

Orality and Writing: Conducting a Writing Exercise in Kenya

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In 2002–2003 I was a Fulbright Scholar/Lecturer at Egerton University in Njoro, Kenya. I taught primarily literature classes, but I was also affiliated with the Centre for Women’s Studies and Gender Analysis. As part of my affiliation with the Centre, I participated in a certificate, two-week long, team-taught course, Gender, Poverty and Development. The course subjects—economics, development, technology, politics, urbanization, poverty, entrepreneurship, and health—were not in my field of expertise. How could I, as a teacher of primarily literature, fit my discipline into the array of topics? I decided I would emphasize gender socialization. How are women and men socialized into the roles they occupy? For my morning-long, three-hour section, I would, for part of the class, use a WAC exercise to get students to think about gender as a social construction through oral literature.

The great Kenyan writer Taban lo Liyong defines oral literature as “the cultural information and values transmitted mainly by the spoken word and received by the ear and responded to by the whole organism in societies where writing was not yet the order of the day” (vi). Oral literature functions in a variety of ways: as indoctrination, socialization, acculturation. It also comes in many different types and genres: “folk tales, legends, myths, beliefs, songs, poems, proverbs, tongue twisters, puns, travelers’ tales, council discussions, traditions, ceremonial activities, and all the other ways of imparting group knowledge to

the young and new members” (Liyong vi). Though oral literature carries morals, typically, the narrators themselves, as Kavetsa Adagala and Wanjiku Mukabi Kabira note, do not moralize (xvi).

Kenyan students grow up in a culture rich with oral traditions, and university curricula reflect these traditions. Every university in Kenya (e.g., Egerton, Moi, Kenyatta, and the University of Nairobi) offers classes in folklore studies and oral literature. By the time I taught my section of Gender, Poverty and Development, I myself had seen many oral tales narrated, sung, and performed. Almost all of my literature students had taken courses in oral literature, and several would tell me about some of their assignments and field trips. I decided to make use of my students’ already rich background and have them connect the stories they heard while they were growing up to the roles women and men play in the economy, development, entrepreneurship, and so on. I would ask them to make this connection through writing.

It is worthwhile to consider briefly the relationship between orality and writing. Walter Ong’s seminal book *Orality and Literacy* provides fundamental insights into both. Where orality encourages “fluency, fulsomeness, volubility” (40-41), writing, on the other hand, promotes, to a greater extent, “sparse linearity” (40). This image of “sparse linearity” gives rise to a skeleton, denuded of flesh, of life. As Kabira notes in *The Oral Artist*,

[t]he written word can not convey the vivid and varied scenes and atmosphere which are often evoked by the spoken word and enactments, especially when the performing artist is a skilled one. Writing eliminates a great deal from an oral performance, and when the material is translated, it is removed from the original performance even further. (v)

Ong reminds us that the written word, bare, alone, lacks the “gestures, vocal inflections, facial expression, and the entire human, existential setting in which the real, spoken words always occurs” (47). On the other hand, with writing, as Ong notes, “the mind is forced into a slowed-down pattern that affords it the opportunity to interfere with

and reorganize its more normal, redundant processes” (40). Continues Ong, “[t]he very reflectiveness of writing—enforced by the slowness of the writing process as compared to oral delivery as well as by the isolation of the writer as compared to the oral performer—encourages growth of consciousness out of the unconscious” (150).

Obviously, the dichotomy between the oral and the written is not so clean-cut. Negotiating in a primarily oral culture requires analytical expertise, and writing, as Wordsworth famously pointed out several centuries ago, involves the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (143). However, this dichotomy is useful for understanding the role writing plays in a culture that values orality. This dichotomy is also useful for designing the American-born WAC assignment in a foreign country.

For the day’s assignment, then, I wanted to combine both sets of experiences—the subjectivity of oral performance with the objectivity of writing (and discussion)—inside the space of the classroom, a space regarded, in Kenya and the United States, as a place where, more typically, students are asked to conduct reflective, analytic thinking. The assignment required the students to move back and forth along a spectrum from the analytical to the emotional back to the analytical. I wanted students to write out an oral tale or poem and analyze it, and then to present it, orally. Following the oral presentation, I wanted them to resume the analytical process, but in the form of discussion rather than writing. Writing would start the process of trying to make students realize that the stories and poems they heard when they were growing up contributed to their ideas about women’s and men’s roles in Kenyan society.

