

## READING FROM THIS PLACE

### From orality to literacy/textuality and back

Welile Mazamisa  
University of Cape Town

---

#### Introduction

In South Africa the Bible has always been read and taught in pluralistic contexts. Contexts, however, are dynamic and keep on changing. In our case, the complexity of our context is compounded by our singular history and the existence of a complex political, economic and religious structure. This problem cannot be but complex, since, according to N C Manganyi, we are confronted with two sociological schemas, namely being-black-in-the-world and being-white-in-the-world (1973:3-6). Being-in-the-world has been covertly interpreted as a question of 'biology, of heredity, of biological determinism, of the superiority and inferiority of one biological group (race) as against others' (1973:37).

Intellectual life in South Africa has been shaped by being-white-in-the-world, and specifically, by white males. They have participated in and shaped the academic process. This fact has been one of the objective mechanisms which have sustained racial domination. Moreover, white monopoly over research skills and research funding and black exclusion from shaping the academy in this country in any meaningful way, have resulted, for example, in the scarcity of black biblical scholars. Biblical scholarship and the Bible remain firmly in white male hands, for they have access to traditional biblical languages and research funding. The equation of being-white-in-the-world is the control of the production and dissemination of ideas.

Historically, being-black-in-the-world has been associated with barbarism, illiteracy, heathendom and unwholesomeness. In *Die Stofberg-gedenkskool van die Ned Geref Kerk in S A*, published in 1927, Mr A B le Roux, principal of the *Normaalskool*, makes the following comment:

Wat het ons as blankes en as kerk met die naturel gedoen?

Ons het van hom geneem sy barbaarse lewenswyses, sy bygeloof, sy baie vroue, sy bierpotte, sy ongelooft en sy natuurlewe - kortom, alles het ons hom ontnem! Wat het ons hom in die plek daarvan gestel? Ons het aan hom gegee en en gee hom nog steeds die Ewige Lewe en Gods manier van dink en lewe. Die Gees van die Heer werk nou in sy hart en

oortuig hom, dat daardie dinge in sy heidense manier van lewe nie alleen verkeerd is nie, maar hopeloos sondig is. Hy sit dus met leë hande as ons hom ontnem wat aangenaam was (1927:2).

Underlying this statement was the philosophy that blacks were not amenable to decent and equal education. On the question of equality the same author makes the remark:

Ons blankes en ons staat het reeds te lank met die saak, wat ons tydelike sowel as ewige bestaan raak, gesloer en uitgestel. Daar is vir ons in Suid-Afrika net drie weë in verband met die naturel oop: (a) Uitroeing; (b) Gelykstelling; of (c) 'n Skeiding. Die eerste is onmenskundig en onkristelik; die tweede is onmoontlik en onkristelik, terwyl die derde die kristelike, moontlike en menskundige weg is wat moet ingesien en gevolg word (1927:5).

Under such circumstances, blacks could not be entrusted with the interpretation of the Bible. It is no wonder then that the theological institutions as well as die South African theological faculties have produced very few black biblical scholars. This, however, does not imply that the Bible is not read in the black community. The question is, how is it read, and what is reading?

## 1. On reading

### 1.1 What is reading?

Different activities could be classified under the general term 'reading'. I may 'read' someone's face to decipher his/her reactions in a conversation; I may 'read' the clouds to find out whether it is going to rain; I may 'read' the tracks of an animal; I may 'read' the world around me. I may 'read' signs and symbols and attach meaning to them.

Reading, ... [then, could be generally defined as] ... the active process of making meaning out of signs and symbols - not just alphabetic symbols, but anything that can be interpreted: any natural event or any cultural artifact (Wittig 1978:4).

Literate cultures understand 'reading' one-dimensionally; 'reading' only has bearing to literacy. A reader must also be able to write. Whoever is not in a position to read printed symbols, is viewed as unwholesome. Reading and writing are regarded as tools to distinguish between barbarism and civilisation. Levi-Strauss goes on to point out that writing sets a people free (Wittig 1978:5). 'Reading', as one of the basic tools of literacy, empowers the 'reader' and gives him/her control over the world and over the 'non-reader'. In the history of colonialism, 'reading' nations have used the tools of reading and writing to annex huge tracts of land of the colonised peoples by signing flimsy treaties that were not understood by the co-signatories.

