How text transcends gender in African oral and popular cultures

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I

The theme of this paper is how African texts, oral and written, constitute persons: in such a way that individual identities are simultaneously affirmed and transcended or set afloat. What I'm doing is arguing for the importance of locally-generated texts to British social anthropology – which has always been intensely interested in how persons and roles are constituted – but at the same time warning that many, perhaps most, African genres cannot be understood as personal voices vouching for individual experience. They are more complicated than that, and more interesting.

II

This may seem a rather inappropriate way to celebrate Phyllis Kaberry's life's work. Phyllis never wrote about the verbal art of the peoples she worked with, nor did most of her contemporaries in the field of British social anthropology. This is in sharp contrast with American cultural anthropology – which from the days of Boas onwards was deeply involved in the collection and interpretation of indigenous texts, especially in Native American ethnography. Casting their eyes over the history of British social anthropology, some Americanists have seen a sad contrast - rigid rule-bound structural-functionalists determined to strip social forms down to their bones, impose a deluded scientific objectivity, and deny the expressive capacities, agency and creativity of their subjects (see for example Valentine and Darnell 1999).

But this caricature is ignorant of a hidden history – a history of a passionate affair with textuality in British social anthropology. Phyllis's work in rather surprising ways bears testimony to this. Her major work, *Women of the Grassfields*, is a report published by the Colonial Office on the economic position of women in Bamenda, in the then British Cameroons. It presents meticulously researched data on social structure and its variations across a range of related peoples, whom she visited by embarking on long cross-country treks; there are tables giving details of household budgets, quantification of agricultural inputs and yield, and fluctuations in market prices. But this isn't a dry book. When she wants to evoke the ideal of the good life espoused by many Nso men, she breaks into a quotation of a 7th century Chinese poem ("Tell me now, what should a man want/But to sit alone, sipping his cup of wine?…" quoted on p.26); and to suggest the men's air of being busy – which Nso women felt was more show than substance – she quotes Chaucer:

> No-wher so bisy a man as he ther nas
> And yet he semed busier than he was (quoted on p.87)

If Phyllis's literary taste ran to poetry, by temperament she strikes me more as a natural dramatist. She had a keen ear for dialogue and almost every page of *Women of the Grassfields* is enlivened and illuminated by her verbatim quotations of things people said to her. Her exposition is bursting with individual speech. She doesn't write "The Nso believe…" or even "Nso people say…" She writes: "As one woman explained to me…" , "My first interpreter, Benedict Tata, told me…" (1952:41), "As one querulous old woman complained, 'Potatoes, always potatoes! I am tired of potatoes!'" (1952:60). She notes the way things were said ("At one stage in our conversation he remarked acidly 'The *fai* does not look after the things which we eat'", 1952:38) and the circumstances in which they took place ("One day I arrived at John's compound to find him perturbed and rather angry... ", 1952:42). Sometimes she describes whole conversations, including her own part in them, quotes within quotes and running commentaries.

In her footnotes, Phyllis frequently refers these quotations back to what she calls the "Lamnso texts". The "texts" are what people told her and she wrote down, either on dictation or from memory afterwards, in Lamnso. What she presents in her argument are selected portions of these, translated into English. The processes of elicitation, transcription, translation, are kept off-stage; but they were clearly a key component in her fieldwork method.

And this was true for many of the social anthropologists of her generation. Collections of "texts", in Phyllis's sense of the word, lurk behind ethnographies that are not on the surface very much concerned with indigenous verbal expression. This habit dates from the earliest African ethnographies: Dale and Smith, in the preface to *The Ila-speaking peoples of Northern Rhodesia,* published in 1920, say

> We aimed at securing a large collection of native texts. The Ba-ila had no written literature; when we knew them first their language had never been reduced to writing; and so we had to obtain these texts in one of two ways – either by writing them ourselves from dictation or, in later years, by employing the assistance of young men trained in mission schools (Smith and Dale 1920:xi).

This appears to have remained a standard procedure for several decades subsequently; the texts thus collected clearly formed an important data bank even though they are almost never referred to except in footnotes. Sometimes such meticulously recorded monologues and conversations resurface decades later, as is the case with Evans-Pritchard's wonderful book *Man and Woman among the Azande*, published nearly forty years after *Witchcraft Oracles and Magic*, and offering extraordinary records of long, live conversations, some with EP himself, some between Zande men and women (overheard? reported to him?), including young men propositioning girls, husbands placating their in-laws and even two lesbians plotting to pull the wool over their husbands' eyes.