The question is, why even ask students to write at all? Why not just perform and discuss? What are the advantages of asking them to put their thoughts first in writing? The reasons lie in the relationship of the English language to ESL speakers who live in a country where orality plays a predominant role. It is worth considering two main differences between assigning in-class writing in the United States and in Kenya. First of all, though English is the medium of instruc-

tion in Kenya, it is not, typically, students' first language. Their first language is more often their tribal language, what they call their mother tongue. As one ESL speaker told me, they feel in their mother tongue. "Mother" is not an accidental word here; the mother tongue is the language of emotions. In Kenya, English holds, to some extent, the same role that Latin used to hold for university students. Ong writes, "[I]earned Latin effects even greater objectivity by establishing knowledge in a medium insulated from the emotion-charged depths of one's mother tongue, thus reducing interference from the human lifeworld and making possible the exquisitely abstract world of medieval scholasticism and of the new mathematical modern science which followed on the scholastic experience" (114). In writing and talking in English about a tale or poem they had heard in their mother tongue, students, I hoped, would see it in a new context, and in a new way.

Next, in the United States, as Ong continues, we idealize "reading for comprehension" (116). In Kenya, reading is still very much associated with the oral and the declamatory (Ong 116). For example, a large part of the reading festival I helped to organize in May 2003 involved dramatic performances, several sessions of reading out loud, and speech contests. Those were the more popular events, not the essay-writing contests that called on participants to analyze literature. I wanted my students to see literature as something to be analyzed as well as something to be performed. In translating the oral to the written, students would, at the very least, give consideration to the meaning of the stories and songs they grew up with.

To that end, I asked students to write out a tale they heard when they were growing up. First, however, I modeled in part what I wanted them to do. I read aloud an oral tale, and then I asked the students to tell me what messages it conveyed about gender roles and expectations. Following that discussion, the students wrote out their own tales, and then analyzed them. Their analyses focused on the following question: what did their stories or poems convey about gender roles, work and reproduction, family, and character? The students then broke into groups along tribal lines. I would not have had them do

that, but in this class, they had grown accustomed to talking in small groups arranged according to tribe. As it turned out, in a class of 20 students (about half women, half men), apart from one lone Luyha, there were pretty much an equal number of students from the Luo, Kikuyu, Kalenjin, and Borana groups, some of the major tribes in Kenya (estimates range from 40-70+ different tribes). In any event, I came to think that it might be interesting for students in each tribe to compare notes on the tales told to them. Following the group work, we then rejoined as a class. One member from each group was asked to narrate her or his tale. We followed each narration with an at-large group analysis. Again, our main question was, what connections could the students make between each tale and the ideas about gender roles that they had already learned from their other lecturers?

All parts of the assignment went along effortlessly, except for the writing. The students, most of whom were science and agricultural majors, were not used to writing in class, and writing out a story with which they grew up seemed to be particularly challenging. I had to prod and coax them. Many at first sat there and just wouldn't write. I walked around the room during the 25 minutes I had apportioned for this part of the class to urge them to write. Some put their pens down after a few minutes and started talking to their friends. I typically beelined toward them to set them back to work.

I knew ahead of time that I would face this difficulty; I had already encountered students' reluctance to write at the beginning of my literature classes. If some students in the United States initially approach freewriting exercises with hesitation, that is especially true in Kenya, where students are more accustomed to straight lecture classes. In my Kenyan literature classes, I spent more time, at the beginning of the term, explaining my reasons for asking them to write about the literature we were to discuss. I offered a number of justifications, and repeated myself in the first few weeks of my classes. I said that writing allowed them to regroup their thoughts and consequently to jump more readily into class dialogue. Writing ignited discussions, I urged. Writing also allowed them to see things in the text that they would

not have otherwise. They could use their short writing assignments as a basis for their longer essays, or for the research papers that they wrote at the end of the semester. But, returning now to Gender, Poverty, and Development, students, even in this class, eventually set to work.

