

***Yembaphone* literature and women's power of expression through traditional song**

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ABSTRACT: Our paper poses the problem of the progressive disappearance of traditional songs in the Yemba linguistic zone. Thus, in a cultural context dominated by foreign languages, and consequently, by the influence of modern songs, how can women, guardians of tradition, rescue traditional songs from the fatality of their disappearance in order to safeguard them, conserve them with the aim of transmitting cultural heritage, intangible heritage, and measure the stakes? As a cultural heritage, they are transmitted from generation to generation through the much more feminine speech, and the texts of this register of songs constitute an oral literary corpus, making two oral genres in their own right. Hence the theme: “Yembaphone Literature and Women’s Power of Expression through Traditional Song”. At this level, our research is concerned with the safeguarding and even the popularisation of Yemba traditional songs by women’s associations. The description of the aesthetic and symbolic value of this oral literature and the analysis of the perspectives of their popularisation was done through ethno-linguistics. We have come to the conclusion that the preservation and popularisation of this cultural heritage requires associative movements that place women at the centre of public events. Thus, it would be beneficial, in view of the rapidly changing world, to rethink the possibility of readapting Yemba traditional songs to the current context in the Yemba linguistic zone. This could galvanise the new generation and help to find a solution to their reluctance with regard to Yemba traditional songs. A reflection on the new forms of Yemba traditional songs in the context of cultural domination in the Yemba linguistic zone could be the subject of further research.

KEYWORDS : *Women, traditional song, speech, heritage, orality, urbanisation.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Cameroon is considered as a miniature representation of Africa because of its great cultural diversity. The country is home to more than 250 ethnic groups and languages, which implies the existence of several dance rhythms and, by extension, traditional songs. The song remains central to the daily life of the people. It is present and performed at every circumstance and stage of life. To speak of songs in Africa is therefore also to evoke the history and living culture of a continent. They are most often performed by women according to the circumstances. In the *Yemba* linguistic zone, this is still a reality. This observation aroused our curiosity about the theme: *Yembaphone* Literature and Women’s Power of Expression through Traditional Song. Our subject poses the problem of the progressive disappearance of the YTS in the *Yemba* linguistic zone. In a cultural context dominated by foreign languages, and governed by a set of rules that accompanies speaking in traditional society, how can *Yemba* women, guardians of tradition, use song to get their message across? In order to carry out this analysis, the corpus underlying this research is made up of six *Yemba* traditional songs (YTS), which we consider to be the most representative of the fifty recorded in the field.

Several works have been carried out on the *Bamileke* traditional song. In the *Yemba* oral literature, Albert Etienne Temkeng in his thesis is interested in the semiotics of *Bamileke* oral poetry, the case of the praise of twins among the *Yemba*. In his study, he highlights the semantic value of these songs which have an honorific connotation for the twins without, however, studying the word as a significant aspect of this literature. Noel Ledoux FOTIO JOUSSE defended a thesis in 2008 on « La condition de la femme dans les chansons traditionnelles *ngiembong* d’hier et d’aujourd’hui ». He shows thus the place of women in oral poetry. Limiting himself to pointing out, through a meticulous study of a hundred of songs collected, that even if the text itself has not changed, the *Ngimbong* woman has nevertheless experienced a certain emancipation under the winds of globalisation.

Isabelle Gautraya publishes “*Je chante*” in a collection of nursery rhymes which is a collection of written nursery rhymes that help to meditate in the mind. Imre Katana’s lullabies present the song as a reflection of a culture, the history of a people and the state of mind of the speaker. They are a very important form of expression for women in this society. Except that they do not transcend the simple level of the status of women to analyse them as instruments of power.

Basile-Juléat Fouda in his work *Sur l’esthétique littéraire négro-africaine*, precisely in chapter 1 entitled “De la littérature orale négro-africaine”, circumscribes “oral literature” in history according to the French Paul Sebillot who invented it at the end of the last century. This is to designate literatures without writing. He thus shows that despite the recentness of the terminology, oral literatures are as old as the world. However, he points out that historically, language appears in two distinct and irreducible forms: written language and oral language. He concludes by simply showing in the structure of Black African oral literature a literature-archive of traditions. Without claiming that our review is exhaustive, we note that the above-mentioned works certainly highlight traditional songs. However, it seems that even though some of them highlight the status of women through song, the notion of women’s power of speech in song is not addressed. This study therefore proposes to study the women’s speech in the *Yemba* traditional song and measure its significance. Our analysis is articulated in two main points. Section one is focused on the *Yemba* women in traditional song, starting from the context of production of the performative act of language. Section two will analyse the expressiveness of female speech from the different themes of traditional female power.