If Phyllis was by temperament a dramatist, she was also a good textual critic. She had a lively appreciation of the words themselves, and of the capacity of

the vivid, idiosyncratic utterances of individual people to give unparallelled insight into their outlook and their experience; but she was also clearly alert to the contradictory, opaque character even of apparently straightforward statements, and emphasised the need to understand them in their larger context. Indeed, her overall interpretation of the "position of women in Bamenda" could be said to turn on a configuration of key statements by Bamenda men and women, statements which appear contradictory but which her contextualising discussion is able to reconcile.

III

This emboldens me to talk about texts in this lecture in her honour. But I have to confess I'm using the word text in a different way from her. What she and her contemporaries meant by a text was anything told to them in the local language which they then wrote down, ranging from proverbs and long narratives to an informal chat. The writtenness was the defining feature. A present-day anthropological view of texts, by contrast, is that they are configurations of words or signs which are constructed in order to be detachable from the immediate context of utterance, and thus to be available for quotation or repetition. This can and is done by writing, of course; but it can also be done in oral discourse - for example by removing tense markers and deictic references, or by a wide range of other techniques of consolidation and condensation of utterance, which render a stretch of discourse capable of reinsertion into new contexts – a process that has been dubbed "entextualisation". Entextualization is the "process of rendering a given instance of discourse as text, detachable from its local context" (Silverstein and Urban, 1996:21). It implies local recognition that a form of words is valuable enough to want to repeat or recreate it. The most obvious example is a proverb, which derives its authority from the very fact that it is recognised as a text which other people have used before and which exists precisely in order to be used again - quoted, in application to new situations.

This doesn't mean texts are fixed. One of the key insights of oral performance theory has been that oral texts are always emergent, always subject to recreation in every performance. But though they're not fixed, they are held to have definite continuity with their previous instantiations. Thus, though they are not written and not fixed, oral texts in this sense of the word have aspirations in common with writing which discountenance the alleged "great divide" between oral and written cultures. In this discussion, then, I'm going to talk about one oral genre and one written one, treating them equally as "texts".

Text in this sense should clearly be central to any anthropology of culture. They are those constructions of words that embody or refer to things that people value and wish to maintain. And they are more than that. Many of the verbal genres which are entextualised and thus demarcated as worthy of repetition are also accorded intense impact as *actions* in their present moment of utterance. Praise poetry for example may enjoy "poetic licence" to criticise kings in a way that could not be done in other discourses (see Vail and White, 1991). Poetic form may give utterance much greater power of persuasion. Among the Dinka songs recorded and beautifully discussed by

Francis Mading Deng (1973) is a composition by which a young man appealed to his father so affectingly that the latter immediately granted his difficult request – something he would never have done if the young man had simply asked him in plain speech.

One of the things texts *do* is participate in the constitution of persons and the consolidation of roles. A Luba chief is not a chief until his status is ratified by the performance of Kasàlà poetry in his honour: "It's the kasala that confirms the chief. If you become a chief without someone chanting kasala for you, you are not a chief at all. Even if you are a hero, you are not a hero. You have to be sung for" explains Patrice Mufuta in a fascinating study of the genre (Mufuta 1969). In Yorubaland, the standing of a self-made "big man" is consolidated by the attentions of his following. Without their regard, he would not be a big man. And the follower's attention is summarised and crystallised in the dramatic dialogic outpourings of praise poets, in which the performer fixes her eyes unwaveringly on her subject and seems almost to will him into grandeur (Barber 1991). As a means for reflecting upon the nature of personhood, these genres encompass and reveal the constituents and processes that make up a person.

So locally-generated texts are crucial to understanding how persons and roles are not only constituted but also reflected upon. But I'm also going to argue that this is not usually because these texts function as personal voices expressing the emotions, opinions or experience of an individual. This is not usually what they are constituted for. What they seem to do is to escape the condition of being authored. They are set up as an unmoored discourse, and thus establish a textual space that can be inhabited by multiple speakers and listeners.

And this may at first look like a bit of a set-back for the cause of texts within British social anthropology. If anthropology's first desire was for indigenous texts that were as close as possible to ethnographic descriptions – slices of life, real conversations, explanations of customs and the realist novel rather than fragmented praise traditions and avant-garde poetry – its second desire was for texts that could be taken as voices testifying to personal experience, testifying to what it's like to *be* there – from within. And these desires are thwarted by the kind of text I'm talking about. Now, however, more critical approaches to the notion of personhood, questioning the assumption that persons everywhere are conceived of as bounded, unitary individuals, has opened the way for a new rapprochement with the fragmented, opaque, and evasive kinds of texts I'm going to present to you.

