

Revenge of the Spoken Word?: Writing, Performance, and New Media in Urban West Africa

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Why would any verbal artists bother to strongly identify themselves as writers when their own works circulate exclusively in a performative mode? Why would they bother to identify with writing in settings where literacy levels are low, traditional orality remains widespread, and electronically mediated forms of orality are fairly accessible? In short, what kind of significance could writing have for composers of creative texts as electronically mediated performance becomes more widespread? These are the questions that I wish to address in this article.

As is well known, Walter Ong speculated on a possible re-oralization of communication, or what he termed a “secondary orality” among literates sustained by electronic technologies. Since then, the point has been argued even more forcefully by George Landow (1997) and others with reference to computer-mediated communication. Observers like Jan Fernback (2003), for example, have highlighted particular features of digitally mediated communication such as instantaneity and interactivity that relate to orality.¹ Scholars of African cinema like Frank Ukadike (1993), as well as Keyan Tomaselli and Maureen Eke (1993), have long foregrounded the ways in which African film directors appropriated strategies associated with forms of orality. For somewhat different purposes, Sheila Nayar in her studies of Indian cinema (2004) likewise emphasizes the debt that textual formatting and organization in electronic media such as film owe to traditional forms of orality.

Here I will not be further pursuing this line of inquiry, which consists of uncovering how orality intervenes in electronically and often digitally mediated textuality. Rather, my intentions are to investigate what kind of significance writing might have for verbal artists whose creative texts reach the wider public only through digitally mediated or live performance. In parts of the world where the dissemination of printed texts has been limited historically for a variety of reasons, the increasing access to digital media has made performance of texts both more cost-effective and “modern.” As a consequence, we are seeing many more literate verbal artists in these contexts develop reputations as performers rather than as writers, hence my title: the revenge of the spoken word. However, this does not necessarily mean that many such verbal artists disregard the contribution of writing to textual production or cease to identify themselves as writers. To the contrary, a number of these figures foreground writing in their self-definition as

¹ The Pathways Project at the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition offers further discussion of the possible connections between digitally mediated communication and orality. <http://pathwaysproject.org>

verbal artists. My goal in this essay is to consider several of the reasons that some verbal artists in this situation prefer to highlight their activity as writers rather than their role as performers despite the fact that they create textual genres that circulate almost entirely through performance with almost no opportunities for print publication.

The specific instances of live and digitally mediated verbal arts performance to be considered here are drawn from the West African country of Mali. Over time, Mali's oral traditions, especially those of the Mande cultural area,² have attracted considerable scholarly attention.³ Indeed, a certain type of traditional verbal artist associated with Malian culture, known in the Mande languages as *jeli* or *jali* and often described as the *griot* in European-language texts, has become the iconic figure of African orality, both within scholarly circles and outside of them. My intention, however, is not to revisit the well researched oral traditions of Mali but instead to explore perceptions about newer verbal performance practices that are either digitally mediated or influenced by increased access to digital media. Several of these instances amount to a new type of orality, and often, in fact, to writing for performance.

Scholars like Eric Charry (2000), Mamadou Diawara (1997, 1998), Lucy Durán (1995), Paulla Ebron (2002), Thomas Hale (1998), Robert Newton (1999), and Dorothea Schulz (2001b) among others, have examined the impact of electronic media on traditional Mande orality and on the Malian public sphere as a whole. My focus on what such media might mean for creative writing and writers, at a time when electronically mediated performance has become even more accessible, sets the present study apart from theirs.⁴ Furthermore, among the different types of electronic media available in Mali, I am especially interested in the impact of digital media because they more frequently enable interested verbal artists to circumvent problems commonly associated with print publication, thus prompting a revising of the relationship between writing, textuality, and performance.

Like many countries in the Sahel region of West Africa, Mali has a low level of contemporary literacy,⁵ despite a celebrated history of medieval literacy. Precisely because of these low literacy levels, Mali currently attracts an increasing number of events organized around the practice of reading and intended to encourage both reading and writing. These include the

² The Mande peoples of West Africa are associated with the old Mali empire, whose reach once extended over much of what is now contemporary Mali. Today Mande peoples are to be found not only in Mali but in several other West African countries such as Guinea (Conakry), the Gambia, Senegal, and Côte d'Ivoire. Many communities in contemporary Mali, and especially those that identify as Bamana, Soninke, Khassonke, and Wasulu, form part of the larger Mande group. Mamadou Diawara (1997:40) has also suggested that non-Mande communities like the Pulaar, "sharing a similar conception of power, of society" should be considered part of the Mande cultural area.

³ See, for example, among many others: Ralph Austen (1999), Stephen Belcher (1999), Sory Camara (1976), David Conrad and Barbara Frank (1995), Ruth Finnegan (1970), Thomas Hale (1998), John William Johnson et al. (1997), and Isidore Okpewho (1992). This list is far from exhaustive.

⁴ I am also not focusing on well known transcriptions of performed texts or epics, such as the Soundiata epic, in this essay. Some of the best known transcriptions such as D. T. Niane's *Soundjata ou l'épopée mandingue* (1960) were obviously produced in an earlier time, before cell phones and personal computers became available, even in poorer African countries.

⁵ The UNESCO Institute for Statistics reports literacy rates in 2006 for Mali as follows: 18.2% for females and 34.9% for males aged 15 years and older, and 30.8% for females and 47.4% for males aged between 15 and 24 years old.

Etonnant Voyageur international book festival held biennially and other events such as *Lire en fête* and *Le printemps des poètes*.⁶ In addition, many NGOs are active in literacy work in Mali. However, even as these activities begin to yield slowly improving literacy rates, new forms of orality continue to emerge, often initiated by literate Malians with access to digital communication media. I have deliberately chosen to focus on literate verbal artists working with new oralities for this exploration of the changing functions of writing in an age of new media. Unlike published authors on the one hand, and non-literate verbal arts performers on the other, they have a more contingent relationship with both older and new media, as well as with writing and performance. In what follows, I examine what writing means to these literate verbal artists, given the new prospects and continuing constraints for textual dissemination against a background of new media, by considering three types of verbal artists associated with relatively new forms of orality in Mali's capital city, Bamako.

A First Instance of New Orality and Writing



Fig 1: Awa Dembélé Macalou reading a story to children at the Marché de Missra in Bamako. Photo by the author.

