

**Orality in Writing:  
intercultural challenges in research  
with oralized cultures of West Africa**

**Oralità nella scrittura:  
sfide interculturali nella ricerca  
con le culture oralizzate dell’Africa occidentale**

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**Abstract**

This article combines two studies that dialogue with the *djeliw* (Masters of the Word), transmitters of ancestral knowledge in the *Manden* people. Based on sensitive listening and African protagonism, the researches penetrated the ancestral memory of these societies, which define themselves based on their own rules and values. Oral documents, meetings with the *djeli* Kouyaté and the works of the philosopher Hampâté Bâ bring the two researches together. The studies revealed the performative character of the oral tradition, where knowledge is an act updated, recreated, revived at the moment it is practiced. This required the translation of this living perspective of knowledge and the nature of the oral word, maintaining qualities and values typical of the *djeliw* tradition not to make abstract knowledge that is the very life of a community. Considering that the methodological foundation is the dialogue between people, we seek the non-hierarchy of knowledge, to establish the same horizon of conversation in the intersection of voices. The aim is to build possible translations between orality and writing, to enrich debates in the field of intercultural education.

**Keywords:** oral tradition, oralized cultures, *maninka* culture, *djeli*.

**Sommario**

Questo articolo unisce due studi che dialogano con i *djeliw* (Maestri della Parola), trasmettitori della conoscenza ancestrale nel popolo *Manden*. Basandosi sull’ascolto sensibile e sul protagonismo africano, le ricerche sono penetrate nella memoria ancestrale di queste società, che si definiscono in base alle proprie regole e ai propri valori. Documenti orali, incontri con il *djeli* Kouyaté e le opere del filosofo Hampâté Bâ uniscono le due ricerche. Gli studi hanno rivelato il carattere performativo della tradizione orale, dove la conoscenza è un atto attualizzato, ricreato, rivissuto nel momento in cui viene praticato. Ciò ha richiesto la traduzione di questa prospettiva viva della conoscenza e della natura della parola orale, mantenendo qualità e valori tipici della tradizione dei *djeliw* per non rendere astratta la conoscenza che è la vita stessa di una comunità. Considerando che il fondamento metodologico è il dialogo tra le persone, cerchiamo la non gerarchia della conoscenza, per stabilire lo stesso orizzonte di conversazione nell’intersezione delle voci. L’obiettivo è costruire possibili traduzioni tra oralità e scrittura, per arricchire i dialoghi nel campo dell’educazione interculturale.

**Parole chiave:** tradizione orale, culture oralizzate, cultura *maninka*, *djeli*.

## Introduction

This article dialogued with two distinct researches that were structured based on the analysis of the African oral literary tradition present in the performance of the masters of the *Maninka*<sup>1</sup> word – the *djeliw*<sup>2</sup> – great social mediators highly respected throughout the *Manden*<sup>3</sup> people. The first research is the master's thesis *The Invisibilised Kingdoms: An Encounter with the Mandinga Word* defended in 2018 in the Postgraduate Program in Education at the Fluminense Federal University – PPGE-UFF. The research dialogued with the forces of *djeli* culture enunciated by Toumani Kouyaté. The second research is the unfolding of the conversation circles that make up the master's thesis: *Circles and bonfires at the foot of large rocks – where the listening precedes the speaking: an exercise in listening to multiple West African oral traditions*, defended at PPGE -UFF in 2021. Rounds of conversations that brought together diverse voices and that little by little led us to understand how orality and the role of masters of oral traditions make present in the constitution of human beings and African oral societies. In this article, we united impressions and dare new flights to ancestral lands.

### 1. Understand the environment

When I was appointed a member of Unesco's Executive Board, I set myself the task of talking to Europeans about the African tradition as a culture. This was somewhat difficult, since, in the Western tradition, it has been firmly established that where there is no writing, there is no culture. The proof of the difficulty is that the first time I proposed considering oral traditions as historical sources and sources of culture, I only got smiles. Some even asked, ironically, what Europe could gain from African traditions! I remember replying: «Joy, which you have lost». Perhaps we could add today: «A certain human dimension, which modern technological civilization is about to make disappear» (Hampâté Bâ, 1997, p. 24, own translation).