What I'm going to do is compare two Yoruba genres from western Nigeria, one oral and one written. The oral genre is the Yoruba tradition of praise poetry called *oriki*, which in the town where I did my research, Okuku, was performed mainly by women, though it was in no sense a "woman's genre". The written genre is early Yoruba print fiction, specifically a narrative serialised in a newspaper under the title *Igbesi Aiye Emi Segilola Eleyinju Ege, Elegberun Oko Laiye*: "The life story of me, Segilola, of the fascinating eyes, woman with a thousand lovers". It was written by a man – the proprietor

of the newspaper - but with the intention of convincing readers that it was actually penned by a woman, Segilola herself, who confesses her scandalous life as a prostitute.

I'm going to suggest that in both – but in opposite ways – the text creates a space where identities, including gender identities, are unmoored. In both – but in opposite ways – there is an immediate, effectual, high-impact affirmation of individual identity and idiosyncrasy, but yoked to this is a textual economy of the person which evades the consolidation of a personal self. I want to suggest that it is in the arena of texts like these that the potentials and the implications of what it is to be a person are given their fullest expression.

IV

Oríkì are essentially assemblages of elaborated epithets, heterogeneous as to content and variable as to length, some taking the form of long, patterned passages and others being single, condensed phrases. Every person, animal, town, god, and in fact every entity under the sun has a corpus of *oriki* – but people have most, men have more than women and senior men have more than junior ones. *Oriki* are assembled over time, composed one by one, by different people, as the subject's qualities and actions emerge. What they do is hail everything that is distinctive or remarkable about a person, from great deeds to tiny and possibly embarrassing incidents. They are autonomous in the sense that they were composed at different times, by different people, to commemorate different things; what holds them together is their attribution to the subject - who is almost visibly shored up, consolidated in his or her social being as the praise singer pulls out epithets or chunks of text from the corpus and hurls them onto his "head". The aim is profusion, for the more *oríkì* are heaped upon the addressee's head the more his or her aura will be enhanced: and this means that performers do not confine themselves to an authorised corpus for each subject, but raid other subjects' *oríkì*, and indeed other verbal genres, for material to add to the pile. All kinds of relationships provide the link. A shared name or title can function as a trigger for the incorporation of long quotations of someone else's *oriki.* And this means that the subject who is being consolidated and hailed for his or her distinctiveness is at the same time being audibly and visibly composed out of other people's attributions**.**

But though the performer locks eyes with the addressee and seems to be directing the utterance intensely and exclusively to him/her, the pronouns in an *oríkì* text are only intermittently the "I" and "you" of the actual people present. There is a continual fluctuation in the speaker and hearer position, to the point where it is impossible to say "who" is speaking or to "whom".

In some texts/performances, the succession of speaking positions can be radically disjunctive. What we seem to here is an unrolling succession of "I"s each coming from a quite different place. Here's an example (discussed at greater length in Barber 1993): an excerpt from the *oríkì* performed in honour of Babalolá, the head of the ancestral masquerade cult in Òkukù. It was a solemn occasion, the beginning of the *egúngún* festival when the title-holders – all men – went on a journey to the other world to fetch back the ancestors.

The wives and daughters of Babalola's compound kept vigil the whole night, chanting *oriki* in honour of Babalola.

The "I" of the chant speaks first from the position of the women actually holding the vigil. They seem to speaking in their own voices as they intone

> I cannot sleep
> I cannot sleep although my eyes are heavy
> Enigboori, our father, has gone off with the *egúngún*

But immediately afterwards the words seem to be those of a small boy of the lineage. Pursuing the theme of the ancestors, with whose propitiation the lineage is so much concerned, the text boasts in the boy's voice of a trick he plays on his mother: he pretends that his dead father's spirit is demanding propitiation, knowing that whatever food his mother offers at the shrine will also be eaten by the family:

> Rather than go hungry
> I'll tell a lie to my mother
> I'll say my father wants two kola nuts
> She won't give him kola nuts alone
> Ayeronfe, she'll bring a nice mound of pounded yam and tell me to give it to father
> Father won't eat it alone
> No, father won't eat it on his own

A moment later, the voice modulates to that of a wife of the lineage, boasting of her menfolk's wealth and generosity:

> If my husband knows how to care for me
> I'll go and buy fourteen hundred cloths
> Not knowing how to care for me
> I'll go and buy twelve hundred
> The moment he takes care of me
> I'll go and buy three thousand cloths
> Enigboori,. that's how the children of Yau buy their cloth

There follows a distinctively male voice, a man of the lineage who declares jocularly that if any child of his fails to follow the lineage occupation of masquerading, he will disown its mother:

> If I have a child who doesn't become a singing masquerader
> I'll sell his mother and spend the money on palm wine!

