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The voices of women in Africa. Love, marriage, slavery, apartheid

It is “well-known” that in Africa women have both historically and in the present been oppressed, hidden, their voices silent. And it is true that they have suffered, and in many places (even, shockingly –in heritage from the past– in today’s Europe) still suffer the silent horrors of clitoridectomy, the non-individuality of polygamy and in many cases non-presence in the written historical records and the official hierarchies. With a few exceptions, mainly in West Africa, men have held the political power and for centuries it has been their voices that have come through loud and clear in African songs and stories and histories. This paper addresses this subject from the point of view both of the present and (principally) the past, drawing its examples from three centuries: back to the mid-nineteenth century in the voices of the external (mainly male) observers, and up to the present, partly continuing as it does from the past, with a speculative glance at the time yet to come –the history of the future. In the often-metaphorical and elusive language of story and song –a source too often neglected or too roughly and literally treated by historians– we can reach out more intimately than in most historical sources, to truths otherwise hidden from us (is there a lesson here, perhaps, not just for women but for all historians?).

The accepted powerlessness picture came out strongly in many of the stories that I, a woman, recorded in Sierra Leone in Western Africa in the 1960s, just after the ending in theory, if not quite yet in practice, of colonial rule there.¹ Only one of the scores of narra-

¹ Reported in Ruth Finnegan, *Limba stories and story-telling*, Oxford, Clarendon

tors was a woman (not for want of my trying). In the tales women are seen as devious, expensive, out for their own ends – a common preconception among men more generally. Among the Limba people with whom I spent many months this dates back, they say, to the beginning of marriage. They explained it in one of their stories – in a way just a fairy-tale but with its own truth.

Marriage began, I was told, because once upon a time a mythic old woman set up a market stall, as West African women do (and very powerful they are too). A beautiful young girl comes by and buys something for the then large sum of £4, soon afterwards a boy does the same. The old woman tells him:

“Follow this path. When you meet a girl standing there, when you meet her, as soon as you see her standing there with her breasts all firm, yakarakara – then don’t hesitate! When you see her, as soon as you reach her, then wupu! fall on her!” The boy went and did so. Then the girl said, “Hey! hey! See, I have bought good merchandise”. The man too said, “Hey! hey! See, we bought good merchandise from the old woman”.

But – the boy hadn’t paid!

The old woman said, “Very well”. Because of that, that is why you must now work for your wife. We Limba were cursed by that old woman to whom Kanu [God] sold the merchandise. The man refused to pay. Today if you want a wife, you have to give money. If you don’t, you won’t get one. That man used deceit on us. Now if you marry a wife, she just goes off!

It was the curse the old woman laid on us. She took the blessing and gave it to the girl. [...] The bridewealth he didn’t pay the old woman, that is what we have to pay for a wife, right up to this day.²

Told by a man the story reflects male resentment of marriage rules where unless he has wealthy parents he has to spend years

Press, 1967 (based on research and recording between 1960 and 1965, a period when, unlike more recently, one could reasonably speak, as did the colonial authorities, of an area of northern Sierra Leone being predominantly “Limba country”; further comment and material in Ruth Finnegan, *The oral and beyond: doing things with words in Africa*, Oxford, James Currey; Chicago, University of Chicago Press; Scottsville, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2007. Stories and histories, both oral and written, continue strongly throughout Africa, but the historical examples given in illustration here may well take a different form at the present time.

² Finnegan, *Limba stories and story-telling*, pp. 247-249 (text recorded in 1964).

earning money to pay for a wife, if he gets one at all. And after that she may not even be faithful or, even worse, obedient. Men know well that wives can speak for themselves and are only too ready to complain to their mothers and set off for home. Marriage, and wives, are a curse: expensive - and also a valuable.

Or take the story-origin of chiefship, regularly a male prerogative among the Limba. It was told by Karanke Dema, a man, a smith. Gentle and kindly he yet enunciates a typical Limba picture of women: their devious, unfaithful and untrustworthy nature and the right of men to rule. Kanu comes to earth to institute chiefship, looking for a wise man to give it to. He disguises himself as a beggar covered with filthy sores and goes round the villages on earth. Nowhere is he given welcome (a key Limba virtue, specially for a chief) but is instead driven off with sticks and curses. At last he comes to a hut where he is hospitably received, given warm water to wash, has a hen killed for him (to the disgust of the resident wife) and, best of all, kind words and dignity. He decides to bestow the chiefship on his (male) host and goes off to get the necessary insignia of office. But no! The man's wife Sirande (prototypical name for a woman in story) overhears and decides to twist the favour instead to –you have guessed it– her secret lover. Kanu comes back with the chiefly chair, staff and gown, even a special scarf and ready-made dress for Sirande as the senior wife.