This was one of the many warnings given by Amadou Hampâté Bâ<sup>4</sup> more than six decades ago. As a member of the Unesco Executive Board (1962-1970), he fought hard for African oral traditions to be recognized as historical and cultural sources. However, international recognition of African cultures and oral traditions is still far from flourishing. For fifteen years, Hampâté Bâ (2010) traveled the ancient region of *Bafur*<sup>5</sup>, carrying out ethnographic surveys and collecting oral traditions. He recorded testimonies from around a thousand qualified representatives of different ethnic groups, living testimonies of the history of these peoples. He believed that the relevance of the treasures of knowledge transmitted by oral tradition exceeds their cultural value, as they agglutinate historical, religious, philosophical, scientific and literary knowledge, whose richness and complexity belong to the cultural heritage of all humanity.

It highlighted the need to safeguard the knowledge of masters of oral traditions, whether through sound or written records. Hampâté expressed his concern that «the last elders, heirs of the various branches of the Tradition», would not survive the coming decades (Hampâté Bâ, 2010, p. 176). He denounced the harmful consequences of interrupting the chain of transmission of oral tradition. Isolated or persecuted by the colonial power – which aimed to eliminate local traditions in a process of intense acculturation – traditionalist masters and initiatory traditions took refuge in the forests, an environment most conducive to the survival of traditions. Thus, Hampâté strove to gather the testimonies and teachings of traditionalists, to prevent the cultural and spiritual heritage of his people from falling into oblivion and a rootless young generation from

being left to their own devices. The writing of traditional oral texts carried out by the first Africans educated by European institutions initially arose from the need to speak to Europeans about African cultures, distorted by Western researchers and writers. This proposal culminated in the creation of the General African History Collection, whose objective was to tell the history of Africa from the perspective of Africans themselves. Hampâté was one of these researchers.

### *Ruptures and Social Changes*

Aligned with colonial imperialism and European ethnocentrism, official history sought to devalue the image of African societies, disregarding their traditions, administrative organizations, histories, spiritual systems, cultures, sciences and technologies. They thus construct a distorted vision of a single Africa, a heaped of disorganized tribes with primitive human beings, without culture, without history, devoid of the ability to develop social organization and efficient production techniques. An Africa of extreme environmental conditions, hunger, epidemics and lack of natural resources. The constructed vision of an incapable Africa – *discovered and saved* by the Europeans – contributes to the consolidation of liberalism (Salum, 2005). The partition<sup>6</sup> of Africa between imperialist European nations, based exclusively on the interests of European countries, ended up being disastrous for the African people. Carried out without considering the history and social, economic, cultural and spiritual specificities of each of its countless ethnicities – the partition ended up bringing together rival ethnicities and tribes under the same political-administrative power, just as the same ethnic group ended up seeing itself subject to different political-administrative powers. This only intensified conflicts between the various traditional African ethnic groups, causing revolts, conflicts, civil wars and genocides to erupt throughout Africa, which plague the continent to this day (Salum, 2005). Hampâté Bâ detailed the ruptures and traumas caused, initially by Eastern civilization – which brought strongly hierarchical societies, Judaism and Islam – and later by Western civilization and Christianity (Catholic and Protestant). Hampâté points to material wealth and slave labor as the factors that attracted the greed of European nations to the *Bafur* region. From that moment on, Africa became the stage for a dispute between these two diametrically opposed foreign forces (Hampâté Bâ, 2004).

One of the first measures of the colonial administration was to force the children of chiefs and notables to attend *white schools*, in order to distance them from tradition (Hampâté Bâ, 2004). The institution followed the guidelines of European education, with the aim of completely removing African traditions in order to impose its own conceptions. To achieve this, students had to adopt the French language and were punished if they expressed themselves in their mother tongue. Probably, if these children had remained in their communities, they would have been educated to become great traditionalists in order to assume important roles within traditional societies. In the *white schools*, they were trained to assume inferior roles in the colonial administration. Thus, they were unable to be initiated and ended up distancing themselves from their ancestral traditions and African philosophy itself, which, according to Hampâté (2004), created an abysmal distance between the African intellectual elite (young people who studied in Western universities) and the African people. Hampâté stated that European colonizers, with the aim of dominating the thought and culture of African peoples, generated a great disturbance in the social and cultural fields, which caused the progressive breakup of the transmission of traditional knowledge. The relevance of traditionalist masters and artisanal workshops was such that the colonial administration committed itself to curbing such activities. He cited the example of blacksmiths who «were prohibited from

manufacturing certain objects, especially rifles or machetes, in order to encourage us to buy manufactured articles from the metropolis» (Hampâté Bâ, 2004, p. 5).