II. YEMBA WOMEN AND TRADITIONAL SONG

1- On the Production Context of the *Yemba* Traditional Song

Traditional songs, if we take into consideration their qualification, belong to tradition. They therefore have a distant and almost indeterminate past, if we are to speak of their origin. In fact, it is not easy to determine the date of origin of traditional songs. We simply remember that they come from ancient traditions. The origin of these songs can be traced back right to the ancestors, or even to the very existence of man. Indeed, man is born in songs. The traditional song is part of the theory of orality¹. Milman Parry based this theory on two main foundations: his recent discovery of the formulas in Homer and the trips he made to Yugoslavia in the early 1930s with his assistant Albert Lord.

The oral-formulaic theory or oralist theory (or Parry/Lord thesis, named after its two initiators) is a theory developed for the study of Homer’s epics by the American philologist Milman Parry in the 1930s, according to which the Homeric epics were elaborated in an oral tradition using a system of formal composition that allowed the aedic writers to improvise the verses of their poems directly in front of their audience, without any recourse to writing. From the outset, this is a comparative approach, since it results from an application to the Homeric text of hypotheses formulated on the basis of the study of the Serbo-Croatian epics; it has subsequently been extended to other cultures and other literary genres.

YTS, oral poetry, is part of the daily life of Africans who generally relax through song. They sing on all occasions, whether in happy or unhappy circumstances. According to Moussa Souleiman Obseh:

African poetry is linked to everyday life and as such can be uttered at any time by anyone: a mother singing a lullaby to put her baby to sleep, shepherds watering their flocks at wells, a warrior singing about his victory or claiming revenge, or even children playing guessing games.²

From this statement by Obsieh, we retain that the song integrates all the moments and stages of the life of the African people. As such, it can be sing by anyone. In the context of our study we have set our sights on songs performed by *Yemba* women. Women, according to our findings, are more apt to sing, as they are naturally emotional. They are synonymous with life and generate confidence wherever needed. The African woman is a relational being by essence. She knows how to create relationships and seems to be more active in events. YTS are therefore most performed by women. The *Yemba* traditional songs are part of the sung genre of oral literature that contributes to the great wealth of African oral poetry. YTS are classified as popular songs because all women of all categories can perform them and re-appropriate them according to their horizon of expectation. Lilyan Kesteloot says: “... As singing is a popular exercise, the poem is also within the reach of the people, and anyone who feels capable of doing it can do it, either by revising it or by repeating the existing

¹Viret, J, 1988, « La tradition orale dans le chant grégorien », Cahiers d’ethnomusicologie, 1988.

² Obsieh, M.S., « L’oralité dans la littérature de la corne de l’Afrique : traditions orales, formes et mythologies de la littérature pastorale, marques de l’oralité dans la littérature », Thèse de littérature française, Centre pluridisciplinaire des textes et cultures, Ecole Doctorale LISIT, Université de Bourgogne, 2012, p 55 (Translated by us)

ones.”³ In this study we will focus on traditional songs performed by *Yemba* women as mentioned in the general introduction. Among the *Yembaphones*, these songs are of various kinds: we have songs of wedding, of birth, of farm work, of death, etc. The difficulty in detecting the author of the YTS makes these songs a collective work (which belongs to no one, but is available to all). Amina Boudjellal, comparing the written and the oral work, speaks of “collective ownership” in these terms:

The author of the written story is its “owner”, its “creator”. But this is not the case for the author of the oral story or the oral tale in particular. The latter belongs to no one. At the same time, it is the “property”, the work of the whole community within which it is told and transmitted.⁴ In other words, unlike written literature, oral literature is much free and thus opens the field to diverse interpretations. A field that remains open to the community that produces the oral work and that calls upon various producers and circumstances on a daily basis. He speaks of the community of the work with reference to Luda Schnitzer who, to symbolise this “collective property”, compares it to “cathedrals” when he says:

The oral tale ignores its authors. Like cathedrals, it is born of a multitude of unknown fathers. Over the ages, each storyteller has used the traditional framework, embroidering it according to his or her own talent. While using the formulas and images created by his anonymous predecessors, he added his own discoveries, allusions to current events, fashionable clichés, jokes of the day. And in passing on his work to his descendants, he left them free to play with a text whose primary quality was its manageability.⁵

That said, YTS are oral productions that are spontaneous and therefore know nothing about the creator. They stand the test of time to become a true cultural masterpiece that not only builds up, but continuously matures over time. The interpreter of YTS is defined as the one who takes up a text, whether oral or written. In this case, it is the one who takes up the work of the community to which it identifies in order to convey its message. However, oral literature is susceptible to metamorphosis, to quote Dili Palai⁶.

2- From the Sung Word to the Performativity of Language

Performativity is the fact that a linguistic sign (statement, sentence, verb, etc.) itself achieves what it states; the sign is then said to be “performative”. The fact of using a sign brings about a reality. The performative statement “is therefore both a linguistic manifestation and an act of reality.”⁷ For Emile Benveniste, it is above all a question of pragmatics. Performativity depends on the speaker and the circumstances and not on the language alone⁸. When speaking of performativity, Peter L. Berger refers to “social constructions”. Here, attention must be paid to the contexts in which utterance takes place. All social reality is based on performative acts and “shared believes”, that is the collective representations that shape our individual ways of thinking, often unconsciously. Thus, ideas of thought are controlled by, and partly dependent on, the socio-cultural context (John Searle 1995)⁹.

III. THE EXPRESSIVENESS OF FEMALE SPEECH IN YEMBA TRADITIONAL SONGS

1. Plural Themes

The aesthetic study of the texts of the YTS reveals the richness of these texts. These oral texts are very symbolic and carry a lot of meaning. Basile Juléat Fouda states that: “Traditional oral literature is a refusal of free literary text [...] its literary production is always functional”¹⁰. The semantic significance of the texts is expressed in the various themes and functions of the YTS. The analysis of these two axes, rich in meaning, will make it possible to show the merits of exploring them and the benefits of making them available to others.

³ Kesteloot, L., « La poésie orale dans l’Ouest africain », *Ethiopiennes*, Number 56, 1992, consulted on the 08 August 2022.

⁴ Boudjellal, A., « Le conte à l’intersec une commutation du code écrit et de la tradition orale », *Saisir l’intermédialité, constructions et réception*, Numéro 4, Université de Ouargla, Algérie, Synergies Canada, 2012, p 124 (Translated by us).

⁵ Schnitzer, L., *Ce que disent les contes*, Paris, Sorbier, 1981, p 62 (Translated by us).

⁶ Dili Palai, 1970, « Oralite africaine : enjeux contemporaine d’une métamorphose », Clé, Yaoundé.

⁷ Austin, J., *How to Do Things with Words*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1962 (Translated By Us).

⁸ Benveniste, E., « La Philosophie Analytique et Le Langage », dans *Problème De Linguistique Générale*, Paris, Gallimard, 1963, p. 267.

⁹ Searle, J., *The Construction of Social Reality*, New York, The Free Press, 1995.

¹⁰ (Translated by us).

- The Importance of a Child

The child is of capital importance in the *Bamileke* society in general. The *Yemba* that concern us in this study give it a special place in their customs. The child is “a gift from God”. This sacralisation of the child, an immaterial good, we would say purely divine, that is incorruptible (who does not know) shows the delicate respect of the latter and the capital place of the child in society. The child in the *Yembaphone* territory is a necessity, a blessing, a grace, in short an opportunity, a guarantee of the perpetuation of the clan. It is a guarantee of the expansion and extension of the lineage. It is a strong hand that not only helps the woman in her domestic tasks but also constitutes an ally for his father.

CTY1: What would you give me?

Chorus: What would you give?

Soloist: 1- If not a child

2-What would you give me?