Awa Dembélé Macalou⁷ is a storyteller. She received her undergraduate education in Mali and then went to the former Soviet Union for a degree in linguistics. She now works at the Centre Amadou Hampaté Bâ in Bamako as the children's librarian.⁸ She also recounts folktales at schools, on television, for special festivals, and at a local marketplace in Bamako, the Marché de Missira, which is also connected to Centre Amadou Hampaté Bâ.⁹ Two or three times a week on afternoons when children are not in school, Macalou organizes a storytelling session for the children of market women that she describes as “la lecture sur la natte” or

⁶ *L'Etonnant Voyageur* is a traveling international book festival from France that has been coming to Mali every two years since 2002, thanks to support from the Malian author Moussa Konaté, who lives in France. The other events are organized by the Bibliothèque Nationale (National Library) in Mali in conjunction with local NGOs.

⁷ Where the artist's stage name differs from his or her usual name, I have used the stage name for all the verbal artists cited here. In some cases, such as Dembélé's, the verbal artist employs her usual name as a stage name.

⁸ The Centre Amadou Hampaté Bâ was founded by the former Malian minister for culture and tourism, Aminata Traoré, as a base for community organizing in a Bamako neighborhood. It functions as a center for meetings and workshops. It also includes a library for children, a craft center, and a hotel Le Djenné entirely furnished with locally made materials. It is a central part of Traoré's vision for imagining and creating a self-sustaining and locally inspired Africa.

⁹ Information here excerpted from interviews with Macalou in Bamako.

“reading on the mat.” The children gather without much prompting when she arrives because they apparently know what to expect. Once they have calmed down in a meeting space in the market, she begins to read out an African folktale in French from a book, with copious comments in the most widely spoken local language, Bamankan,¹⁰ all while dramatizing the story. Typically the book is held up for the children to see as she turns from one page to the next while some children on the fringes walk in and out. She then asks a series of comprehension questions to make sure they have understood the story, and selects a volunteer to narrate the story in Bamankan. These reading/storytelling sessions are meant to encourage children to visit the children’s library at the Centre Amadou Hampaté Bâ, where they can get assistance with their reading skills.

More frequently, Macalou recounts local folktales in Bamankan without using a book. These stories about orphans, wicked stepmothers, princes, and talking animals bear much in common with the kinds of West African folktales translated into French by such notable writers as Birago Diop (1961) and Bernard Dadié (1955). As she narrates these traditional folktales, Macalou modifies and extends the story to fit contemporary circumstances. According to her, local stories can no longer be told in the traditional way because children today would not find many of the elements in the story credible. Since childhood, she had apparently been concerned about how to keep alive the practice of storytelling once the older generation of storytellers like her grandmother passed away. She once recorded a couple of stories on cassette for her nephews living in France after they had been introduced to traditional storytelling during a visit to relatives in Bamako.¹¹ For Macalou, cassette recording proved a difficult long-term strategy for preserving traditional folktales, and she eventually turned to writing to preserve these tales. As of 2009 Macalou had “transcribed” and translated four stories into French: *Nayé, la fille qui ne meurt jamais* (“Nayé, the girl who never dies”), *Fanani, l’enfant prodigue*

(“Fanani, the prodigal child”), *Le singe devenu tisserand* (“The monkey weaver”), and *La Hyène en quête d’épouse* (“The hyena in search of a bride”).¹² Thus far, the stories remain in typed manuscript form because she has not been able to find a publisher for them. Her plans are to transcribe, translate, and eventually publish a total of twenty-four such Bamankan stories in French.



Macalou singing a song from the story of Nayé, the girl who would not die.

Awa Dembélé Macalou is a performer who aspires to become a published writer. In the meantime, she practices her verbal skills by narrating children’s stories in a performative mode. For Macalou, performance serves as a provisional mode of publication, or making public, while awaiting what she sees as the definitive publication, that is print publication.

¹⁰ Bamanankan is the language spoken by the Bamana people, and functions as a language of wider communication in the southern part of Mali.

¹¹ This appears to be a popular strategy for making Malian folktales available to Malians abroad. Cécile Leguy (2007:139) reports encountering cassette recordings of Malian folktales in another local language, Bwa, among Malians in France.

¹² Listen to Macalou singing a song from the story of Nayé, the girl who would not die. This is one of the stories that Macalou has transcribed and is seeking to publish. [http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/26i/adejunmobi#myGallery-picture\(2\)](http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/26i/adejunmobi#myGallery-picture(2))

A Second Instance of New Orality and Writing

In addition to the “neo-traditional” music of such internationally acclaimed musicians as Salif Keita, Ali Farka Touré, and Oumou Sangaré, Mali also boasts a lively hip hop scene with recognized stars, up-and-coming rappers, an awards ceremony, and a new magazine dedicated to promoting Malian hip hop.¹³ For the most part, Malian hip hop performers are known only locally in Mali, though a few have been able to organize tours taking them to Europe (especially France) or other francophone West African countries. N’BEE, King, and Tal-B are rappers and part of this growing Malian hip hop community based in Bamako.¹⁴ N’BEE has been part of a two-man crew called Diata Sya (or descendants of Sundiata) for several years. In addition to rap, he also performs ragga and reggae. N’BEE completed high school and currently works at a local printing press as well as performs as a rapper. King and Tal-B work independently as rappers. At the same time, Tal-B is enrolled at the University of the Humanities, although he apparently plans to drop out to pursue his musical career. N’BEE has performed on television shows and has also recorded music videos for television. N’BEE, King, and Tal-B may all be considered practitioners of digital orality. N’BEE’s rap lyrics circulate mainly through CDs, while King and Tal-B more frequently rely on cell phones to disseminate their rap, as will be elaborated upon later.

For all three rappers, the two critical elements required for producing rap are writing on the one hand and software on the other, a combination that provides a background beat and enables public access to the performed lyrics. Speaking about the role writing plays in rap composition, N’BEE declared: “You can’t become a rapper if you don’t know how to write.” He further stated that Malian rappers rarely engage in improvisation. They usually perform from written lyrics recorded in a studio or performed live. King explained that his composition process involved waking up at night, trying out different lines and words, and then writing them down immediately. N’BEE and Tal-B described a similar process, starting with written verbal composition, seeking musical instrumentation for their lyrics only after the words had been written down, and moving on to recorded performance as a final step. N’BEE marveled at how many notebooks he had filled with rap lyrics over fifteen years of being a rapper. “You know,” he remarked, “friends have told me that if I tried publishing all the notebooks I’ve filled, it would make a big book.” But he apparently had no plans to publish, and was interested only in performance. The fact that N’BEE writes his Bamanakan-language rap “phonetically,” and not according to the officially accepted orthography, makes possible publication of his written lyrics even less likely. Both King and Tal-B similarly confirmed that their written lyrics would probably not be fully legible to other literate individuals.