According to Hampâté, the phenomenon of acculturation intensified after the last major global military conflict (1939-1945), when many young people, formed based on the assumptions of *modern education* and influenced by the emergence of new needs, began to seek out large urban centers and the great Western schools and universities, now abandoning traditional schools of their own accord. Thus, traditionalist masters found fewer and fewer receptive students to whom they could transmit their teachings. Over millennia, in traditional African societies, the transmission of knowledge occurred through a long chain of oral tradition, but always «by the sweet-smelling mouth to the well-cleaned ear (that is, the keenly receptive ear)» (Hampâté Bâ, 2010, p. 211).

For centuries, African societies have been exploited in their economies and territories and physically and emotionally violated. In addition to being attacked in their beliefs, principles and values through the actions of religious missions that – in agreement with the *civilizing projects* of imperialist nations – promoted conversions, often compulsory, of an entire community. The enslavement of Africans enriched governments and elites, not only in slaveholding countries (Arab and European) and in the American Colonies – but it has also become one of the main export products, enriching governments and elites in various African countries.

### *African Diaspora in Brazil*

Despite the scale of the horrors of the trafficking, the enslavement and the colonization of African people,

few people have any idea what colonization really meant for Africans. Many continue to minimize or ignore the fact that the colonization of Africa was a real act of genocide against the black race. A genocide as extensive as the genocide that was the slave trade, on the one hand, and the enslavement of Africans in the Americas, on the other (Moore, 2010, p. 32).

And Moore adds:

There are still those who – denying the evidence that points to the slave trade and the colonization of Africa as being gross crimes against humanity – deny the fundamentally racist nature of these attacks by Europe against the black people of that continent. The human hemorrhage that Africa experienced with the different slave trades, on the one hand, and with European colonization, on the other, has never had parallels in the history of humanity. Simply put, it was a racial genocide (Moore, 2010, p. 35).

Erasure effort that was widely perpetuated on Brazilian soil. Brazil was the last country to abolish black slavery and did so formally and legally. However, this change was not accompanied by material and substantial freedom. Prejudices and discriminatory practices prevented black people from integrating into the nascent class society, whose best opportunities were occupied by immigrant workers (Western and Asian). Thus, currently, black people mostly occupy the same subordinate positions as black people who were enslaved in the past. In the search for solutions, Brazilian society is trying to reevaluate the legacy left by black slavery since we still live with logics similar to slavery that continue to deny black people the right to dignified living conditions (Jaime and

Lima, 2013). Black movements fight incessantly to transform this reality. Part of society is incapable of listening to the demands of this population that has been massacred for centuries. Will we be able to hear and adopt measures and affirmative action policies capable of effective sociocultural changes? The very need for the existence of Law n. 10.639/2003 (Brazilian federal law that made the teaching of Afro-Brazilian History and Culture mandatory in public and private primary education schools) is already evidence of an effort to distort and erase the memory and cultural heritage of black people of official history.

To confront the genocide of black people in Brazil, a percentage of the black population managed to take refuge in territories recognized as *quilombos*<sup>7</sup>. In struggles for recognition and guarantees of rights, the term *quilombo* has been associated with a form of human grouping that maintains non-Westernized traditional principles. Such human territories remain alive, recreating a life of freedom, solidarity and generosity. In a material organized by José Maurício Arruti and Amanda Jorge (2022), entitled *Panorama Quilombola*, it is possible to verify the existence in Brazil of 6,023 *quilombola* localities, distributed across 1,674 municipalities – which represents 30% of the country's municipalities – located in almost all units of the federation.

## 2. Orality as traditional language

### *Traditional African societies*

The African continent is home to an immense variety of ethnic groups whose histories, customs, languages, spiritual systems, technologies and administrative structures are as old as they are varied. Hampâté Bâ (2010, p. 190) has stated that black African peoples built a complex social organization over the centuries, well before European colonization. Traditional Africa is based on the extended family, with ties that include households and cover the entire clan. Individual life did not exist, just family life and, by extension, community life, which constituted the fabric of society and guaranteed the survival of the group. There is a deep perception that society precedes the individual (Hampâté Bâ, 2004, p. 8-9). Thus, all adults look after children, not just parents, grandparents and direct uncles. They were unaware of loneliness or abandonment and, above all, they were unaware of individualism:

Loneliness was unknown: the widowed or divorced woman, the old man, the physically disabled were not abandoned to their own devices. The little that each family had was shared with all its relatives, as well as with passing guests; as a result, if there was poverty, it was collective, never individual (Hampâté Bâ, 2004, p. 8, own translation).