In South Africa, the Bible was initially read by white people. Black people only had access to the Bible during the beginning of the eighteenth century. To many black families, the Bible was the only literature available at the time. Today in the black community it is read in all places of worship, and even in such social events as 'stokvels'. According to Gerald West, it is also used as 'an instrument of social control and an instrument of social struggle' (1991:35).

## 1.2 The reader

Reader response criticism has introduced a whole population of readers. There are 'intended readers, implied readers, historical readers, model readers, mock readers, ideal readers, and an equal number of narratees' (Culpepper 1983:205). West identifies two readers, namely the trained reader and the ordinary reader (1991:164-173).

In my opinion it is necessary to speak about the participating reader, who is the one who participates fully in the reading act, and the 'listening' reader. This reader has no access to the written text, but participates through his/her ears. Incidentally, this is the biggest constituency of 'readers' in South Africa, due to the fact that between 50% and 60% of the black population is not able to read and write. This is a community that has been socialised in the oral tradition.

## 2. From orality

### 2.1 Oral tradition

What is oral tradition? Oral tradition is a genre of communication of a special nature. Vansina defines oral traditions as 'verbal testimonies which are reported statements concerning the past' (1965:19). These statements are either spoken or sung. Hearsay plays a major role, for the informant does not necessarily have to witness an event in order to be able to narrate it. Events are learnt about through hearsay.

Orality exists in the soul of a community that is attuned to oral traditions as an historical source. To those people who still regard orality as primary to literacy, oral tradition forms, according to Vansina 'the main available source for a reconstruction of the past, and even among people who have writing, many historical sources, including the most ancient ones, are based on oral transmissions' (1965:1). Words were heard before they were seen, and humanity continues to operate with spoken words (cf Whittaker 1986:1).

Orality subsumes, but goes beyond the contemporary orally conditioned communities to encompass the way of life and verbalisation of past communities. It refers to social bonds characterised by emotional cohesion, depth, continuity and fullness of communities that perceive the oral tradition as the

pith and marrow of communication. Orality is the inner order of community, whether this be religious, political or cultural. It is given legitimacy by its roots in the field of communication, social function, allegiance or tradition. Orality includes the verbalisation of mores, the non-rational, the religious and ritualistic ways of behaviour of a community.

Orality is more than the spoken word. Marcel Jousse, one of the leading scholars in the field of oral studies during the 1920's, published a work of cultural anthropology, *Le Style Oral*, in which he looks at various ingredients of oral style, and explains how they function in the process of oral communication. Language is, first and foremost, mimicry.

When it is at the stage of living gesture, it is mimodrama; projected and inscribed on a surface it is mimogram; written down and pronounced it is phonogram (Jousse 1990:xxiv).

Balancing and rhythm are inherent in oral oriented cultures. The Jews still 'balance' when they recite their famous laments at the ancient walls of the Temple in Jerusalem. Recitation of phrases is a psycho-physiological dialectic which is transformed into a new text that incorporates orality and literacy.

Orality is the first act, literacy/textuality the second in the history of the world's literary history. Contemporary scholarship suffers from the tyranny of the written word. The deepest problems derive from the claims of those scholars who dismiss oral tradition as literature, but advocate for a primacy of the written word in the face of overwhelming evidence that oral traditional literature is older than writing.

## 2.2 African oral literature

African oral tradition is not just an antithesis of a written literature, but a development of a more complex literary genre which has utilised to the maximum the social and linguistic potential. It is a form that has evolved a special set of principles necessary for the socialisation of thought. Its preservation and interpretation of history aim at reinforcing the all powerful 'fundamental law of humanity (*umthetho wobuntu*)'. Its symbols are organised to appeal to a complex and varied set of community emotions. It carries within its inner meanings thoughts which seem simple, but which grow more and more complex as one probes deeper into their hidden systems.