And so it goes on, moving sinuously and without pause from one "voice" to another. The "I" of the *oríkì* chant moves continually between male and female, adult and child, insider and outsider, specific and generalised persona. At times it occupies the position of the performers themselves, at other times shifting completely across to the addressee, the absent Babalola, and speaking in a voice that could be his. The text is all quotations, but the

thing to notice is that there is no textual frame or background into which these "quotations" are inserted. Rather, the whole performance slides endlessly around the shifting pronouns, and no voice can be identified as a stable centre. The contrasting speaking positions are not linked (except by the shared theme of the lineage's distinctiveness) or hierarchised in any way – they simply succeed each other in a rolling procession of shifts and contrasts. The chant is held together thematically, because from their different vantage points each "voice" contributes to the glorification of the lineage's occupation as masqueraders. And it is held together by the suspension of contrasting elements in juxtaposition with each other. As it proceeds, each element asserts itself and then drops out of sight as it is succeeded by another. Though performers are adept at making their materials do different things, according to the nature of the occasion, they do not seek to make these materials "their own" or to speak predominantly or exclusively from their own subject position. Rather, they are activating an inhabitable text - "inhabitable" in the sense that in the performance, both speaker and listener can occupy successively the speaking-positions of numerous categories of lineage members.

This makes it possible for the performers, who are women, to utter words exposing knowledge which is only supposed to be known by men.

> Women are impatient, that is why they cannot know the secret cult
> Women do not know the sacred grove
> If women were allowed to know the secret cult
> I would wear one masquerade costume after another
> Ayeronfe, I would wear one cloth after another
> And inside the costume I would wear beads.

Women's exclusion from the secrets of the *egúngún* cult is what gives this cult its authority and mystery, for "the secret" is at the centre of the spiritual power in Yoruba religious thought, and human collusion in maintaining the secret is indispensable. The women uphold the reputation of the *egúngún* cult, which is the speciality of their husbands' lineage, by expressing in accents of loss and desire their sense of exclusion. Women assert that they cannot know the secret, but in the same breath they reveal that they do in fact know it: "I would wear one masquerader's costume on top of another". *Egúngún* costumes have human beings inside, and this is the secret that women collude in pretending not to know. Because of the continually shifting voices in *oriki* chants, the performers can go on to give, in the voice of a young boy of the lineage, graphic details of the experience of wearing an *egúngún* costume:

> Vociferous talking is my father's work
> My mother was slow to realise
> She went and bought corn starch loaves to keep for me
> She thought I'd gone to the farm
> She didn't know that I was under the fig-tree like a weaver bird
> Where I was chattering interminably
> Don't let a dirty entertainer wear my *egúngún* costume
> If a dirty entertainer wears my outfit he'll spoil my cloth

> That one has a misshapen head under the cloth
> If a little Ogbori puts on the costume he'll know how to swagger
> If an old Ogbori puts on the costume he'll know how to walk
> If a little Iloko puts on the costume he will delight you
> Enigboori, his teeth will be shining white under the cloth…

The boy's voice makes a sharp distinction between the *egúngún* costume and the person under it which exposes the "secret" in unmistakable terms. No woman could say such things and get away with it. The performer Sangowemi, who came upon an unmasked *egúngún* taking a rest and a draught of palm wine during the festival, saluted the man by name and was promptly expelled from the town - her livestock and household pots having been hacked to pieces by an angry party of *egúngún* who came out for the purpose - and it was three years before she was let back in.

This shows clearly that the text performed by the women during the vigil is not understood, in Okuku, as women's "voices", as a form of expression revealing an individual or a group's consciousness or concerns. But nor is it someone else's voice merely being transmitted by the women. They speak in their own voices in the opening lines, and then in a succession of other people's voices. There is no overall or dominant speaker. What has been constructed, through the dazzling art of assemblage of fragments, is a text that transcends gender – as it transcends generation, status, and time. This doesn't mean that it is democratic. Nor does it mean that "traditional" Yoruba culture was free of gender distinctions. Being expelled from the town for violating a traditional taboo excluding women is surely evidence of that. The chant is being staged in order to magnify the reputation of a male cult in a patriarchally-ordered society. Nonetheless, it constitutes a verbal domain which is not anchored in individual, gendered identity.