The traditional African establishes a living relationship of participation with the world, not of pure use, as man only had the right to enjoy the land and its riches. African traditions did not know the concept of private property, the community enjoyed natural resources and passed on the laws that governed this relationship to their descendants. The land was sacred, belonged to God and the ancestors, and could not belong to any man. The view of time in black-African societies follows a circularity, where time encompasses all of eternity in the present time. The past is linked to the present through the cult of ancestors, as they act in events that occur centuries after their departure from earthly life. The past acts on the present and the present on the future, not only through interpreting facts and the consequences of past events but also through direct action that can present

itself in different ways. African perception perceives the present as the basis for the future, but current events belong to the present integrated with the past; the present time is made up of current and past events. The African people focus more on what happens integrated with what has already happened than on what might happen (Hama and Zerbo, 2010). Thus, the traditional African conception of time does not involve the linear one beginning, middle and end (past, present, future), life does not begin with birth and ends with death. The conception of an unknown past and an indefinite future is foreign to African thought.

### *African oral tradition or The Great School of Life*

Hampâté Bâ (1997, p. 24) stated that for traditionalist masters, «oral tradition was total knowledge, the great school of life». In the present research, we adopted the terms oral tradition and orality to refer to the word as a cultural matrix in the context of West African societies and black communities of African origin in the Brazilian diaspora. In oral societies, there is an intense connection between man and the spoken word, traditionalists say that the tongue that falsifies the word, vitiates the blood of him who lies or «he who corrupts his word, corrupts himself» (Hampâté Bâ, 2010, p. 173-174), where blood symbolizes the inner vital force and lies unbalance the harmony of these forces. In this context, the lie kills the person who lies in his multiple personas, the civil, spiritual and hidden person. He can continue living, but he isolates himself from himself and the community, a life that, according to tradition, is worse than death, for himself and his loved ones. In these societies, the value of words is not restricted to communication, becoming a powerful mechanism for preserving ancestral wisdom.

For the *Manden* people, all knowledge is grouped in the grand history of life «includes the history of lands, lakes and rivers (geography), the history of plants (botany and pharmaceutics), the history of the sons of the womb of the earth (mineralogy, metals), the history of the stars (astronomy, astrology), the history of water, and so on» (Hampâté Bâ, 2010, p. 179). Among all Stories, the most important is the History of man, which constitutes a symbiosis of all Stories, since man was generated from a portion of each previously created being. These concepts reflect an understanding of life as a unit, where every manifestation of creation is interconnected, in constant interaction and interdependence. According to Hampâté, the teachings were transmitted unsystematically, as they were connected with the practical circumstances of everyday life, which gave traditional African education a practical and lively aspect. In these societies, the first formative space, the first cell of traditionalists, is the family, with parents and elders being the first masters and educators. The second moment of traditional education is the community itself, which, with its codes and norms, assumes the role of educating. It is understood here that the children belong to the community as a whole, they are not just parents's responsibility. The elders take advantage of everyday situations for their lessons (Hampâté Bâ, 2010). The author added that the third moment of traditional education occurs in traditional training spaces, in schools of initiation. In these societies, traditional human activities mostly had a sacred or occult character, configuring themselves in true initiatory or mystical schools, valued for constituting a possibility of access to the One Being. In the traditional crafts school, not just technology was taught but also a set of scientific, cultural and esoteric knowledge. Because it involves transforming living matter, it was linked with esoteric knowledge transmitted through initiatory processes and the different elements of traditional education (*ibidem*).

