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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Oral and Beyond: Doing Things with Words in Africa* by Ruth Finnegan

Review by: Ken Walibora Waliula

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Thus, this is not a perfect book. On the other hand, Eldredge comes to her conclusions carefully and honestly, and they are important. The book is not only significant for what it tells us about Lesotho and southern Africa in the late colonial period, but for what it teaches about the inner workings of indirect rule or rule-through-chiefs in the British Empire. The result of the abrogation of African power — the circumscription of chiefs' ability to fight, to raid one another for cattle, and to move away to better pastures — was to create the conditions for the medicine murders, and so the continuation of violence by other means, which closes the narrative. The cost of the gradual defeat of chiefship in Lesotho, before its partial resurrection in the 1960s, was high, and it was borne by the people, not the chiefs. From within the hidden transcripts of BaSotho power, there emerged a hidden hell.

Laudably, Eldredge is not afraid to suggest what was actually going through the minds of the protagonists, and she uses her deep understanding of highveld South Africans' culture to good effect. The book adds to the history of Lesotho, and more, to the history of colonial power in practice.

**Paul S. Landau**

University of Maryland, College Park

Ruth Finnegan. *The Oral and Beyond: Doing Things with Words in Africa*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007. 258 pp.

Ruth Finnegan's *The Oral and Beyond: Doing Things with Words in Africa* is a profound meditation upon both the static and shifting scholarly interventions in and interpretations of Africa's rich oral artistic expressions. She draws on philosopher J.L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (Harvard University Press, 1975 [1962]) for her subtitle, *Doing Things with Words in Africa* — a subtitle that underpins her conceptual emphasis on the illocutionary or performative attributes of words or "language as process and action" (6).

The text is divided into four major parts, with the first appropriately narrowing its focus on the oral tradition of the Limba people of Sierra Leone. The book extends its frame of references progressively: Part II deals in broad terms with the interplay between oral literature and performance and time; Part III focuses on conceptual and theoretical debates on orality and textuality; and Part IV attempts a more global articulation of the relationship between "doing things with words" and being human.

What makes Finnegan's work particularly compelling is her lucid and astute synthesis of the various strands in oral literature as a field of inquiry, from her own earlier contributions, notably the publication of her seminal

text *Oral Literature in Africa* (Oxford University Press, 1970), to more contemporary texts by other scholars. One could safely say that she is as ruthless in her critique of her own earlier work as she is passionate about defending it and justifying the apparent weaknesses which subsequent scholarship has perhaps exposed or exaggerated.

Finnegan is quick to acknowledge the significant contributions of any number of scholars of the African oral tradition in particular (such as Isidore Okpewho, Harold Scheub, John W. Johnson, and Peter Seidl) and orality in general: the high priests of the study of oral expressions namely, Walter Ong, Albert Lord, and Jack Goody, who have had tremendous influence on the field (7). She highlights the trends and the trajectories in the theorization of the field over a generation, indeed tracing both the metamorphosis in her own outlook and that of the field in general. *The Oral and Beyond*, therefore, is at once a thorough analysis of the field and the author's own introspective self-analysis; it is a sort of autobiography of her intellectual life or an "occasion for presenting and reconsidering some of my own words since the late 1960s" (8). Finnegan concedes that when she entered the then largely uncharted waters of African oral literatures in the 1960s, there were certain conceptions or misconceptions informing her approach that would later be discounted or justifiably contested.

Now, with the benefit of hindsight and given the tremendous strides scholarship in African oral literature has made over the years, it is instructive that Finnegan, one of the leading figures in the field, would have the candour to admit that there are certain things she would have done differently. For instance, she admits that her decision to jump onto the bandwagon of scholars with "universalising tendencies" regarding the question of oral composition made her apply to Africa what may not have been particularly applicable given the numerous counter-examples (148). She admits that her "meagre approaches" or conceptual extrapolation on the nature of the African oral narrative in *Oral Literature in Africa* have been rendered "increasingly out of date" (149). Furthermore, she argues that she also fell into the trap of categorizing African oral genres according to Eurocentric categories that were then perceived to be universally valid to everyone everywhere. She notes: "But still the organization of the book probably gave the impression of a more solid and generalisable basis for classification than was really justified" (149-50). Indeed, on this theoretical issues as in others, she succinctly points out that she never intended for her seminal work to be a theoretical benchmark and its elevation to that status has been largely misplaced and mistaken.

Inevitably, Finnegan revisits the highly contested question of the oral epic that she had broached in her first book and for which she was severely critiqued for allegedly claiming that the elevated genre did not exist in Africa. Later interventions by scholars such as Isidore Okpewho,

Mugyabuso Mulokozi, and John W. Johnson discounted her claim. In *The Oral and Beyond*, as in Finnegan's later works, she presents a more nuanced approach to the topic, acknowledging the fresh insights that new research has furnished and the shortcomings of the ideas that influenced her earlier assertion. Yet she seems to remain resolute in the defence of her controversial statement and the intellectual impetus that give rise to it. She writes: "Let me say first that in some respects I would still hold to the general position that underlay" the controversial statement (151).

One of the text's glaring shortcomings is the reproduction of research on the Limba oral tradition of the late 1960s almost exactly as it appears in her first book, *Oral Literature in Africa*, without any substantial consideration of how the Limba do things with words in the present millennium. Yet it bears stating that overall, *The Oral and Beyond* is a book whose intellectual breadth and brilliance makes it one of the most outstanding and important texts on Africa and orality. The book's probing engagement with the African past, present, and future use of words to do things, both in practice and in theory, makes for compelling reading. Ruth Finnegan's latest text is, indeed, indispensable for anyone interested in the study of orality in and outside Africa.

**Ken Walibora Waliaula**

University of Wisconsin-Madison

Karen E. Flint. *Healing Traditions: African Medicine, Cultural Exchange, and Competition in South Africa, 1820-1948*. Athens, Ohio: University Press, 2008. 274 pp.

The notion that multiple healing traditions co-existed in South Africa and, as Flint skilfully illustrates, have always borrowed from each other is something worth remembering at a time when, for example, cultural boundaries are considered more fixed than malleable or, when the possibilities of cultural exchanges under colonial rule are forgotten and thus pose a barrier to making sense of the post-colonial present. With *Healing Traditions*, Karen Flint urges us to heed the lesson from history.

The strength of *Healing Traditions* is its long view of history. This helps demonstrate that "healers in a postapartheid South Africa faced many of the same issues as their early twentieth-century predecessors" (xii). In addition, Flint suggests that cultural exchange and competition was not new or limited to the time when the Zulus were subjected to white rule, either under British colonialism or in apartheid South Africa. The history of the formation and the social organization of the Zulu kingdom also challenged the Zulu healers to be adaptable to new and changing