V

Oriki, then, is a form of discourse that can't be pinned down as the utterance of a gendered speaker. It is constructed as a field of voices speaking from different positions, none of which is dominant. This genre depends for its effects on being produced in a localised and deeply informed community – a community where people have the habit of observing each other, commenting in laudatory or bitingly sarcastic mode on each others characteristics and actions, however trivial, and making their allusions in a riddling mode which can only be decoded by someone who knows the story. The indeterminacy of the floating voices, that is, is made possible by the embedded and localised character of communication.

By contrast**,** new media**,** in conjunction with the emergence of new salaried classes in the city in the early colonial period made possible communication with dispersed audiences whose identity was unknown and whose knowledge base could not be taken for granted. The first and arguably the most enduringly significant of these media was print publication, which in Western Nigeria was already flourishing in the hands of the Lagos elite, independently of the mission stations, as early as the 1860s. If print, by virtue of its fixity and reproducibility, made possible and even fostered the imagining of an

anonymous, indefinitely large dispersed public, it also confronted writers and readers with peculiar problems of self-positioning and self-authentication. The very impersonality of typeface, and of the repeated framework of pages and columns into which all items, week after week, were slotted, opened up questions about who was speaking, who was responding, and with what authority. In *Itan Emi Segilola* it provoked brazen attempts to hammer out an unchallengeably solid speaking position which were at the same time continually undermined and destabilised.

Itan Emi Segilola was originally published in instalments in a Yoruba-language newspaper, *Akede Eko*, owned and edited by I.B.Thomas in 1929-30. It has often been described as the first Yoruba novel. It was so popular that it was immediately republished as a booklet, and an English translation was subsequently serialised in the paper in 1930-1. *Itan Emi Segilola* purported to be a series of letters to the editor from Segilola as she neared the end of her thrilling but shameful life.

The newspaper, *Akede Eko*, was one of a flurry of new Yoruba-language weekly newspapers which appeared in 1920s Lagos, precipitated, some scholars think, by the long drawn out crisis over the deposed oba of Lagos, Esugbayi, during which the established Lagos elite needed to mobilise popular opinion on their side against the colonial government. So *Itan Emi Segilola* appeared just at the moment when a small elite was attempting to widen its public address to include a broader section of the Lagos people, attempting to transcend the cosy familiarity of a social world where everyone knew everyone else.

It was a highly moralising and editorialising press. It was also highly epistolary. *Akede Eko* itself was sometimes made up almost entirely of “letters” – open letters by the editor to prominent political figures in Lagos, columns by regular contributors in the form of letters addressed to the editor, and long, discursive letters from readers. Many of these were signed by nicknames, initials, and pseudonyms, so that the presumed anonymity of the addressed readership was mirrored by the affected anonymity of the authors and contributors. This practice may have been adopted in order to heighten the sense of the newspaper as a disinterested public space.

Segilola’s letters to the editor were thus the natural, and perhaps at that point the only, form for the heroine’s fictional confessions to take. But the most striking thing about this text is the strenuous effort by the author, the paper’s editor-proprietor I.B.Thomas, to maintain the illusion that the letters were real. He ties “Segilola’s” life history into real time and known places. She announces, in her first letter, that she was born on September 9, 1882, and in her letter published in September 1929 that she is now beginning her 48th year. She constantly refers to the moment of writing (“Tears cloud my eyes and I can write no longer“) and to the temporality of the letter-sequence (“As I said in my letter of last week”). She makes updating amendments to names and places in her narrative, linking the past to the present moment (“the CMS Girls Seminary (now known as CMS Girls School Lagos)”. And perhaps rather alarmingly for some of her readers, she constantly hints that some of the

people with whom she had affairs in her youth are still alive and are now prominent people in Lagos life: “But I am sorry, the Editor of *Akede Eko* had warned me that it was not right to mention names of people in such connection in a public journal” (letter 28, English version).