According to the author, rites of passage, youth associations<sup>8</sup>, traditional crafts initiations and *Manden* initiation schools constitute different aspects of traditional African education. In the *Manden* tradition, at the age of twenty-one, the young person was

initiated into a certain tradition, but the learning process would continue for another twenty-one years. African education extended into life (Hampâté Bâ, 2003). Hampâté Bâ (1997) stated that Western cultures overvalue writing and criticize the role of orality in African societies without bothering to verify the foundations of orality in the context of traditional African societies. In the traditional education of African people, apprentices and masters did not feel the need to write stories, tales and songs, as they considered speech and *collective memory* to be much more efficient resources. Toumani Kouyaté is an important *Malinka djeli* (Burkina Faso and Mali), who has internationally disseminated the meaning of oral tradition in his culture. According to him, talking about oral tradition is talking about the life of an entire community. For the *djeliw* (the artisans of the word), orality is not a word, it is a life. Like Hampâté Bâ, Toumani sees oral tradition as the great school of life and makes us understand that such a school is the transmission that occurs through uncles and aunts, but that the true transmission comes from grandmother and grandfather, since the connection with grandparents it is stronger than with parents.

He provokes us to think... What is oral transmission? How does it happen? Why does it happen? When does it happen? Who is responsible for the transmission? With these questions, Toumani tries to make us understand the characteristics of an oral society. He emphasized that, above all, transmission is a matter of love. First, you love what you are going to transmit. It's also a question of trust. Whoever transmits is always attentive to see if the other person is available; you need to know if the person receiving the transmission will learn how to use it for themselves. Oral transmission is a question of responsibility, a question of accompaniment, a question of chain of transmission, and, therefore, the image of the spinning belt is brought to think about transmission. Toumani does not fail to emphasize something prior to this transmission from uncles and aunts, grandmothers and grandfathers: women are the mother of orality. Considering orality as life itself, the mother will then fulfill a duty with her words. In the first seven years, the mother's word is the most important for the child; the mother will provide the roots. After the age of 7, the child will practice orality outside the family; once the child is on the street, this is the place where they meet, share and speak different languages.

Kouyaté uses an image to illustrate these formative moments in orality: «When a tree has its roots firmly planted in the ground, its leaves have the possibility of making great exchanges» (2012, s/p). As an artisan of words, the *djeli* shows us the privileged form of this word transmitted by the mother and recognizes the story as the representation of the mother in his culture. The story is the first educational tool for the *Manden* people. For Kouyaté, the story is the first person that opens another's eyes to see the world. He says: «Mothers breastfeeding, the eye gazes into the eye of the child, this is the story» (2013, s/p).

### *The Maninka People*

The ancestry of the *djeliw* Kouyaté is intertwined with the roots of the *Maninka* people, an ethnic group belonging to the *Manden* family. Their ancestors witnessed the events that led to the formation of the great empire of Mali or *Manden Kurufa*. The *Maninka* established strong connections with the Islamic world, which favored their conquest of other African territories. Sometimes peacefully, sometimes through war; the fact is that between 1235 and 1670, the *Manden Kurufa* empire spread across a large part of West Africa and its influence was felt in the European and Asian world. To understand how orality shapes human beings and traditional African societies based on our experiences with the *djeliw* Kouyaté, we studied the traditions of the *Manden* people, especially the

*Maninka* culture. We seek to understand their ancestral principles and values, that is, the ways of being, acting and thinking typical of these oral societies.

As others *Manden* people, the *Maninka* are known for a deep knowledge of their history, genealogy and esoteric knowledge. According to the Guinean historian Djibril Tamsir Niane (2010), the *Maninka* have the *djeliw* or *masters of the word* as the basis of their entire social structure. They are organized around the traditional crafts (blacksmiths, weavers, wood and leather workers, *djeliw* and public entertainers, among others) and their respective crafts associations and secret brotherhoods.

### 3. Spoken words on paper. Academic research in oralized cultures

One of the myths of the *white school* that still operates in our academic life today is the universalization of writing and its technologies. The mastery of writing inserts a certain type of human into civilization and excludes others from this discursive place of legitimacy in culture. Historically, they justified such exclusion and violence with evolutionary theories and conceptions, subordinating and silencing peoples and cultures. Focus on oral cultures means undertaking work to question *socio-historical truths*.

Academic writing was forged throughout modernity by a rationality created as universal and delegitimized other forms that did not correspond to the standards of the formal logic of literate cultural references. In this way, to the listening of the West African cultures and the *djeli*'s words, it was necessary to understand that we are Brazilian researchers. Even though formed in a country where more than half of the population descends from oral cultures, we are steeped in the forms and Western writing technologies, which create in our writing forms of speech with monological, abstract, objectifying and mortifying patterns of the other's languages. So, initially, it was necessary to deal with the words coming from West Africa using other logics. The initial challenge was to move and open ourselves to recognizing the multiplicities of human beings in the world. Being literate is no longer a parameter to measure or distinguish a human being. Professor Augusto Ponzio (city in Mello, 2021), with his philosophical understanding of language, has helped us to understand that even before human beings produced written texts, we already had the ability to invent and create the world. In this article, thus, when we use the term *writing*, we want to mark a rationality that does not merely consider the importance of *writing* in formative processes but affirms a more comprehensive form of education that recognizes oral texts as important forms within our human cultural repertoire.