If Kenyan students are more reluctant to write than their American counterparts, they are certainly more adept at listening and talking. As I noted above, I started my section of Gender, Poverty, and Development by reading aloud a version of the Kikuyu folktale, “The Lost Sister.” I asked students to take notes as I was reading, but, I should note, none of them did! However, when, after I finished reading, I asked them to identify some of the messages—oral literature seldom contains only one “moral”—they got them, very quickly, even if they had not taken notes. They saw the story as an illustration of men exploiting women’s labor. Without a woman—Wachera—, a man—Wamwea—cannot cook for himself. They noted that “The Lost Sister” is about a woman, and a man, coming of age. They could see that the sisters must marry away from the family, and the brothers profit from their sisters’ marriages. The students regarded Wamwea as selfish and demanding, and Wachera as responsible and caring. The men look after the animals, and the women after the crops.

I was delighted after I heard the students’ analyses, and had high expectations of their own stories. I was not disappointed. Indeed, I was awed; not by what they had written, but by the presentations themselves. I had thought the students would simply read or recite their examples of oral literature, but instead, they sang, dramatically read, or performed their tales. We were able to hear five presentations; I will describe three of them here. The first one was a Luyha wedding song sung by the women guests to the bride and groom. I asked the student to translate the song for me:

The first born will depend on you
 We are delighted in you
 It is a delight to the family
 You are the only ones

Bring the cloth you have brought
So we can dress the first-born.
We don't have any other
It is the only one
After giving birth we will be proud
Because it is the only child
When you bear the child
We will be proud because it's the only one.

The student not only translated the song, she sang it, and though the song is a Luyha one, most of her classmates knew it, and sang along with her. The moment was a powerful one, and I did not want it to end. I let the song wind down, and then asked the students to reflect on its language. What did we hear? I asked. The students emphasized that because only women were singing, that men were excluded from the process of raising children. Just as the men stand passively at the wedding, so do they remain uninvolved in child rearing. I pointed out to the class that the men were singing along with the women. They shrugged their shoulders. They wouldn't have if they were at a real wedding.

The next song, another wedding song, was a Kalenjin one, and is roughly translated as follows:

You are a flower in the family
Picked on the road
When you are called by your husband
Say yes, I am here
And if you fail to respond
You will be given a thorough beating
You will be paid for by cows
In return you should be submissive.

The mood during the performance—and the sing-along (because the students knew this song too)—of this song was one of positive levity. I could not help smiling, though I had a translation of the words in front of me—“given a thorough beating”? “you should be submissive”? I asked the students if there were any contradictions just now

between the mood of the class, and the message of the song. They immediately did somber up. Yes, they said, women could not play a role in selecting their mates; they were to be passive. The song made wife beating seem normal. Women were bought, like cattle. The discussion of this song went on for some time, as the students compared notes on the similar ways women were socialized to be passive in the different tribes.

The third performance was read aloud by a student who frequently acts in plays. He recited one of the most popular Luo folk tales; I had heard and read this one several times. The student's version accorded with that of the great Kenyan writer Grace Ogot, another Luo, who called her story "The Fisherman." The student's reading was magnificent, and though I'm sure I'm not the only one who knew this story well, the students listened attentively. The students compared this story to "The Lost Sister." Again, it is the women who bring the wealth, and again, we have another instance of a greedy man, except in this story, greed and maltreatment of women are punished. Women seem to have the same status as cows; the more wives, the more cattle, the more prosperous a man is. One student said that women in this story are not altogether passive; Wagai leaves as soon as she is mistreated. That is an act of resistance. Another student noted that one must be mindful of where wealth comes from; Nyamgondho trips himself up by forgetting his past.

