



Universiteit
Leiden

In search of the storyteller in Africa and in the diaspora: From performance to text to performance again.

Applicants

Supervisor Name	Discipline
Prof. Dr. Maarten Mous	African Linguistics LUCL - African Languages and Cultures
Dr. Annachiara Raia	African Literature LUCAS / African Studies Center

Project description

Neglected and relegated to a primordial part by postcolonial debates since the 1980s, oral literatures and popular cultures have increasingly received attention in recent debates about southern epistemologies. In an effort to counter the dominant Western colonial archive of knowledge, they have been emphasized as alternative (and often genuine) forms of African knowledge production and preservation close to people's imagination and cultural memory. Furthermore, local initiatives have been taken up on the African continent and in the diaspora to preserve, collect and document verbal and visual arts and make them available to a wider audience¹. Initiatives, like literary festivals, magazines, photo exhibitions, spoken word events and competitions have also been facilitated by new technological possibilities, digital media change as well as globally entangled cultural institutions and an economy, where creative industries have become more important.

We take this revived interest and new creative initiatives as an occasion to invite for critical debate and scrutiny between our students vis à vis practitioners and artists.

The idea that the project underpins is to rethink and analyse African re-telling and re-enactment in current digital media, audio books and illustrations. The widely known figure of the storyteller in African verbal arts has nowadays re-invented himself/herself; How far has this "re-invention" through the digital had a transformative impact on the performer and the related performance? Has the local become foreign and re-adapted again for new publics overseas? Whether, as attested by Finnegan, "oral literature is by definition dependent on a performer who formulates it in words on a specific occasion—there is no other way in which it can be realized as a literary product."² How far is the significance of the actual performance nowadays changing when the language and media also

¹ Some links with current re-telling of traditional African tales:

Hekaya Arts Initiative ; <https://www.facebook.com/HekayaEA/>

African storybooks <https://www.africanstorybook.org/>

Positively African: <https://www.positivelyafricanmedia.com>

Ubuntopia: <https://ubuntopia.world/>

² Finnegan, R. <https://books.openedition.org/obp/1187?lang=en>

changes? Can we talk about alternative forms of knowledge production and/or new available commodities in the digital era?

Research Trainee Profile

We are looking for two research trainees with a strong interest for oral African-language literature and popular culture in Africa. Among the major tasks, they will be expected to research current re-tellings of African stories; interview producers; compare the new renderings to the original versions, interview and keep a dialogue with the producers again on motives and tropes for adaptations, and study perspectives of current users in comments through discourse analysis and audience response theory methods. Furthermore they are expected to interact with the local community on the rendering, authenticity and adequacy of the new artistic and cultural product and its meaning(s). The final attempt will be to gauge possible boost to indigenous verbal arts in the digital age and in particular in urban settings in Africa.

MA and ResMA students in African Studies, Linguistics and Anthropology, Literature and Film Adaptation as well as advanced BA *Afrikaanse Talen en Culturen* students are eligible and highly invited to apply. The precise focus on which ethnolinguistic group to deal with will be defined on the basis of the initial survey and in agreement with the linguistic area and cultural knowledge that the selected students are more familiar with. A preliminary knowledge on languages, cultures and literatures of Africa is also expected.

Collaboration

The project is close cooperation and intrinsically interdisciplinary linguistics-literary studies and establishes close cooperation between the specialist of African literature (Raia) and her linguist colleague (Mous) sharing interest in East Africa, oral literature and popular culture. This strengthens the current restructuring of the BA *Afrikaanse Talen en Culturen* programme with a common integrated multidisciplinary approach. A study on storytelling and performances in Africa and in the diaspora is highly influential also in the disciplines of History, Literature and Film Adaptation and more broadly to African Studies and to multidisciplinary themes like Intermediality, Media Practices and Media Literacy as well as Mobility, Globalisation, and Interculturality.

Deliverables

- A joint article on the topic
- Inventory of the current storytelling initiatives in existence
- A possible joint paper presentation at the 5th Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies Conference, Moi University, 6 – 8 September 2021
- A short documentary to be presented in the courses on Communication and media as well as Oral Literature: Research in Living tradition (BA) or Art, Literature and Culture in Africa (MA)

Planning

Preliminary phase | January > Feb. 2021

- a. Search, interview and selection of the two research trainees
- b. Survey and initial documentation through the Internet of the African re-telling and re-enactment in current digital media, audio books and illustrations
- c. Preparing the annotated inventory list
- d. Selection of the ethnolinguistic group

Phase I | February > March

- a. Connecting with the producers of the African re-telling initiatives which have been selected
- b. Analysing the main actors
- c. Studying the genres and performers adopted by the producers
- d. Interviewing the producers and the artists (I)

Phase 2 | April > May

- a. Viewing and studying a selected number of re-tellings
- b. Comparing the renderings with the prior/original versions
- c. Analysing the audience/users response
- d. Interacting with the community
- e. Interviewing the producers and the artists (II)

Phase 3 | June > July-Aug.

- a. Presenting the first outputs
- b. Writing the article
- c. Preparing a short ethnographic documentary
- d. Finalising and submitting the article
- e. Final presentation at the Research Trainee Conference

Student Application

Potentially passionate and interested students should send an electronic motivation letter to the following email applicants' addresses: m.mous@hum.leidenuniv.nl ; a.raia@hum.leidenuniv.nl