But though her reality is vehemently consolidated in these ways, the secret of her identity is tantalisingly withheld. Both the letters and I.B.Thomas’s own comments as the sequence unfolds stress repeatedly that “Segilola” is not her real name. She begs the editor again and again not to expose her secret, promising, however, that after her death, both her name and her photograph will be made available for publication. This trick worked: readers apparently became obsessed with discovering Segilola’s “real” identity. Thomas published letters and poems from readers begging to know her name and professing a burning desire to meet her. Such letters - whether real or composed by the editor himself - are artfully placed to corroborate not only the reality of Segilola’s existence but also the truthfulness of her autobiographical tale. “Jumoke”, whose letter to the editor was published under the heading “Ebun sile-mewa fun Segilola Eleyinju Ege” (A present of ten shillings for Segilola of the fascinating eyes), states that Jumoke and her husband have been enjoying *Akede Eko* more than ever since Segilola began her story. “Jumoke” states that she herself was a prostitute in her youth, but quickly reformed; she is therefore in a position to confirm that Segilola’s story is *“otito gan”* (real truth). She encloses a ten-shilling note for Segilola and gives the editor permission to publish this letter if he wishes, but not to reveal her own real name – for “Jumoke” too is a pseudonym.

The unsettling combination of an insistence on the absolute factual veracity of the narrative – and of all its circum-texts and para-texts - and the smoke-and-mirrors game of hinting at, withholding and faking identity, is the key to understanding how voice and person are publicly constituted in this newspaper discourse.

Segilola is both stridently present, thrusting herself upon the reader, and curiously absent, a mere effect of discourse. When she comments on her own motivations or actions, it is always from the outside, with the effect of a statement in the third person. Though Segilola’s confessional reveals many things a decent Lagosian would normally keep secret, her voice is always exterior and public. She writes in full consciousness of the reading audience, often looking over the shoulder of the Editor - to whom the letters are ostensibly addressed - to speak directly to the readership: “Will it not be wise for you, my readers, to regard me as the mirror in which to look for your future, and learn salutary lesson”. Segilola presents herself as an example to her readers; and her readers are invited to see their own tendencies or possible future fates in her - not in the concrete specificity which she is at such pains to consolidate, but generically.

Thus, while the art of *oriki*, produced by communities where everyone knows everyone else’s business, is to effect a dispersal of the speaking subject into multiple grammatical persons and enunciative positions, the newer art of the earliest published popular fiction in Yoruba, produced in the nascent,

potentially anonymous public sphere made possible by print, is to attempt to nail down a persona, concretise it and endow it with reality. The whole point of Segilola is that you *believe* in her existence as a coherent, continuous person so that you can take warning from her life story. But it's an attempt that undermines itself. Here we have, as one of our first extended works of Yoruba written literature, a fiction that pretends to be fact; a male author penning a fervent confession by a woman; readers' responses that may or may not be real, by readers who may or may not have been really taken in. For all its emphasis on Segilola as a stable, incontrovertible and veracious speaking subject, her identity turns out to be a puzzle, a tease which appeared to interest readers as much as the events unfolding in the narrative themselves. The text purports to present a woman's voice as had never been done before, but undermines it in the very act of presentation.

It is surely no accident that at this point in the expansion of the Lagos public, the most phenomenally successful serial should have been on the theme of an errant and exploitative fallen woman. If there was one theme which could galvanise all readers of whatever gender and social status, this was it. As a lesson, men learnt "beware of unscrupulous gold-diggers"; women learnt "don't go too far in the exploitation of men". It is a theme which was, and has remained, ubiquitous in colonial and post-colonial popular culture all over sub-Saharan Africa (and, of course, beyond), reappearing in very similar imagery in numerous genres up to the present day. Phyllis Kaberry's *Women of the Grassfields* itself bears witness to the universality of gripes against modern women in Africa: "the Ngie or Esimbi man", she says, as he sits over his cup of palm wine, is given to "bemoaning the tribulations of the present – in particular, the payment of tax, the disrespect shown by the younger generation, and the increasing stubbornness of womenfolk" (Kaberry 1952:26).

VI

If the *oriki* appear to be constituting a confident polyvocal discourse that floats above individual identity, the hollowed-out illusory presence of Segilola appears to be the product of male and female anxiety in the face of changing gender roles. But in both these cases, what we see is locally-constituted texts that evade interpretation as a straightforward, unitary expression of a personal voice. In opposite ways, each transcends a simple identification of text with a gendered subject.

What I hope I have suggested is that both these forms of textuality are an achievement, a highly sophisticated and artful construction. They offer unparallelled insight into the cultural work by which persons are constituted, because they bring the means by which that work is accomplished to the surface, and implicitly reflect upon them.

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