Studying the oral forms of West African cultures does not mean placing oneself in front of a cultural ghetto; above all, it is part of a political struggle that works to maintain the diversity of the enunciation forms of the human being. It's no longer up to us to accept the desire to submit to the single Western European form (Mello, 2021). The people of West Africa in our research are concrete, expressive and speaking subjects. Their words, logic and traditional cultures are unique ways of seeing and creating the world. Their signs are enunciating paradigms that should be urgently recognized, highlighted and discussed, as they hold an image of an inclusive, loving, supportive, generous human being. Given the global context of environmental, economic and social decadence that we are experiencing, perhaps traditional cultures still hold – and have the capacity to renew – the treasures and technologies that will allow us to overcome the civilizational wreck in which we find ourselves.



#### 4. Two methodological possibilities

##### *The Invisibilised Kingdoms: An Encounter with the Mandinga Word (2018)*

The word of the *Manden* people is a radical alterity for us, listening to it from this principle was an exercise to the construction of a *heteroscience* that wants to create dialogical knowledge. Bearing in mind that what is at stake in the way of doing one science another is the meeting between two centers of values, we needed to create a combination of voices to honor the principle that we are dealing with *expressive and speaking subjects* (Bakhtin, 2011). Therefore, a discursive construction was necessary in which Toumani's enunciations were given an aesthetic treatment to keep his voice and his project of saying preserved and alive. Toumani uttered in specific genres, through which he expressed his unique vision of the world. Entering into dialogue with him, we were immediately thrown into these genres, mainly into the short story, a genre that Toumani recognizes as an important *instrument of education, training and transmission*. In an attempt to understand our duty in relation to Toumani's words, we realized that we need to be a link in the transmission chain that legitimizes and values *cosmoperceptions*<sup>9</sup> that continue to be silenced by Western hegemony. This Bakhtinian principle of responsibility for transmission meets the *cosmoperception* of the *Manden* people.

The tradition of the word craftsmen, whose principle is to speak through images, provoked us to look for types of enunciation where we could respond to these words with an intonation that responded to these images. In response to Toumani, we created short stories following the parameters of what defines a story for the *djeliw*. Based on his statement that the story is the privileged form of transmission, we chose to bring to shape this ethical and aesthetic choice of speaking through images. Furthermore, short stories have allowed us to escape the objectifying structures we usually slip into, saying objectified facts and words. The image of a researcher we had was the image of a wanderer, of someone who wants to live in the world and read different types of texts, such as oral texts. What was at stake was and is life itself. The image of the hero constructed was that of the human on the threshold. The *djeli* is this human on the border between two worlds (the visible and the invisible; one era and another era). He is always in the present, uniting past and future in the now, in the instant. He is a person who is attentive to changes in the world and changes with it. Therefore, this was an image that guided the construction of the tales.

The tales were strongly permeated into each other as if the entrance door to one kingdom could have an exit door to the other. All the tales were created based on the principles we could absorb from the *djeliw*'s words. One of the stories was woven with the enunciative material of Amadou Hampâtê Bâ (2010), where he describes the *Komo* ritual, some foundations of the African oral tradition, which Toumani and Hampâtê Bâ have in common. We found it important that the primordial myth of the society of the *Manden* people was presented in a story, thus allowing us to refer to the origin of the word *djeli*, contextualizing this word in the cosmogony of the entire community. In another tale, we brought up the idea of *kouma*, which in *Bàmànàn* means *word* and whose literal translation is *we catch you by the tail*. An image of this relationship of interaction through words that the *Manden* people live in. This artistic chronotope was woven with the beacons of internal infinite time in the space of exchange between the visible and the invisible, with the image of the human responsible for the harmony of the world. A new tale was created to bring the imagery of transmission as a matter of responsibility, also as a way of sculpting man's being. A way of showing how the human of West Africa constitutes himself as a link in the chain of transmission through the tools of traditional

*nyamakalá* activities. The speech is understood as the listening and what comes out of the voice. The space was the body itself that embodies knowledge at the moment of transmission. It was important to write a short story that represented *listening* and we connected *listening* with the image of the *tantã* to highlight the importance of words being intoned with rhythm.