After we heard all of the presentations, I asked the students to take out their writing, and to reflect on it, the poems and stories we had heard, and the discussions in which we had engaged. What connections could they make to the issues that were raised by their other lecturers? What patterns could they see? They said that it was clear that women performed the work, and were responsible for the child-bearing. Yet, in Kenyan society, and across tribal lines, they had little voice or decision-making power. How did the students feel about that? What had they noted in their writing? I asked. Two said they were angry. What role, I continued, did the stories that they heard from their families and friends, and the songs they heard sung at wed-

dings, play in their ideas about gender assignments? An unconscious role, a particularly perspicacious student pointed out. It was in translating her song, though, she said, that she became more conscious of what the words were telling her. I ended class by encouraging students to continue to make links between the stories they heard and the expectations they had of men and women, and to use writing as a means to enhance their awareness. Acquiring awareness, I urged, is a lifelong process but one that would allow them to become, to use a phrase I heard throughout this two-week long certificate course, “change-agents.”

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¹ See Ong, who writes that “[l]iteracy [. . .] is absolutely necessary for [. . .] explicative understanding of literature and of any art, and indeed for the explanation of language (including oral speech) itself” (15). He states even more strongly elsewhere, “abstractly sequential, classificatory, explanatory examination of phenomena or of stated truths is impossible without writing and reading” (8-9).

² In addition to not being used to writing, I wonder if students were reluctant to write because writing is such a solitary activity. Orality unites people (Ong 69). In writing, one is alone (Ong 101).

³ I should note that I had more luck assigning freewriting in class than I did short writing assignments outside of class. Because Kenya is a communal culture, students liked to share their work with each other, and so their papers tended to echo one another’s. I saw short in-class writing assignments as a chance for students to think on their own, and I told them that. I emphasized how the other students and I wanted to hear their own perspectives. Though initially cumbersome, within weeks of each of the four literature classes I taught, students grew accustomed to whipping out a piece of paper when I began class or when I stopped discussion mid-class to start on another tack.

⁴ “The Lost Sister” (in Carolyn Martin Shaw’s *Colonial Inscriptions: Race, Sex and Class in Kenya* [1-2]) is about a young woman, Wachera, who lives alone with her brother, Wamwea, a young warrior. At the beginning of the tale, Wamwea looked after goats during the day, and went out at night. In the meantime, Wachera is being pursued by several young men. She warns her brother, whose response is, don’t worry about it. She is kidnapped by these men. Wamwea must live on his own. Because he cannot prepare his own food, he kills his goats and eats them. The goats last him for years. After he kills the last one, he goes on a journey, when he runs into two children, who take him to their mother’s hut. As it turns out, these are Wachera’s children. She doesn’t recognize Wamwea as her brother. He stays at her household for a month. Eventually Wachera realizes that Wamwea is her brother.

But he is angry because she had not given him a cup for his food, but rather a potsherd. To get him to recognize her as his sister, she offers him increasingly larger numbers of goats, oxen, and cows. Eventually he relents, and the brother and sister are reconciled. Wachera's husband finds eight wives for Wamwea, and he lives near his sister for the rest of their lives.

⁵ Did I in particular find the moment powerful because I come from a culture in which such moments of spontaneity are rarer? See Ong 136-37.

⁶ "The Fisherman" appears in Ogot's short story collection, *The Other Woman and Other Stories*. Essentially, this story starts with a fisherman named Nyamgondho who is unable to catch any fish, to the great disappointment of his wife Achunga (in other versions, Nyamgondho is a widower). One day he hauls in an old woman, whom he reluctantly takes home, and whom Achunga reluctantly feeds. As a reward, the old woman asks Nyamgondho to build an enormous pen to house cattle. He does; when it is finished, a long line of cows, bulls, and calves of all colors comes streaming into the pen. The old woman is transformed—into what, it's not clear—a beautiful young woman?—but in Ogot's version, we do know that she insists on being named Wagai. Nyamgondho takes her as another wife. He then takes on many more, younger wives, and prospers. But then he forgets his past. One night he comes home and abuses and humiliates Wagai. In response, she reverts to her old woman self, and leaves, along with all the cattle. Nyamgondho frantically follows her, to no avail. She and her cattle return to the water. Nyamgondho is transformed into a huge statue; in other versions, he is a cactus.