

University of Massachusetts Boston

ScholarWorks at UMass Boston

Africana Studies Faculty Publication Series

Africana Studies

1998

Review of Ruth Finnegan's Oral Traditions and the Verbal Arts: A Guide to Research Practices

Chukwuma Azuonye

University of Massachusetts Boston, chukwuma.azuonye@umb.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umb.edu/africana_faculty_pubs



Part of the [African Languages and Societies Commons](#), and the [Comparative Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Azuonye, Chukwuma, "Review of Ruth Finnegan's Oral Traditions and the Verbal Arts: A Guide to Research Practices" (1998). *Africana Studies Faculty Publication Series*. 21.

https://scholarworks.umb.edu/africana_faculty_pubs/21

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Africana Studies at ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in Africana Studies Faculty Publication Series by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact scholarworks@umb.edu.

and the activities of the Algerian Islamists within it, and on the key features of Algerian foreign policy since independence.

The book represents a welcome addition to the English-language literature on Algeria and will be particularly useful for the general reader with no previous knowledge of the country. In particular, Stone's analysis of the Berberist and Islamist movements provides a good insight into the complexities that characterize both movements. He makes the point that the FIS is above all a political, not a religious movement but one that has articulated its policies in the context of Islamism. One could go further and see the FIS leadership as a counter-élite poised to take power and, despite lip service paid to 'alternance', one that would rule in the same authoritarian style as the present military-backed regime. Unfortunately, the chapter on the armed Islamist groups includes only a short paragraph on the regime's response to their campaign of violence. Since the conflict began, the army has developed new strategies to deal with the AIS and GIA deploying its own forces to target the main concentrations of 'terrorists' and using the *gardes communales* and *groupes d'autodéfense* (which have increased rapidly to number some 200,000 men), familiar with the terrain, to track down smaller groups of Islamist militants. An increase in revenues from oil and gas has enabled the state to pay for these additional forces. At the same time human rights groups have strongly criticized the methods used by the state. A report by the Fédération International des Ligues des Droits de l'Homme published in June 1997, citing evidence from the families of victims, lawyers, members of NGO's and journalists, claimed that numerous secret detention centres exist, confirmed the systematic use of torture by the authorities against detainees suspected of membership of terrorist groups, and arbitrary executions, many carried out by self-defence groups but invariably attributed by the regime to the Islamists. Several thousand people had simply disappeared. Relatives of detainees were often afraid to seek legal advice and lawyers themselves were sometimes in danger.

Since the book went to press there have been new allegations that most of the GIA factions have been infiltrated and are controlled by military intelligence. The real agony of Algeria is that ordinary citizens have become the victims of both the terrorism of the state and that of the Islamists. Stone's assertion that the military's decision to support Zéroual's candidature in the 1995 presidential elections marked an important stage in that institution's conversion to democracy (p. 121) must be questioned. Although we do not have a clear picture of the main fault lines that divide the different clans within the military élite—to oppose 'éradicateurs' and 'conciliateurs' is certainly an oversimplification—the generals are united in their determination to preserve their power and privileges. The new bicameral parliament elected in June 1997 is tightly controlled and all key policy decisions continue to be made by the military chiefs. Moreover, some analysts have argued that the Zéroual regime has skilfully manipulated the political parties, encouraging some to weaken others, successfully 'domesticating' them and that negoti-

ations with the FIS have been aimed not at seeking a compromise to end the violence but at encouraging divisions within the party and undermining its credibility.

At the end of October 1997, having secured a unilateral ceasefire from the AIS, Zéroual announced that the dossier on the FIS was closed permanently. Should Zéroual experience problems managing the political parties in the future, one suspects that there are generals eager to remove him and his democratic facade.

The book contains numerous typographical mistakes and there are several inconsistencies in the text suggesting that the work was written, or at least completed, in some haste.

RICHARD LAWLESS

RUTH FINNEGAN: *Oral traditions and the verbal arts: a guide to research practices*. (ASA Research Methods in Social Anthropology Series, no. 4.) xviii, 284 pp. London and New York: Routledge, 1992. £12.99.

Ruth Finnegan, Professor of Comparative Social Institutions at the British Open University, is well-known for her encyclopedic surveys of oral literature in Africa and elsewhere across the world. In this book, she has turned her attention to the knotty problems of research methodology in this field, in which she is an undisputed pioneer and world-acclaimed expert. The book's ten chapters cover the three main issues in oral literary research, namely the recording of performances in the field, the establishment of the verbal texts through faithful transcription, translation and editing, including annotation and indexing, and the analysis of the texts themselves, both in themselves as they really are and in terms of various comparatist theories and analytical models from a wide range of sources—anthropological, folkloristic, literary and the like. A moot, but none the less easily discernable fourth dimension of the discourse has to do with the problems and processes of preserving oral performance events, both from the purely technical perspective of processing them for archival storage and from the point of view of ensuring the continuity of the social and ritual contexts on which such performances depend for their survival. The important question of proprietary rights to communal cultural property—the so-called 'folklore phenomenon' in the international copyright code—is also addressed briefly but cogently under the rubric of 'Ethics' (ch. x).