¹³ The Mali Hip Hop Awards event has been held in 2007 and 2009. A magazine titled *Rue 14, 1^{er} Magazine Hip Hop au Mali* was launched in January 2009.

¹⁴ The information here and following has been excerpted from interviews with N’BEE, King, and Tal-B in Bamako in 2009.

A Third Instance of New Orality and Writing

BoubacHaman is the president of the Association des slammeurs maliens or ASLAMA.¹⁵ BoubacHaman, who holds a law degree, says slam poetry was introduced formally to Mali in 2006 during the *Etonnant Voyageur* book festival. Though the association has only a handful of members, they are deeply committed to spreading the word about slam by holding workshops in Malian high schools. Like other Malians who identify with and perform slam poetry, BoubacHaman began his performance career in live and recorded rap. What, I asked him, is the difference between rap and slam? Why did he decide to dedicate himself to the performance of slam poetry rather than rap? To perform rap, says BoubacHaman, you need special equipment to produce musical accompaniment for the rapper's lyrics. He also added that rap often involved wordplay as an end in itself rather than trying to communicate a clear message. Compared to rap, which has a somewhat shady reputation among older Malians despite its growing popularity with educated and urban youth, slam elicited a more positive response from local audiences. The rappers King and Tal-B echoed BoubacHaman's comments, and stated that composing slam was more demanding than composing rap.

Like Azizsitén'K, another member of ASLAMA and a university undergraduate in 2009,¹⁶ BoubacHaman considers writing to be a critical part of the process for producing slam poetry, although he would often memorize his written texts before a performance. In his opinion, the most important distinguishing characteristics of slam are its reliance on writing, its function as a vehicle for transmitting clearly understood messages, and the relative freedom of expression afforded to slam poets. While ASLAMA had embarked on the process of recording an album of Malian slam in 2009, most of their performances consisted of live performances in bars and at special festivals or events organized by various agencies in Mali such as the Centre Culturel Français. The Malian slam poets I met were definitely seeking additional opportunities to hold slam events, but were not seriously investigating the possibility of publication. The lack of interest in print publication on the one hand, and the decision not to rely as much on a digital or electronically mediated performance on the other hand, differentiates Mali's slam poets from storytellers like Macalou and rappers like N'BEE. It further complicates the picture in trying to understand what writing means for these self-identified "writers" who operate mainly as performers.

Digitally Mediated Performance and Writing

The three types of composer-performers presented thus far share some qualities in common relating to their creative work. All three types of composer-performers tended to define their activity as verbal artists mainly in relation to the written composition of texts. First, they did not present themselves first and foremost as performers but as composers of texts. Second, their

¹⁵ The information here and following has been excerpted from interviews with BoubacHaman and Azizsitén'k in Bamako in 2009.

¹⁶ Azizsitén'k has now graduated from the University of Humanities in Bamako with a degree in English.

creative texts circulated only through performance, whether such performance was live or digitally mediated. Digitally mediated performance was especially popular with younger male verbal artists. Third, all three types of composer-performer strongly objected to any comparison of their performance with that of the *griots/jeli*, the traditional bards of Mande society. Fourth, they all emphasized the centrality of writing to composition and textual production. Before proceeding with a discussion of these findings, it is important to acknowledge that these particular verbal artists are not necessarily representative of all literate verbal artists in Mali or elsewhere in Africa for that matter. I do make the claim, though, that their choices reflect the kinds of options that might be pursued by literate verbal artists who happen to privilege the recognition of authorship over involvement with performance in a low literacy environment today.

The rap artists undoubtedly represent the best examples of a digitally mediated orality among the verbal artists considered here. In their line of work, while digital technology matters for the process of composition, it is also essential for effective dissemination of rap lyrics and for acquiring visibility as a rap artist. At the same time, one of the ultimate signs of success for a rapper consists in being invited to perform live at major events backed by a powerful local or international sponsor. Indeed, the less famous a rapper is, the more he or she depends on digital media for generating initial interest in his or her compositions.

It is worth noting then, that the rappers mentioned thus far would not be considered the most successful rappers in Malian hip hop circles. A list of the best known Malian rappers of the moment would probably include figures like Amkoullé, Tata Pound, Yeli Fuzzo and Lassy King Massassy among others. Despite the challenge of piracy, each one of these locally famous rappers has produced albums and CDs that are available on the local market and at accredited retail outlets like Mali K7 in Bamako.¹⁷ More importantly, they have many opportunities to perform live in Mali itself, and there is a kind of synergy between their live performances and the circulation of their recorded music. By contrast, although N'BEE is known as one of the pioneers of Malian rap and is respected within the local hip hop community, he does not always attract the kind of attention that some younger figures do within Mali itself. Nonetheless, he continues to receive occasional invitations to perform at World Music events in Europe.¹⁸ Unlike King and Tal-B who were yet to record any albums, N'BEE does have two albums out on CD and has collaborated on albums by celebrated Malian rappers.

King and Tal-B say they are occasionally invited to perform on television, which helps to enhance their reputation. But it is unlikely that they will be invited to perform live at major events unless they achieve some degree of fame. At the same time they cannot achieve the desired level of name recognition without first circulating their music, usually through digitally mediated modes of dissemination. King and Tal-B say they more commonly record their rap lyrics using available software, lyrics that they download onto cell phones. They then rely on the

¹⁷ Mali K7 (cassette or *ka sept* in French) is a Malian recording and retail center dedicated to combating the pirating of albums by local musicians in Mali. Cassettes and CDs by Malian and other African performers are sold at the store.

¹⁸ The most recent such invitation would be the World Music Expo “Womex” held in Copenhagen, Denmark in October of 2010.

first set of listeners to send the lyrics to other cell phone users, hopefully generating exposure and a reputation for them. N'BEE recounts that before cell phones became ubiquitous, the recording of music videos for broadcast on television stations was the preferred path for stirring up public interest in one's work. For these struggling rap artists, digital orality is the pathway that will hopefully lead to fame and success, manifested in opportunities for live performance at major events.