3-Ye if not a child

The woman in African societies is synonymous with life. Her primary role is assigned to motherhood. The child has a double significance in the life of the woman. She attaches great importance to it. Motherhood is a pride that in addition to bringing joy to the family, it is a guarantee of security and an important aspect of the woman's condition. Although the condition of the mother is almost ignored in Western societies, which consider the child as an obstacle, a brake on development. For many, female emancipation in African societies is achieved, including the possibility of being a mother.

-The symbolism of sex

Yemba women have developed a formula, that is a specific way when they want to talk about sex issue. In the African culture, it is not often permitted to talk whenever sex is mentioned anyhow. This is always seen as a taboo. Hence *Yemba* women have developed a free way of talking through songs that permits them to talk about sex without restriction, at times using figures of speech such as euphemism to transmit their message. The song that follows is a pure illustration :

CTY 2: Give something

Chorus : Hand in hand

11-Attention (bis) it's time

12-Give what massa wants

13-Give what madam wants

14- Hand in hand

In this song, *Yemba* women emphasise on the importance of interdependence in the life of a couple. Each of them must do everything to respect their commitments. They also insist on the conjugal duty within the couple. They make it clear that once in the home, the two spouses form a single body, hence the expression “hand in hand”. This is all the more interesting in that it is not just one sex, but both sexes that are being addressed, meaning that it is not just the man who has a right over his wife, but both. In other words, both the woman and the man have the full right to demand satisfaction when needed. It is therefore the duty of the partner to fulfil the desire of the other for a better collaboration and a home that is not only durable but stable.

- The Satire of Unfaithfulness

Unfaithfulness in the broadest sense is perceived as lack of fidelity and dereliction of duty. In this case it is deception with regard to the marital relationship. In the *Yemba* songs, this act is decried. This means that it is very present in this territory. YTS 47 is therefore used to expose the behaviour of a woman who lacks truthfulness and accuracy, thus not honouring her marriage vow. It is important to note that this song is taken up by women as it is the man who actually exposes his wife's infidelity while complaining about society which he believes has caused this change. The woman who cheats does not do it alone. There is a kind of double deception, as the man acknowledges that he trusted his relatives who then paid him back by taking his wife away. However, her entourage encourages her in this act.

CTY 3: What I have become

Chorus: Turn me and see

Soloist : 1- Moise look at what I have become

2-Moise look at me mother

3-Ye when I was marrying my wife I didn't see you

4-Today you are the first to turn her

5-You turn until you turn the right side to look

- The Place of Work

Speaking of the place of work in the life of the man, it is a question for both sexes. However, in our analysis we have come to the conclusion that here it is more a question of the place of work in the life of the woman. Unlike in the past, women today are no longer consumers but increasingly understand their role in the home through the work they do, as the song below shows:

CTY 4: Cultivate

Chorus : Cultivate the earth does not lie

4-Ye the ration at home in Dschang is the handle of the hoe

6-With this we eat a bit of everything

8- The ration in Douala is three hundreds

10-Mama to eat the kneaded banana

12-Yeah, the Yaounde ration is 200

14-Mama with that they eat the rice

20-If you don't eat it's because you are lazy

In this song, the soloist shows the benefit of a woman giving space to work. The rural woman, and the *Yemba* woman in particular, should not neglect her work in the fields. For most, it is the best source of provisioning that guarantees her balance by allowing her not only to reach a position of self-sufficiency, but to participate at least in the education of her children. This can be seen in the verse below "32-Ye to pay for the children's school". This means that she must make herself useful and contribute, like the man, to the financial balance of the household. Also, the woman who cultivates is free from need. She does not depend on her husband for everything. Once she "handles the hoe well", she has her ration. Hence the latitude to consume whatever she wants. The behaviour of lazy and dependent women is decried here. It is suggested that if they do not eat enough, it is because they have deliberately chosen not to work.

- The Mystery of Death

Death is a mystery that is difficult to understand because it is elusive, even inexplicable. As a mystery, the concept is not in the realm of the intellect at all, as it surpasses all human intelligence. Since it is a mystery, it is therefore incomprehensible, and no one can define its contours, especially since it is a divine phenomenon and can only have a divine explanation. It is therefore understandable that it is not up to the natural man to question it. The *Yemba* women lament this situation in the following verses:

CTY 5: It is the truth

Chorus 1 : It is true he is dead

Soloist: 1-Is it true that he is dead?