In the discovery of these meanings lies one of the most amazing experiences one can have. In them is embodied a timeless set of values which by their ethical authority supersede the whims of temporal political power. The central communal strategy of African society makes oral literature a crucial tool for consolidation. The spoken nature of the literature further guarantees the widest circulation of the communal ethic and history. This is particularly evident in the treatment of the great oral works as serious religious statements. It is interesting to note that the Gospel in the black communities was spread orally by preachers who were not exposed to any form of formal education.

### 2.3 African orality as socialisation

'Socialisation' is a widely and diversely used concept in the social sciences. A variety of psychological theories such as psychoanalysis and social learning theory, as well as anthropological studies influenced by psychological theory employ the concept (Goodman 1985:67-70). Within the field of sociological studies structural-functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism all employ the concept of socialisation, though in quite different ways (Goodman 1985a:73-75). Conflict theorists have focused on the way 'class interests have been defined as general societal values and then transmitted from generation to generation' (Goodman 1985a:74). Structural-functionalists view socialisation as something which the group does to its members in training them to function as 'loyal, committed, competent members'.

Socialisation consists in teaching the various statuses of society and the necessary 'prescriptions of behaviour' which are termed roles. Symbolic-interactionists are primarily concerned with the interconnection of the individual to his/her social group and wider society. This connection is explained in terms of the process of socialisation (Goodman 1985b:114). In the words of Goodman (1985b:114):

Basically, socialisation is a learning process that takes place in the interaction between individuals, through the medium of both verbal and nonverbal communication, and is directed to enfranchising a person as a functioning member of a social group (especially society).

African orality must be seen as socialisation because each and every African individual participates in the oral tradition which is handed down from generation to generation in the African family. The history of the family is not written down, but is narrated by the elderly in the family. Within the family context the Bible is read aloud by a member of the family, and the entire family responds.

Therefore, orality is the first act, and textuality/literacy the second.

## 3. To literacy/textuality ...

### 3.1 The literary tradition

The installation of the world's literature is based on the fact that in oral tradition facts or events are observed and transmitted from generation to generation. The process of transmitting testimony to successive generations culminates in a new project, which is the written text. Written literature is, therefore, a series of verbal documents handed down from generation to generation. Textuality has been an important medium in the communication of the Gospel.

The most significant role that textuality has played is that it has been able to overcome the problem of oral fragility. Textuality has placed words in a fixed

place where they cannot be forgotten. Textualisation of the spoken word transformed the oral text from a free text to a fixed text; and moved speech from the oral-aural level to a new sensory world of longevity. However, the advent writing introduced a new and foreign medium of communication which was used by a special class of people, namely, the wealthy, the officials, the clergy, while the majority of the people were familiar with oral literature.

### 3.2 Textuality as resocialisation

Textuality for the black biblical scholar is a form of resocialisation process to the extent that it is in discontinuity with previous socialisation (oral tradition). Through the resocialisation process the trained reader negotiates a new identity in a new universe of discourse. The new universe of discourse is learned and internalised in the form of literacy. Textuality is a movement away from orality to literacy. Black biblical scholars have tended to ignore the role of orality in biblical hermeneutics. By so doing, they have entered the second phase of the Enlightenment.

## 4. ... and back

### 4.1 The hermeneutics of orality and the hermeneutics of textuality

Orality and textuality are complementary; they are *adialectica reconciliae*.

### 4.2 A case-study of the above: Ntsikana's Great Hymn

Ntsikana was one of the first converts in the Eastern Cape during the beginning of the eighteenth century. He was a praise singer and poet. One version of the oral tradition has it that the idea of the Great Hymn was actually conceived at the dance which Ntsikana attended on the day of his conversion. Another claims its conception as being at the time of his vision in the cattle kraal. Be that as it may, this hymn enshrines the main doctrines of Ntsikana's teaching, and was used at his services up to the time of his death.