I attribute the fact that these particular rap artists also present themselves as writers to their current position within the local artistic environment. Given the minimal opportunities that Tal-B and King have for live performance, and the limited scale on which their music circulates, one understands why they don't play up their "performance credentials." N'BEE's receding reputation on the home front may also account for his inclination to emphasize the significance of writing for the aging rapper. While hoping to one day generate a reputation based mainly on performance, these rappers, who were not well known to the public, legitimated their claim to be verbal artists by invoking their activity as writers of rap lyrics. Yet they engage in a different kind of writing for performance than one might associate with a playwright, for example. For one thing, the ultimate goal of their writing is self-performance—that is, a verbal arts performance in which the artist performs himself or herself. The equivalent would be for a playwright to include herself as a character in her own play and to act out that role on stage.

One should not rule out the possibility that these verbal artists might later opt to foreground their activity as performers rather than as writers, were they to record a successful album and to have opportunities for large-scale live performances in Mali and beyond. In the meantime, they present themselves as writers, and therefore as rappers. This may be a fairly typical move on the part of verbal artists who disseminate self-authored texts through digitally mediated orality but have not yet achieved a desired level of recognition among peers that would result in invitations to perform at major events. In these contexts, then, the possibility of gaining commercial reward for a verbal arts performance apparently makes for a more contingent attachment to writing on the part of the verbal arts performer.

Revenge of the Spoken Word

Clearly, Macalou the storyteller does not practice digital orality, since most of her performances are not transmitted electronically or recorded.¹⁹ Indeed, her storytelling activities represent an interesting take on the widely reprinted dictum credited to one of Mali's best known writers, Hampaté Bâ, who famously declared "chaque vieillard qui meurt en Afrique est une bibliothèque qui brûle" ("each African elder who dies is like a library that burns down") (Laya 1972:190). The statement expresses Bâ's high regard for elders as custodians of knowledge transmitted orally, but has also been interpreted as a sign of his commitment to writing and transcription (Adejunmobi 2000). Like Bâ, Macalou seeks to preserve the wisdom of the elders for the benefit of a younger generation. Interestingly, unlike Bâ who achieved his reputation as a

¹⁹A few of her performances have been recorded for radio and television.

writer rather than a performer, she achieves this goal initially through performance that she then associates with writing.

And yet I would describe Macalou too as a beneficiary of a changing media scene in Mali, one in which orality can be viewed as a modern practice, thanks largely to the reliance on electronic media for circulating new types of performance. Indeed, it was Macalou's commitment to updating both the content and means of transmission of traditional children's stories that led her initially to cassette recording and later transcription. Her commentary on her own work indicates that she sees herself as one of the modern verbal artists operating in Mali rather than as a traditional verbal artist.

But given her clear investment in the practice of creative writing, one may wonder why Macalou or any of the other verbal artists discussed here ever turned to the spoken word and performance as an outlet for their writing. The answer lies in the fact that the process of publication presents considerable difficulties for the would-be author in contemporary Mali. Although a number of publishing houses exist locally, the Malians who are most frequently acknowledged locally as creative writers all got their start by being published outside Mali, usually in France. This included writers like Yambo Oulouguem, Hampâté Ba, Ousmane Diarra, Moussa Konaté, and Mandé Alpha Diarra among others. Others like one of Mali's best known living creative writers, Seydou Badian (2008), and other authors like Ismaïla Samba Traoré (2005, 2009) have recently opted for joint publication of their works by both Africa-based and French publishers (author interviews with Ismaïla Samba Traoré and Seydou Badian). It is true that a small number of Malians outside this small circle of recognized writers has managed to get their creative texts published locally, and that the local writer/publisher is an increasingly widespread phenomenon.²⁰ But with the possible exception of Ismaïla Samba Traoré and Moussa Konaté among the "younger" generation of writers, many of these writer/publishers are known as writers only to a small and restricted circle, even within the country. Indeed, there seems to be little evidence that many locally published authors are ever identified as creative writers locally or that their works are admitted into the canon of Malian literary works either within the school system or in local discussions of Malian literature.

As is to be expected, each of the locally established publishing houses has its own publishing priorities. For example, Le Figuier specializes in children's stories, often written by the founder, Moussa Konaté, who is a creative writer in his own right (personal communication with Mariam Oumar Touré, Director of Publishing at Le Figuier). The Jamana publishing house publishes mainly textbooks as well as children's stories in French and local languages like Bamanankan (personal communication with Mahmoud Sidibé, Director of Marketing at Jamana). It's not clear, though, that Macalou's "transcriptions" and translations of Bamanankan children's stories would fit into the areas of specialization adopted by any of the local publishers. Children's stories tend to be short, while at least one of Macalou's typeset narratives runs well

²⁰ Moussa Konaté, Ismaïla Samba Traoré, and Amadou Seydou Traoré represent the better known writer/publishers in Mali. Konaté owns Le Figuier, Ismaïla Samba Traoré owns La Sahélienne, while Seydou Traoré owns La Ruche à Livres (author interviews with Amadou Seydou Traoré and Ismaïla Samba Traoré).

over one hundred pages.²¹ A second story is almost 50 typeset pages long.²² Nor does Macalou's choice of genre (children's stories) correspond to the type of oral text favored by local publishers like Jamana. The preference at Jamana is for transcriptions and translations of oral epics. At the same time, the children's stories they do publish conform to standard conventions for published children's stories in their relative brevity and particular style. Finally, none of the local publishing houses appeared to have any interest in contemporary poetry other than those poetry selections written by African poets from the 1950s and 60s, and approved for inclusion in state-sanctioned textbooks.

Unlike the other verbal artists mentioned here, Macalou is strongly committed to becoming a published writer. Unable thus far to overcome local barriers to publication, she has turned to a performance type that she configures as an introduction to literacy for children. In this instance, the spoken word owes its revenge not to a deep interest in the society's traditions of orality but to the manifold obstacles to print publication. We can connect Macalou's continuing quest for print publication to the fact that she does not appear to have as much mastery and awareness of the newer digital media as the younger rappers and slam poets. By contrast, many of the younger rappers and slam poets, including some of those mentioned in this article such as N'BEE, BoubacHaman, and Azizsitén'k have music videos of their work posted on YouTube.²³ One of N'BEE's albums is available for purchase on iTunes and on Amazon.com, as is the case for several other local hip hop artists in Mali. Not surprisingly, these younger rappers and slam poets also tend to be avid users of social media like facebook and myspace.

