A study of the entextualisation of oral genres, however, suggests that writing is only an extension of processes already well established and flourishing without it. Fixing words, attaching them to material objects, making them object-like in themselves, making a mark, constructing vast networks of linked and mutually-suggestive formulations, creating forms that others can recognise, appropriate and inhabit, are what “oral cultures” do.

The texts we have looked at are clearly not trapped by the “finite horizon lived by [their] author”. Detailed, elaborate exegeses proceed without any reference to authorial intentions. Indeed it would be hard to locate an authorial intention in many of these genres, composed from elements created and modified by numerous people and assembled by performers who may function more as catalysts than as creators. It is clearly not the case that cultural forms mediated by living speech are inseparable from the flux of immediate personal communication, and incapable of being established over against this flux.

Where does “meaning” lie in texts like these? If it cannot be associated with a determinate or identifiable authorial intention, can it be located in the creative activities of a “reader”? Certainly not in any of the ways suggested by reception theory, poststructural criticism, or the theory of relevance. These texts do not instruct the listener how to fill in their own “blanks” (Iser 1978); they do not offer a cornucopia of signification which any reader/listener is free to explore in his or her own way (Barthes 1975b); nor can a reader, prompted by the “weak implicatures” said to be characteristic of poetic texts, scan through a range of potentially relevant scenarios, available in public culture and in their own personal
experience, to find those that seem to “make sense” of the text in the way most satisfying to them (Sperber and Wilson 1986). The obscurities of genres like African praise poetry are not invitations to open-ended free-association by the listener, but rather signals that a specific but non-inferable narrative context or additional text is required to supplement the utterance. What that further material is, how it is linked to the text in question, who is in a position to make the link – all these are questions that cannot be answered from a study of the text alone, nor deduced from a priori assumptions about the nature of communication and textual interpretation. We need a model with sociality and the institutionalisation of speech genres built right into its base. To understand how meaning is constituted in apae, mbiimbí or kasàlà – or in a host of other genres – we need to know how textuality is set up in the cultures that produce these texts: how genres are related to each other, how the work of composition and exegesis is distributed, and how interpretations are generated.