2-What didn't work

3-Is it true that Dongmo is dead?

10-If we could see death we would buy it with money

11-But since we can't see death we go back with money

The song notes the women's feelings about the loss of one of their own. Indeed, they are unable to explain this mechanism. So unacceptable is the news that they feel they are dreaming. Hence the expression "Is it true?" The temerity of death is presented here. It is with regret that the women find themselves powerless before it. They could have done anything, even if it meant buying with money so that the deceased could return to them.

2. Traditional Female Power in the *Yemba* Song

Among the *Yemba*, no word is devoid of meaning. Every word is significant and every expression carries meaning, and carries a symbol that reflects the social identity of the *Yemba* people. These words are meant to shape behaviour in society or better still are indicators of the cultural practices of the surrounding world.

Folktales and songs constitute different kinds of oral traditions as typical ways for Cameroonian women to express their feelings. A region in which the female gender suffers from marginalisation, with little or no power of open protest. In this region, in such circumstances, women have found different methods of protest in reaction to this domination by men, notably through songs. In the *Yemba* linguistic zone in particular, saying a sacred word is a predominantly male domain. In order to make themselves heard and above all to ensure that their words are taken into account in the traditional environment, women use several means of expression, including song. MBOW, P. states to this effect:

Women have often been excluded from the spaces where important decisions were taken. However, her body has served as a site for expressing her desires, wishes and impulses: dance, dress, gait, looks, but also her daily life have often helped her to express her thoughts; for example, the blow of the drumstick, the song of the lullabies or of the women at the time of family ceremonies, etc.¹¹

Indeed, for this generation, the YTSs allowed women to restore balance in the home, they allowed them to acquire a solid moral culture. At that time, speaking still respected the canons of its execution: one did not speak in any way, and not just anyone spoke. In short, speech was regulated, subject to prohibitions. Aware of this, the women subtly exposed their complaints and made themselves understood more easily without going to court by means of these poems. These songs were also placed as regulators of society, they dealt with the rights and duties of the people and at the same time expressed the sanctions and consequences to which those who violated the rules of life were exposed. To this end, every child who was born grew up spontaneously learning the rules and prohibitions of society; these songs instilled in him great moral values and showed him the importance of man in society. This is the case of YTS 34: The Hen

CTY 6: The Hen

Chorus: Don't catch other people's chickens

Soloist : 1- Don't catch someone's hen (bis)

2- Don't catch someone's hen

3-If someone catches someone else's hen to do her "fe'e"¹²

4-So even a hundred years later

5-Even a hundred years later

6-The little hen will get up and ask her

7-Eh Does Martha understand?

8- Don't catch someone's hen

9- Oh, Don't catch anyone's hen

In this song, the child is presented as the most precious thing; a good that cannot be exchanged for money. These songs, according to their advocates, are reassuring for man in general, and show the primacy of the latter over everything else. Man is thus seen as an intangible asset, the best wealth of the earth. Hence the prohibition of using him to enrich himself through certain ritual practices. In addition, in the YTS "the reward", women make apology of the child while showing that it is a precious good which should be well maintained since it becomes a subject of joy and source of family and social well-being. It is a pride with which the *Yemba* woman boasts. The verses opposite give us more details.

Moreover, women are not totally on the side-lines in the use of the sacred word. Those who hold the sacred word are highly honoured among the *Yemba*. The sacred word is generally spoken by the notables or privileged people who, under the authority of the chief, can say it or announce it. This is why we have among them the "*djwissi*"¹³ and the "*manissi*" who are recognised as non-ordinary women, endowed with supernatural power. They serve as a transmission belt between the divine and man. In addition to this category of women, the sacred word can also be spoken by women who live in the chieftaincy or who occupy an important rank such as that of the Great Royal in the *Ambiguous Adventure*¹⁴. In any case, the sacred word is traditionally masculine. It is not the prerogative of women since they refer to their husbands for personal matters. However, because of the relevance of the messages and the social impact that accompanies them, the woman as mother and first educator speaks strong, interesting and meaningful words to preserve the family in an ordinary tone through the YTS. As a subtle being in essence, she will know well through these songs how to speak and be heard in different ways in communication situations.