For this younger generation of (usually male) educated verbal artists, print publication presents few advantages, given the relative ease of access to and autonomy offered by some forms of locally available digital media. And while many more Malians have access to music on cassettes than on CDs or in other digitized forms, literate verbal artists find digital media increasingly attractive because it allows them to circumvent obstacles to publication and to work independently. Digital media also enable them to bypass the diverse conventions that might hinder regular access to broadcast on radio, television, or the types of media that tend to be under the control of more powerful local interests. When it comes to the production of creative texts in these settings, the freedom to engage in certain forms of innovation is increasingly intertwined with the adoption of new and digital media.

²¹ As Robin Lakoff (1982) has pointed out, there is a difference between actual transcriptions of spoken language and artistic representations of speech in writing. Although I haven't read Macalou's texts, I suspect that her typeset narratives are much closer to real transcriptions than they are to the conventions for representing traditional orality in African literature. This might explain the relative length of her children's stories and why she has had some difficulty persuading local publishers to publish these narratives.

²² A local printer and friend of Macalou helped to typeset the manuscripts so that she would have an idea of what an eventual publication would look like. The manuscript *Nayé, la fille qui ne meurt jamais* turned out to be 138 pages typeset, while *Fanani, l'enfant prodigue* consumed 47 pages.

²³ See, for example, a YouTube video showing Diata Sya (N'BEE's crew) performing with Tata Pound, a local hip hop star in Mali: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WMRhad2XXRc>. Though this does not appear to be a professional recording, it underlines the fact that younger verbal artists are aware of these avenues for self-publication.

It would seem, then, that the growing accessibility of small technologies and digital media to literates, even as literacy levels inch up, is the critical element that separates the younger generation of literate verbal artists from the older generation of literate verbal artists. In some respects, a kind of generational shift appears to be at work, not so much in terms of the varying ages of these composer-performers, as in degrees of mastery over diverse options for “technologizing the word.”²⁴ For example, it is difficult to imagine that verbal artists as highly educated as Macalou, Azizsiten’k, and BoubacHaman would have become performers without also becoming published authors a few decades earlier in Mali, and in many other locations in Africa, where textual dissemination solely through performance was often more appealing for literates who were unable to secure advanced education or complete their education for whatever reason. As things currently stand, therefore, well-educated Malians are more likely than minimally educated Malians to become personally proficient, or to become proficient with the assistance of peers, at deploying new communication media for textual performance. A similar trend towards “re-oralization” (Nnodim 2005:250) of some written genres, which probably owes its impetus to the dissemination opportunities provided by new media, has also been reported by Sophie Moulard-Kouka (2005) with respect to Senegalese rap, and by Nnodim with respect to Yoruba poetry in Nigeria. Ironically, then, the secondary orality postulated by Ong may turn out to be the primary beneficiary of rising literacy levels in many African contexts when it comes to the distribution and circulation of a diverse range of creative texts.

Of the three types of verbal artists considered here, Macalou most fully embodies the constraints inherent in a commitment to print publication when one operates in a context that is not particularly conducive to print publication. Given these challenges, performance allows for the circulation of more innovative textual genres by literate composers, genres that happen to fall outside the usual range admitted by local publishers. An earlier generation of educated Africans probably turned to print dissemination supported by overseas publishers because that form of “publication” offered more artistic and ideological independence than did indigenous or colonial systems of patronage for composers of texts. New forms of orality appear to function in a somewhat similar way in contemporary Africa, offering an autonomy in textual composition and distribution that is not often available for emerging verbal artists in the arena of print publication. Such opportunities for artistic and infrastructural autonomy will be of particular interest to young men in a country like Mali with limited avenues for social mobility and self-expression.²⁵

Rappers, for example, can circulate their rap lyrics using digital technologies with minimal reliance on artistic, financial, or technological intermediaries and gatekeepers. Indeed, it may be the refusal to align themselves with more powerful forces locally that compels them to fall back on digital media that are accessible to, and can be operated by, small groups of relatively poor individuals. Be that as it may, these verbal artists appear to be driven more by the quest for expressive and infrastructural autonomy than by concerns over the continuing illiteracy of much of the local population. They are above all artists, focused on opportunities for creativity, rather than activists seeking the most efficient ways for communicating with the population at large. And the novelty of their work lies more in the embrace of new media than it

²⁴I am borrowing Ong’s celebrated formulation from his 1988 book title here.

²⁵See for example Dorothea Schulz (2002:805-06) for the challenges facing young men in Mali.

does in a willingness to challenge either the aesthetic or ideological orientations associated with their preferred art forms. Their turn towards performance represents a reaction against the perceived restrictions associated with local and foreign publishing interests, as well as with the conventions surrounding traditional oralities. Such new oralities also have the added advantage of enabling local practitioners to position themselves as consumers and advertisers of modernity in relation to global performance trends, while also maintaining an appearance of relative independence and artistic integrity.

Textual Production and New Oralities

The Malian slam poets represent a somewhat different development, having transitioned from digitally mediated dissemination of rap to live performance of slam poetry. Does this transition reflect some level of detachment from the perceived modernity of digitally mediated performance? I don't believe so. For one thing, the genealogy of slam poetry that members of ASLAMA recount traces the appearance of slam poetry in Mali to a globally circulating book festival, rather than to traditional forms of verbal performance in Malian culture. In the second place, what live performance offers these slam poets is a means for introducing the public to a particular artistic genre without the commercial potential of rap. In fact, slam poets sometimes juxtapose slam to other verbal arts genres that have a greater commercial appeal via their live and recorded performances with the aim of creating interest in slam. Thus, for example, Azizsitén'k, who recently released his first album, sandwiched performances of slam between recordings of rap and R&B music.²⁶ In other words, these slam poets are more interested in finding a convenient and affordable means for disseminating a non-commercial art form than they are in emulating traditional verbal artists. Third, and as is evident with Azizsitén'k (and BoubacHaman), many slam poets are also hip hop artists. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Malian slam poets strongly disassociate themselves from local traditions of verbal arts performance.