By and large, Finnegan provides a highly readable and informative summation of the key issues in all these dimensions of oral literary research and succeeds in whetting the reader's appetite to follow through the problems and challenges she discusses into their original sources in her detailed notes and comprehensive and up-to-date 35-page bibliography. But, at the same time, she raises numerous controversies, largely through her deconstructive approach, an approach which defers all definitions and tears open the

boundaries of categories commonly regarded as well-established in the existing critical literature.

The ten chapters of the book are as follows: 'Scope and terminology' (pp. 1-23); 'Theoretical perspectives' (pp. 24-53); 'Some prior issues and practicalities' (pp. 54-72); 'Collecting, recording and creating texts' (pp. 73-90); 'Observing and analysing performances' (pp. 91-111); 'Production, functions and ideas' (pp. 112-34); 'Genres and boundaries' (pp. 135-57); 'Analysing and comparing texts: style, structure and content' (pp. 158-85); 'Text in process: translation, transcription and presentation' (pp. 186-213); and, of course, 'Ethics' (pp. 214-33), mentioned earlier. These are extremely handy summaries of scholarship much of which is contained in books long out of print or in articles in widely dispersed and narrowly specialized journals. Needless to say, the problems and methods of field collection and transcription of oral performance texts include many questions which every scholar in the field is better off discovering for himself in actual practice. And some of Finnegan's prescriptions are in need of more rigorous deconstruction than she has attempted to offer in this book. For example, Chapter v is essentially a summary of Kenneth Goldstein's fairly dated discussion of the various possible contexts of recording verbal performances in the field.

On transcription, Finnegan seems to favour a retraction from the increasingly widely accepted principle of reflecting the performance features of oral texts in their transcription. Dennis Tedlock's model in *Finding the center* (1972) may be too elaborate for common use, but the principle is unassailable and Finnegan's deconstructive efforts on this issue present themselves as a way of avoiding the issue. The truth is that there can be neither vacillation nor absolutism on this matter. Transcription should be as rigorously faithful to the contextual-performance and linguistic situation as possible, thus making the texts readily available for a wide range of uses in a continuum ranging from historical reconstruction to literary recreation. The alternative to such meticulous transcription is the publication of a compact disc or cassette tape-recording of the actual performance as part of the book, as has recently been done for the vernacular traditional section of *The Norton anthology of African-American literature* (1997).

Although Finnegan offers a superb summing up of the key problems and challenges of translating across cultural and aesthetic barriers, which one often encounters in dealing with the texts of oral performances, she sometimes slips into redundant answers such as the following on 'what is left out in translation':

Some of the familiar answers on what cannot be translated include: the poetics ('poetry' in Robert Frost's definition being 'what is lost in translation'); humour; puns; a play between different registers or vocabulary; stylistic qualities ('prose' as well as 'poetry'); multi-levels of meaning, perhaps directed to different audiences; connotations; imagery; and culturally specific allusion (p. 190).

Needless to point out, *poetics* (as I understand it, the theory of literary composition) seems to be the wrong word here if, indeed, the reference to Robert Frost's definition of translation is to be taken seriously; and the features listed in addition to poetry are of the very essence of 'poetry'.

Finnegan's most glaring problem in the book is her apparent inability to find a precise term for her field of investigation, hence the dubious title, *Oral traditions and the verbal arts*. Throughout the book, the two key terms in the title (*oral traditions* and *verbal arts*) remain vague despite the author's wide breath of reference in their discussion. In many ways, this vagueness is due to a sharp conflict between the author's new deconstructive approach and a strong Eurocentric absolutism of the kind manifested in the more controversial assertions in her earlier writings, notably in *Oral literature in Africa* where she dogmatically rules such genres as epic, myth and drama out of existence in African oral traditions. Needless to say, *oral traditions* is nothing but 'tradition' transmitted by word of mouth where tradition refers to ideas, beliefs, and modes of expression shared in common by members of a group and which are handed down from generation to generation, either by word of mouth or by means of writing. In recent times, historians have appropriated the term for materials which embody information about the past; but it is wrong to be so dogmatic about the boundaries and content of oral tradition. All categories of knowledge in a traditional society may be transmitted orally. *Verbal arts*, on the other hand, is used as a synonym for 'oral arts', whereas it ought to refer generally to the *belles-lettres* or the artistic use of language, oral and written. As one stumbles across the shifting and confusing use of the two key terms and their synonyms in this book, one cannot help wondering why Finnegan seems so eager to avoid the term, *oral literature*, which she herself has promoted in her previous books and which appears rather appropriate for the present offering, for the book is essentially *Oral literature: a guide to research practices*. The confusion seems partly to arise from Finnegan's avowal of a purely anthropological interest while the perspectives she offers are also recognizably literary and comparatist.

Despite the fact that, for the most part, Finnegan subverts her own best insights in this book by deconstructing everything and at the same time attempting to impress her Eurocentric absolutism on the unwary reader on many critical issues, comparatists and folklorists should be grateful to her for her intelligent and concise presentation of many thorny theoretical and methodological problems in the field of oral literary research. The problem with the deconstructive approach is that it has the effect of reducing the value of the book for newcomers to the field to whom the book should have been primarily addressed, especially since, as I have noted earlier, more experienced researchers have invariably encountered the key problems discussed and discovered effective solutions for them.