Another two short stories were created to work on the meaning of the tales for the word artisans. It was essential to create a short story based on the idea of the *koteba*, as from the beginning of the work, it was the strongest and most revealing image of the culture of the *Manden* people. The image of the spiral of the great snail permeated not only the creation of this tale but the research as a whole. The last tale works on another central image in the speech of the *djeliw*, the first root of all orality: the mother's word as the primary force that points out the importance of women for the culture of the *Manden* people. A story to show that in front of our mother, our duty is to listen, revere and honor the roots of our being in the world.

*Circles and bonfires at the foot of large rocks. Where the listening precedes the speaking: an exercise in listening to multiple West African oral traditions (2021)*

In this research, we seek to understand how orality and the masters of oral traditions are present in the constitution of human beings and societies, based on the *cosmoperception* of some black civilizations in West Africa, more specifically in the Sudano-Sahelian region. In the process, we seek to understand: how oral traditions are involved with childhood in these communities? How to characterize traditional African education? What are the training spaces? How does traditional African education differ from that imposed by the colonizer? What is the relevance of family, community and spaces of initiation to the education of children and young people? How are stories, songs, proverbs, riddles and children's games used to educate children and young people? Our desire was to weave the threads (or part of them) that elaborate and singularize the oral tradition in this geographical space and its historical times, as well as confirm the relevance of oral transmission, traditionalist masters and traditional training spaces nowadays.

To avoid the tricks of racist and Eurocentric conceptions about the African continent, we consider it necessary to carry out research based on African protagonism concerning the construction of their own history, the valorization of the *cosmoperceptions* of their people and based on African speeches about themselves. Documentary and bibliographic investigations focused on some works by the African philosopher Amadou Hampâté Bâ, as well as other African authors, whose works are based on *cosmoperceptions* of African people and work towards reconstructing African historiography free of stereotypes. The author's childhood memories and her experiences with the *djeli* Sotigui Kouyaté and other *djeli* and storytellers from the *Manden* tradition also structured this research. Finally, meetings with Africans from the Sudano-Sahelian region – students, teachers and storytellers – highlighted the relevance of oral transmission, traditional masters and traditional training spaces today. Elements that act not only as mechanisms for preserving and transmitting knowledge but also as a resistance strategy capable of overcoming the barriers of cultural and political domination imposed by the colonizer. The research was the result of expanded listening based on African protagonism.

Understanding oral traditions required us to study traditionalists and the elements used by these masters to transmit ancestral knowledge to new generations. When working with the concept of Traditional Africa proposed by Hampâté Bâ, we sought to forget for a while who we were, to allow ourselves to be penetrated and transformed by *her* in a

movement of dialogic listening. For a while, we forget about ourselves and our time, immersing ourselves in listening to the other, leaving the other person the entire experience of expressing themselves. We just listen... Without judging or interpreting, without comparing or giving new meaning.

With Hampâté, we understand that studying oral societies is detailed and slow work, which requires a lot of dedication, listening and observation. It is about penetrating the ancestral memory of a collectivity that defines itself based on its own rules and values. An oral tradition text needs to be heard at different times and by various different narrators, it needs to be memorized and repeated for oneself and for different audiences. Therefore, in these cultures, the listening, the speaking and the memory are highly valued skills developed from an early age. In fieldwork, the researcher must be respectful, which means that must politely accept what is offered. The researcher must not insist on it or become angry, even if provoked. If necessary, he must be willing to travel in any way, lie down anywhere, eat whatever is available and never judge what he sees based on his own criteria. And, above all, he must put himself in a listening position. (Hampâté Bâ, 2010). To exemplify the relevance and primacy of listening, we bring the speech of the blacksmith and master of words François Moïse Bamba, one of our African interlocutors.