It should probably come as no surprise that some verbal artists should privilege oral dissemination of their written texts in a country like Mali where literacy levels are low and traditional orality is alive and flourishing. For the non-Malian observer, complete rejection of identification with traditional orality may be the greater surprise. And yet many of the slam poets and rappers I met rejected this kind of identification, as did Macalou, the storyteller.²⁷ BoubacHaman, the slam poet, insisted that his compositions and performance should not be compared with those of a *griot* because he did not come from the lineage of a *griot*. N'BEE, the rapper, initially stated that the activities of a *griot* and a rapper were diametrically opposed. Later, he clarified that a *griot* could learn to rap, but that a rapper should never be viewed as a *griot*. Macalou did not insist on the differences between her performance and those of a *griot* quite as vigorously as the rappers and slam poets, but she too pointed out that that she did not

²⁶ The album, titled *Tounga*, was released in March 2011.

²⁷ In other words, these verbal artists are to be differentiated from an earlier generation of African writers who consciously invoked traditional orality as a model for their creative writing.

belong to the lineage of the *griots*, and that in any case the *griots* were not known for children's storytelling.

By and large, then, Malian verbal artists appear to have a more restricted (and undoubtedly more customary) understanding of who can be a *griot*. As Malians, they were able to invoke a cultural justification that required that only those of the lineage of *griots* lay claim to the calling of *griot*.²⁸ The family names of these *griot* lineages are well known in Mande society and in Mali as a whole. For example, N'BEE's two-person crew chose a name that connected it to Sundiata, the famed founder of the Mali empire, but not one that would have been locally recognized as connecting the team to the lineage of *griots*.²⁹ Although none of the verbal artists I spoke with mentioned this perspective, the fact that the *griots* or *jeli* occupy a somewhat ambiguous position in Mande society and sometimes have a negative reputation may also explain their insistence on not being identified as *griots*.³⁰ And in the eyes of these non-*griot* performers, writing was one of the most important elements that separated their practice from the entirely oral practice of the *griots*.

By contrast, as remarked by Eric Charry (2000:242), the guitar was the instrument that brought together performers of "modern" and "traditional" Mande music. In other respects, however, those musicians, like these literate verbal artists, faced somewhat similar challenges. For both artistic vocations, the challenge was to communicate artistic novelty in relation to indigenous practices as well as in relation to practices borrowed from outside the usual sources of cultural influence. The guitar was not a traditional instrument, and those who first used it in Mande communities were seen as introducing a new element into the local performance of music. At the same time, some of these innovators quickly transitioned from playing Cuban songs to using the guitar to simulate the playing of traditional string instruments, thereby creating a genre of music that could no longer be viewed as Cuban music even if it used some of the same instruments. For literate verbal artists in the early twenty-first century, the move towards digital media separated them from the locally and internationally established authors who depended on print media. But the turn towards performance narrowed the gap between them and traditional verbal artists who were also engaged in performance and who increasingly used broadcast media. In order to highlight the difference between themselves and the traditional *jeli*, some of these literate verbal artists chose to highlight the contribution of writing to the process of artistic composition. Since they often appeared more concerned with speaking about their involvement with writing than in speaking about their use of digital media, they gave the impression of being quite preoccupied with defining and defending the border that separated their work from the work of traditional verbal artists.

²⁸ Eric Charry (2000:3) substantiates the point when he writes: "The distinction between *jeli* and non-*jeli* musical arts is fundamental in Mande society. As part of the *nyamakala* class . . . it is the right, duty even, of *jelis* to devote their lives to music. Non-*jelis* making such a decision usually encounter resistance from their families, and with rare exceptions their avenues are limited to the non-*jeli* spheres of music."

²⁹ Ironically, as N'BEE's crew has begun to move within the "world music" circuit, members of the group have tended to adopt a more traditional appearance in their dress and to include the use of a traditional instrument like the *kora* while continuing to specialize in hip hop.

³⁰ See Hale (1989:15, 193-216) for a more detailed discussion of the position of the *griot* in many Savanna/Sahelian societies and especially among the Mande.

Nonetheless, despite their repudiation of any social affiliation with the traditional *griots*, these literate verbal artists do share a few things in common with female pop stars in Mali who often model their performance on the practice of the female *jeli* or the *jelimusow* as the female performers are called. Lucy Durán (2007:571) estimates that currently between 60 and 80% of all singers on Malian television are women. Not all of these women are of *jeli* lineage, though the majority consciously embraces the styles and conventions of *jelimusow* performance.³¹ The literate verbal artists being discussed here could be compared to the many non-*jeli* women who are borrowing either the strategies or style of successful *jeli* women in Mali. Historically, the men within *jeli* lineages recited the history and genealogy of famous patrons while the women provided improvised praise of and admonishment for the same patrons. Contemporary *jelimusow* have significantly expanded on their traditional role of offering praise and moralizing to individual patrons to address the society at large.³² These female pop stars have been among the most astute users of broadcast media in Mali, a strategy that has enabled them to accumulate fans and relative wealth even when they do not have the skills or the training for securing support through live performance for powerful patrons. Like those *jelimusow* who use broadcast media, the rappers and slam poets are also seeking to generate a following, if need be, without the support of traditional patrons. Like many *jelimusow*, and these young men are seeking to capitalize on avenues to social mobility and prestige that allow them to circumvent traditional dependence on male elders, a situation that offers them few immediate prospects for self-realization and advancement.³³

But such is the current success of the *jelimusow* on Malian broadcast media that some of the younger male verbal artists occasionally resort to joint performances with well-known *jelimusow*. Thus, for example, Azizsitén'k has recorded only one music video for his 2011 album entitled *Tounga*. The music video, which accompanies the song “Tounga” on the album, features Azizsitén'k and the famous female *jeli*, Yaye Kanouté, more commonly known as Yayi Kanouté. The aesthetics of this music video borrows heavily from a style associated with the performance of the *jelimusow*. The opening shot is of a man playing the traditional Malian string instrument, the *kora*, with Yaye Kanouté’s voice in the background. Then we move on to a shot of Yaye Kanouté, dressed in the gorgeous robes typical of the *jelimusow* and sitting next to Azizsitén'k, who is dressed in the typical fashion for a young Malian male rather than in a recognizably Western outfit. In this song about emigration to Europe, Yaye Kanouté engages in the kind of moralizing singing associated with the *jelimusow*, while Azizsitén'k adopts the more politically oriented critique associated with male rappers and slam poets as he raps in both Bamanankan and

³¹ See Dorothea Schulz (2001a:345, 348) and (2002:801) for further discussion of this phenomenon.

