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إفريقيا وتحديات القرن الواحد والعشرين

**Orality, Modernity and African Development:  
Myth as Dialogue of Civilizations**

Kenneth Inyani Simala  
Masinde Muliro

**5 - 9 / 12 / 2011**

Rabat Maroc / Morocco

## **Abstract**

This paper discusses the various ways in which orality provides an indispensable, eternally-expanding guide to reading, writing, living and creating the African world of the past, present and future. Examining the intimate correlation between orality, myth and modernity, the paper demonstrates how an indigenous resource can be harnessed in dealing with development challenges facing Africa. While scholars have been acutely conscious of the myth in African orality, they have too often missed its cues on the challenges of modernity. Although African orality has been regarded as myth and nothing more by many scholars, its mix of multiple voices, its fusion of personal and communal historical experiences, its fragments of narrativity, its riveting imagery and layered allusiveness, all remain hallmarks of a response to modernity. Although the oral tradition in Africa is always based on myth, and despite its ubiquity and role, African orality and its importance on the continent is a subject that is not yet widely known. Whereas orality stands both as a representation of the concrete facts of the collective experience of African people and as a reconstruction of their consciousness induced by engagements with modernity, the concept has remained alien in existing studies. Many scholars have treated African orality superficially and contemptuously as largely mythical and not modernist. Yet, African orality explores, recreates and seeks meanings in human experience, contemplating and celebrating its diversity, complexity and strangeness of interactions of civilizations at different times. However, with the turn to orality, there is a growing consciousness of cultural identity and with it myth is becoming a domain of great intellectual interest to various scholars of African studies.

While much of what has been said by mostly non-African scholars so far represents the notion of traditional myth, a closer reexamination of the oral tradition reveals that it is not marginal to issues defining modern society, including science and technology. This paper argues that what has generally been dismissed as myth is a massively complex intellectual reflection and perception on civilizations in contact, conflict and conversations that is in response to modernity. Myths belong to traditional oral African philosophy. Yet, there is a particular worldview associated with myth. In this way, orality becomes an intellectual engagement and negotiation between the ancient and modern worlds. The great tradition of African orality represents the depth, achievement, and ambience of the people's culture. The paper argues that unlike in the West where written culture is a sign of modernity, the oral-tradition in Africa, as a people's wisdom, becomes a marker for modernity, an ever-moving point marking off our own present from a long past. The paper acknowledges that there are

alternative forms of knowledge and cultural transmission outside the sphere of literate modernity and that African orality provides an alternative form of knowledge that needs to be appreciated as the continent grapples with the challenges of development in the twenty first century and beyond. As an aspect of lore, orality attained its historicity as a living embodiment of African metaphysical principles and self-consciousness as a form of artistic representation at the moment it encountered the historical divide between tradition and modernity which are contesting each other. As a historical bridge across the divide between the past and the present, orality offers multiple perspectives on the spatial and temporal nature of African life and its civilizations. Thus, African orality is an enlightened 'text' invested with social and political capital which throws light to the paradigm of civilizations in dialogue.

Traditionally, orality has been a very important and dominant progressive and innovative medium of the philosophical thought and intellectual expression of topical event, ideas, values and viewpoints in Africa. Orality articulates the African worldview as it is employed to communicate ideological standpoints and values. Indeed the development of African society and its values is reflected in orality. Apart from being the force, the energy, and the dynamism of the daily lives of most Africans, orality is a means to finding voices confronted with intrusion, diversity, difference and strangeness. Thus, orality can help study the perception of people and also narrate histories of nations, analyzing their historical, cultural or social transition. Orality is itself a history of language, culture, society and tradition. Oral tradition speaks the story of not only the past but also of contemporary social, cultural and linguistic structure of the African society. Within this context, it is argued that African orality is a complex narrative saturated with meaning and laden with historical significance and relevance to understanding modernity. African orality has innovative ideas that connect broader cultural trends and aspects that offer new perspectives on emerging global trends and challenges. The orality is not only a source of African history of civilization but an effort at preservation and reenactment of the events that brought about encounters amongst and between Africans and 'others'. The inclusion of African orality in the civilizations in dialogue debate is at once a decentering and a critique of the hegemonic and oppressive Western systems of thinking and knowing that define the modernity paradigm and exclude Africa. By exploring the epistemology in African orality, the goal is to privilege the oral philosophy that has existed on the margins of modern literate society and at the same time demonstrate how the two can blend in a creative way.