[...] we see much more meaning in orality than in writing. The word is so important that it has an older sister: the listening. It's like a child who gives birth to its mother. Because for there to be listening, there has to be the word first, listening is superior to the word. The ancients where I come from say that to experience a society of oral tradition, you need to be at least two: the one who has the word and the one who has the listening. And it is the one who listens that is the most important, because it is those that have the listening that gives importance to the word. (Pereira and Lopes, 2021, p. 273)

The conversation circle and the bonfire are strong traditions in the production of knowledge and life in the author's history. Thus, her childhood memories led the research down a different path. We chose to organize the chapters and structure the research in conversation circles in order to highlight the research question and give a certain circularity and fluidity to the writing, making it more lively. The writing, the images and the layout were designed in coherence with the chosen path: *Orality laid down on paper*. It was an invitation to sit in the circle, an attempt to construct prose that was somewhat more poetic and somewhat closer to orality. The proposal was to speak with Africans – philosophers, historians, *djeliw* and storytellers, African teachers and students – and not talk *about them*. The speeches were received as life narratives, unique experiences that express the particular experience of each individual placed there in dialogue. However, we intended to do something other than generalize and create a model capable of reflecting the *cosmoperception* of African people. The intention was to provide an opportunity for the listening of experiences of an Africa that unfolds into multiple. Human memory and its enunciations were temporalized and spatialized based on these personal experiences and, with them, portions of this great continent. We took on the challenge of writing an academic text without restricting ourselves to the already established methodological parameters, going beyond the limits of what was conceptualized as an interview. A creation that was built in the process in an effort to name what had not yet been named and to remember what had been forgotten or erased.

## Considerations

We now have the political commitment and the challenge of getting closer, to listening, to seeking to understand the relevance of the different forms of language, so that we no longer feed power relations that exclude and subordinate. Leda Maria Martins (2023) quotes Joseph Roch in his book *Performance do Tempo Espiral* and he points out that «texts can obscure what performance tends to reveal» (Martins, 2023, p. 126). We have an open path ahead to learn about oral textualities, their figurative expressions, their repetitions, the qualities of the narrator's bond with tradition, speech performances, symbolic strategies and all of the language's ritualistic games (Martins, 2021) that for us Westerners are unseen.

*Oraliture* is the challenge: creating conditions so that academic research may include oral tradition's peoples within it, without, however, distorting the knowledge of these cultures by subjecting them to writing-centered logics. On the contrary, we must change ourselves, learning from these historical subjects and ancestral knowledge other methodologies that, if properly understood and re-signified in the context of diasporic realities, might conduct us to self-criticism from a decolonial perspective. To *oraliturize* will, therefore, restore for us, Latin American women, our own logical, dialogic bases, founded on the oral traditions of which we are also part.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> *Maninka, Malinké* (in Fulbe) or *Mandinga* (in Portuguese): large ethnic group of the *Manden* family, originally from the territory called *Mande* or *Manden* (Niane, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> The *djeliw* (singular *djeli*) are the masters of words in the *Manden* tradition responsible for the oral transmission of ancestral knowledge and experiences. They are storytellers, genealogists, historians, musicians, counselors and conciliators.

<sup>3</sup> The *Manden* people (*Mandenka, Mandingo, Mandê*) are a geographic and linguistic extensive family, made up of several different ethnic groups, spread throughout the Sudano-Sahelian zone (Niane, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> A great Malian humanist, writer, historian and philosopher, was considered one of the intellectual and literary figures of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Africa (Heckmann, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> «I shall take my basic examples from the traditions of the savannah to the south of the Sahara (what was formerly called the Bafour and constituted the savannah zones of former French West Africa)» (Hampâté Bâ, 2010, p. 170).

<sup>6</sup> The Berlin Conference (1884-1885). Among other definitions, the agreement guaranteed that «absurd concept of the hinterland, which came to be interpreted to mean that possession of a coast also implied ownership of its hinterland to an almost unlimited distance. [...] This was the so-called doctrine of effective occupation that was to make the conquest of Africa such a murderous business» (Uzoigwe, 2010, p. 29).

<sup>7</sup> *Quilombos* are ethnic-racial groups according to criteria of self-attribution, with their own historical trajectory, endowed with specific territorial relationships, with a presumption of black ancestry related to resistance to the historical oppression suffered (Decree 4887/2003).

<sup>8</sup> All children and young people, regardless of caste or gender, should join a secular youth association (*waaldé*), where they would actively participate in all activities, discuss their problems and seek to solve them together (Hampâté Bâ, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> *Worldview* is used in the West to summarize the cultural logic of a society, which privileges the sense of vision. It is Eurocentric to use it to describe cultures that may privilege other senses. The term is a more inclusive way of describing the conception of the world by different cultural groups, which privilege all the senses (Oyëwùmí, 1997).

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