³² Schulz (2001a:366) notes, for example, that Malian female pop singers “sell their pop songs as ‘moral instruction’ to the public.” She attributes their fame in part to the growing popularity of “public moralizing” in local Malian music performance (*ibid.*:349).

³³ Schulz (2002:805) describes young men in Mali as being confined to a status of “adulthood-in-waiting” due to limited opportunities for economic advancement, which also result in dependence on parents and elders. I would argue that Schulz’s very apt description applies not only to the social standing of these young men but also to their standing as verbal artists. By associating writing with new media, these young men and literate verbal artists are able to achieve some degree of professional and artistic autonomy, enabling them to escape that extended period of “adulthood-in-waiting.”

French. The distinction between the moralizing tone of the *jelimusow* and either the social and political critique or the longing for pleasure expressed by slam poets and rappers is fairly representative of the genres preferred by these different types of performers. I would suggest that in making this music video, which has been posted on YouTube,³⁴ Azizsiten'k is attempting to broaden the audience for his politically engaged poetry by tapping into the local popularity of the *jelimusow*, while reiterating his distance from the typical practice of the *jeli* by performing verbal arts genres that neither male nor female *jeli* perform, and by associating his performance with writing.

I am certainly aware that, unlike BoubacHaman and N'BEE, many African and non-African rappers do invoke African traditions of orality to explain their verbal performance.³⁵ Statements by such rappers need to be taken seriously as an indication of how they would like their work to be positioned locally and globally. To the same degree, however, those African rappers and performance poets who reject this kind of identification also need to be taken seriously for what their statements suggest about a different kind of local positioning. By insisting that their work should not be viewed as iterations of traditional oralities, these literate verbal artists are signaling that their privileging of an oral mode of dissemination does not stem from a desire to accommodate local sensibilities accustomed to traditional orality, or from a desire to make concessions to widespread illiteracy in their community. On the contrary, they repeatedly emphasized the newness and novelty of the verbal practices they were engaged in, manifested in various ways and especially through composition by writing.

While an unwillingness to identify with traditional orality has deep cultural roots among some literate Mande verbal artists in particular, their stance does have wider implications for assessing the significance of writing in an age when small media technological devices have become increasingly available to individual operators in poor countries. At a time when highly educated verbal artists often find themselves as dependent on these technologies for textual dissemination as minimally educated practitioners of "traditional orality,"³⁶ a stated investment in writing is one way for verbal artists who happen to be ambivalent about identification as performers to separate themselves from the crowd by presenting themselves as authors, and therefore also as artists engaged in a mode of textual composition that is different from that of the traditional *griots*. In this instance, references to writing have a particular value that is distinct

³⁴ The music video for "Tounga" can be viewed online at the following address: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufh2dFQzYwg>

³⁵ One thinks, for example, of the popular rap artist in Ghana, Okyeame Kwame, who has adopted the Akan term for the traditional spokespersons for royalty, *Okyeame*, as his stage name. Obviously, this is an attempt to link his hip hop performance with the performance of traditional verbal artists.

³⁶ Consider, for example, the many Malian female popular singers who now disseminate their performances through music videos that are broadcast on television and also posted on the Internet. Many of these popular singers are literate, although not highly educated, and rely on skilled personnel to record these videos, unlike the rappers described here who produce their own work with the assistance of peers. Some of the most popular female singers explicitly identify themselves as descended from a lineage of the *griots*. See Schulz 2001a for more on the female popular singers and their music videos.

from the significance attached to print publication.³⁷ Thus, the slam poets and rappers such as BoubacHaman and Tal-B who choose to distance themselves from well known local traditions of orality represent a special cadre of verbal artists who have specifically decided to foreground their activity as composers of texts while downplaying their activity as performers, although they are completely dependent on verbal performance for dissemination of their texts. In contrast, those literate African storytellers, slam poets, and rappers who prefer to present themselves as performers rather than as composers of texts privilege a closer alignment with traditional orality.

In addition to emphasizing their own activity as composers of texts, these verbal artists also offered a distinctive view of the function of the creative text. Both the slam poets and rappers mentioned thus far voiced a criticism of the *griots* that was specifically textual, calling attention to what they viewed as the narrow thematic range of *griot* texts, complaining that “it’s only praise-singing.” BoubacHaman extended this criticism to other traditional genres, including hunter songs that spoke only about hunting. All three types of composer-performers appeared especially irritated by the complete implication of the *griots* in a local process that Karin Barber (2007:134) describes as the “making of persons,” or the construction of local reputations for acknowledged and would-be dignitaries.³⁸ By contrast, King (2009) stated that “rap is the voice of the people,” a verbal art that can be used to express a wide variety of opinions about a range of topics and from a number of different subject positions. In effect, the Malian rappers and slam poets almost seemed to concur with the opinion of Eric Havelock (1986:45, 86) that oral poetry becomes mere entertainment once writing has been introduced in a society, and poetry no longer serves the function of an information storage system for the society.

“Post-Literate” Oralities?

Drawing on Ong’s theories, Tricia Rose (1994:86) specifically identifies rap with a post-literate orality, where “orally influenced traditions . . . are embedded in a post-literate, technologically sophisticated cultural context.” Eric Pihel (1996:249) too uses the term “post-literate” to describe rap, but with a somewhat expanded understanding of the term, emphasizing not just the literacy of the composers and the community in which they operate, but also the role of pre-writing in composition and performance. He notes, for example, that “most rap music is pre-written and meant to be performed” (*ibid.*:250). Given the fact that they operate in a setting where a plurality of citizens and consumers of texts cannot in fact read or write, the verbal artists discussed here can be described as practicing a post-literate orality only where post-literate refers to pre-writing. Indeed, the fact that these verbal artists are not just literate but very highly

³⁷ The argument here thus echoes the point made by Adejunmobi (2008:164) that “in the multilingual societies of the developing world, the ideological significance of print media and the production of written texts for many modernizing activists will begin to diminish during the twenty-first century, often in conjunction with a reevaluation of orality . . .”