It is therefore understandable why the *Yemba* woman places particular importance on bodily expression without setting aside sexuality in the YTS. Women's speech is much more controlled and observed, to the point

¹¹ Mbow, P., « Femmes et images : la production culturelle chez les Africaines » dans *Clio : Femmes, Genre, Histoire. Socialisme « réel à l'épreuve du genre »*, Numéro 19, Paris, Editions Belin, 2004, p. 118 (Translated by us).

¹² Sacrificial ritual practiced in most *Bamileke* villages. It consists of a libation session and several other practices with the main aim of summoning the spirits and calling for the protection of the ancestors. This practice can also be recommended by a diviner to prevent bad luck and chase away bad luck. Some people believe in its purifying role as well as its power to act on the lives of humans.

¹³ From its literal translation woman of God, they are recognised as the seers, those who have the power to predict the future in the village.

¹⁴ Kane, C. H., *Ambiguous Adventure*, trad. Katherine Woods, New York, 1963.

where from childhood they receive a much harsher education in speaking. Thus in the *Yemba* linguistic zone, women can only utter simple words; they do not have the status of uttering sacred words. YTSs are the bearers of wise and subtle words through which women make themselves heard. These words can be gentle, violent, emotional or hurtful, but they carry mysteries that need to be decoded in order to be understood. We speak of codified speech.

In Africa, no word is ever free. In all African linguistic communities, as among the *Yemphaphones*, speech is significant and is never taken lightly. Speech always carries meaning and is most often spoken in a veiled manner. The women's words that make up our corpus show numerous figures of speech and code languages. Affin O Laditan¹⁵ believes that codified speech should not be understood as ordinary or simple speech. On the contrary, it is very elaborate since it contains verbal images, metaphors, quotations, proverbs, etc. In everyday life, the art of conversation exists and good talkers are recognised and their reputation goes beyond the borders of their village. Nowadays, good talkers are much in demand during ceremonies where they play the role of master of ceremonies and facilitators.

IV. CONCLUSION

Our ambition in carrying out this work was to show how YTS is a means of expression for women through the power of speech. However, in a context strongly influenced by modernism, the exogenous culture seems to be much more valued to the detriment of the local culture which is full of language. We conducted a reflection based on the corpus of YTSs collected in the *Yemba* linguistic zone of Dschang, through women's associations, via the traditional chieftaincies, notably the superior chieftaincies of *Foto*, *Bafou*, *Foréké*, and those of the third degree, *Batsingla*, *Fonakeukeu*, to mention only these. We also visited the outlying villages of the city of Dschang, namely: *Fondonera*, *Fongo-tongo*, and *Fokamezo*. Once our texts were collected, they were transcribed and translated into French to make them more accessible to all. To this end, we called upon the so-called ethno-linguistic and postcolonial theories, whose aim is to work alongside postcolonial discourses, in order to better read and judge the mechanisms of the past of colonised peoples. From these multidisciplinary approaches, we retain two theories which, it would seem, have a compatible relationship, and which have helped to better define the contours of this analysis. The first describes and explains linguistic facts and processes that encompass semantic analysis and linguistic variability in the contextual and socio-cultural situation of the communication act. It thus highlights the dynamism of *Yemba* women in YTS, despite some phonic variations. Faced with the problem posed by the present study, the women's associations, since they are the collection point of the corpus, seem to be the promoters insofar as they constitute a regrouping pole of women. This being the case, it is the place *par excellence* for the development of women on the one hand and for learning on the other. Traditional songs are not prohibited in any way. In the performance process, the floor is open to whoever wants to take it. This freedom allows the *Yemba* woman to express herself and to address many subjects that sometimes require a whole protocol. However, in the *Yemba* linguistic zone, they are still highly exposed to the offers of globalisation. This constitutes a brake on the safeguarding of the YTS in the said locality. The new generation, in contrast to the older generation, is in denial about the traditional songs and is still being shaped by the exogenous culture. This being the case, the younger women, unlike the older ones, find it difficult to perform a YTS. In view of this situation, it would be beneficial to rethink the possibility of readapting YTSs to the current context in the *Yemba* linguistic zone. This could galvanise the new generation and help to find a solution to their reluctance regarding YTS. Reflection on new forms of YTS in the context of cultural domination in the *Yemba* linguistic zone could be the subject of further research.

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