³⁸ In their discomfort over how *griots* traditionally interacted with their “patrons,” these rappers and slam poets appeared to echo the ambivalence of the U.S.-based Malian film scholar, Manthia Diawara (1998:110-16), regarding his encounter with a female *griot* in a Bamako restaurant on a return visit to Mali in 1995.

educated for their community³⁹ surely accounts for much of their determination to foreground writing and to distance themselves from practitioners of “traditional orality.”

If Macalou the storyteller treated printed writing as a useful follow-up to performance, the rappers and slam poets considered writing a prerequisite for performance. In their view, a satisfactory performance would not be possible in the absence of written texts. When I first met Azizsiten’K and BoubacHaman, for example, they were teaching high school students how to write slam poetry as part of an extra-curricular program at school. The funding for this particular workshop came through a French initiative called “Bibliothèque sans frontière” (“Library Without Borders”), and whose name clearly suggests an interest in writing and in books. The emphasis in the workshop was on writing rather than on performing, though the spoken word was the only acknowledged outlet for these written texts.

It is also important to note that, like the rappers, these slam poets were not using writing to ensure some kind of permanence and fixity for their work. Nor were they engaged in the kind of activity that Barber (2007:185, 198) describes as self-writing, or personal writing. From the moment of composition, these texts were destined for public circulation through performance. Accordingly, they rarely engaged in improvised performances, preferring to read from a written text (which is what they encouraged students to do), or to memorize a previously written text. In effect, writing mattered for these verbal artists because it provided the very basis for the making of texts. Indeed, these Malian rappers and slam poets could self-identify as composers of texts in the absence of print publications bearing their names mainly to the extent that their particular arrangement of words existed, independent of any performance, in a written format. In their view, without writing there could be no texts. This opinion obviously runs counter to that of many scholars who hold that writing does not by itself make textuality. It also runs counter to the convictions that motivated earlier generations of African writers to present traditional oral texts as equivalent to written literatures.



Fig 2: Students at Lycée Manssa Maka Diabaté learning how to write slam poetry in March 2009. Their teachers are BoubacHaman and Azizsiten’k. Photo by the author.

³⁹ All these verbal artists have at least a high school education, and several have a college-level education or the possibility of pursuing their education beyond high school. After completing high school, N’BEE trained as an electrician before starting part-time work in a printing press. Azizsiten’k has completed his undergraduate education. BoubacHaman and Macalou are particularly well educated with graduate-level degrees.

Conclusion

Digital technology is undoubtedly enhancing the stature of both mediated and unmediated forms of performance as acceptable modes of textual distribution for literate verbal artists in low literacy contexts. Although such self-described composers of texts operate mainly as performers of texts that may never be published, the revenge of the spoken word does not apparently foreclose identification with writing. The specific significance of writing for the verbal arts performer exposed to new media does depend, though, on a range of variables. Macalou the storyteller opted for transcription following performance and hoped for eventual publication as a way of modernizing the transmission of traditional stories. For their part, the slam poets were not interested in producing written texts for circulation in print. Instead, they used references to writing to distinguish themselves from unschooled or minimally schooled verbal artists whose works also circulate through live performance. By contrast, rappers who had not yet achieved a desired level of prominence as commercially oriented performers tended to use references to writing for legitimating their claims to be verbal artists worth taking seriously.

What is especially noteworthy is the extent to which writing continues to function as a marker of composition for literate verbal artists in a location where there are relatively few opportunities for print publication. There are a number of reasons for this tendency to foreground one's writing practice. In the first place, and with respect to the kinds of traditional verbal artists who are acknowledged as composers of texts, the verbal artists discussed here find suspect the artistic integrity of a composition process characterized by undue responsiveness to current and potential patrons. Hence, their emphatic and repeated repudiations of improvisation, which is considered the practice of traditional verbal artists in their performances.⁴⁰ These literate verbal artists want to be known as composers, but composers who operate in a different mode than that of those traditional verbal artists who also engage in composition. Second, the presenters of the most prestigious oral texts in that environment, namely, traditional canonical texts, tend to be viewed as performers of these texts rather than as composers. Indeed, texts in these predominantly oral settings acquired their canonical status, *inter alia*, by appearing resistant to improvisation and thus to further composition. This distinction matters in settings where "traditional orality" still generates considerable audiences and remains the paradigmatic model of verbal arts performance. It matters for verbal artists who want to be also known as composers, and not solely as performers. In the last place, when texts are produced and disseminated using new media in these contexts, the identity of the composer/author is rarely highlighted; instead, these texts tend to be associated with particular performers rather than with particular composer/authors. In this regard, the impact of new media on ideas about composition is quite similar to the effects of "traditional orality" on the dissemination of canonical texts.

It is for these reasons that the figure of the "autonomous" composer/author continues to be associated with writing despite the scarcity of outlets for print publication. The relative rarity of successful authorship further ensures an especially high regard for authors as composers of texts, with none of the ambiguity surrounding the status of *griots* as composers of texts. Indeed,

⁴⁰ According to Moulard-Kouka (2005:239), rappers in Senegal exhibited a similar disinclination towards improvisation.

although new media often make performance a more viable option for textual dissemination where advanced literacy is not the norm, literate performer-composers appear to be strengthening a tendency to associate composition with writing, and to emphasize distinctions between respectable composers of texts (who are ideally literate) and sundry performers of texts (who do not have to be literate).

Despite the fact that their own texts circulate mainly through performance, some contemporary verbal artists in low literacy settings are thus highly motivated to invoke writing as a non-negotiable criterion of authorship and textuality. As has been illustrated here, some choose this route in order to enhance the modernity of their activity and to disassociate themselves from traditional practices of orality that remain popular in communities where advanced literacy is not yet the norm. Others embrace writing because they have not yet achieved desired acclaim as performers and can, in the meantime, use writing to legitimate their vocation as artists by presenting themselves as composers of texts. To conclude, those verbal artists in low literacy societies who continue to profess attachment to writing, notwithstanding the expanding prominence of live and digitally mediated performance, tend to invoke writing not mainly as a mode of textual dissemination but as a marker of authorship and as a means for accrediting their own modernity and non-normative expressions of creativity. Writing thus retains a certain kind of significance for literate verbal artists in these low literacy environments, even as performance becomes an even more prominent means of textual dissemination thanks to digital media.

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