He inevitably mistakes the (unnamed) lover for his kind host and gives him all the things of power. Typical! is the reaction of the mixed-sex audience (a regular concomitant of any narration), just like a wife! Mission completed Kanu sets off back to heaven. On the way he meets Sara and recognises the very gourd in which Sara had served Kanu palm wine. Kanu realises, and rights, his mistake and gives Sara a whip to turn Sirande into a wandering cat.³

Another sign of women's silence and, in male eyes, deserved subservience and due punishment? Yes indeed if we take such stories seriously –as we should. Not literally of course, that would be to be more credulous than either the tellers or the listeners, but certainly as carrying a resonant meaning, justifying current estimations. But there is more than just these and similar stories, for the continent is full of voices, women's as well as men's.⁴ They extend through the

³ Finnegan, *Limba stories*, pp. 240-244 (text recorded in 1961).

⁴ For some among the many works now available see B. W. Andrzejewski, S. Pilaszewicz, W. Tyloch (eds.) *Literatures in African languages*, Cambridge, Warszawa, Cambridge University Press, 1985; Karin Barber, *I could speak until tomorrow. Oriki*,

centuries, from the time of slavery to the new voices on the web, across the world and to new continents and new cultures, from India to Europe, the Caribbean too and the Americas.

During my own fieldwork I talked a lot with women, all with their own stories. Among them was the sad homeless semi-mad woman who had been accused of being a witch and told me of having red pepper rubbed in her eyes; the old lady with no relations who explained how she fended for herself from her own small hut; the head of the women's secret society; the lovely and not so lovely young women, eyes roving towards men too poor to buy a wife; the initiate girls daubed with white chalk, ready for marriage to some elderly man of wealth; the children with beads around their as-yet slim hips and pitchers of heavy water on their heads, enthusiastically entering into their duties as women. They knew well –and accepted– that they would live as co-wives in a polygamous household; but knew too that that very institution of polygamy was what would save them from the even heavier labour of a sole wife.

A male researcher –no fault to him– could not have got so close. Small wonder women's voices seldom come through in earlier reports. It does not necessarily mean they are “oppressed” –just that their voices remained unrecorded.

Many stories denigrated women, true. But women are admired too. I soon discovered in both my own fieldwork and from reading the research of others that women are not seldom the heroines too –the lovely girl who wins the man from his duties and saves him as well; the wily heroine who –the story teller clearly approves– avenges her murdered father by seducing then craftily killing his slayer; the four girls who in turn save the hero and win him the chiefship, ending, as often, with a dilemma: which girl had sacrificed most, so whose child should succeed him as chief? The question led to long argument– no one believed that the relations between men and women, familiar as they were, were either simple or unambiguous.

Other heroines were tragic, characters portrayed with pity and understanding, above all in Karanke's story of the man Deremu

women and the past in a Yoruba town, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1991; Ursula Baumgardt, Jean Derive (eds.), *Littératures orales africaines*, Paris, Karthala, 2008; Ruth Finnegan, *Oral literature in Africa*, Cambridge, Open Book, 2012²; Philip M. Peek, Kwesi Yankah (eds.), *African folklore. An encyclopedia*, New York, Routledge, 2004, and also, among others, the web pages <www.internationalafricaninstitute.org/biblio.html/>, <www.africaisola.org/_digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/AfricaFocus/>, <www.ru.ac.za/ilam/>, <www.hum2.nl/Verba_Africana/>.

whose mother was forced to give him over to a deadly spirit. It ends in disaster for to save himself he poisons her, but then buries her with honour. The love between mother and son is forever sacrosanct –here lay the tale’s reflective tragedy: that a mother, the one who, who everyone knew, would always protect her son, would be the very one to betray him.⁵

Women also appear as vivid personalities in the novels, poems and plays of both traditional and modern Africa. Though this is not the same as a woman’s direct voice, such forms, both positive and negative, indubitably help to shape women’s views of themselves –men’s too– and their confidence to articulate them.

The number of love songs is surprising –at least to those brought up to the idea that personal love is bound to be lacking in African cultures? But as often as in the familiar European literature women and girls are addressed as the precious objects of love.

Take the Hausa poem from nineteenth-century northern Nigeria for instance to “Dakabo, a maiden”:

Dakabo is tin!
 Dakabo is copper!
 Dakabo is silver!
 Dakabo is gold!
 Where greatness is a fortune
 The thing desired is (obtained only) with time.
 Thy things are my things,
 My things are thy things,
 Thy mother is my mother,
 My mother is thy mother,
 Thy father is my father,
 My father is thy father!
 Be patient, O maid!
 Be patient, young maiden!⁶

Or again, the Ghanaian (Akan):

I sleep long and soundly;
 Suddenly the door creaks.
 I open my eyes confused,
 And find my love standing by.⁷

⁵ Finnegan, *Limba stories*, pp. 113-117, recorded 1961.

⁶ Roland S. Fletcher, *Hausa sayings and folklore*, London, Frowde, 1912, p. 65.

⁷ J. H. Kwabena Nketia, *Folk songs of Ghana*, London, Oxford University

Somali love poetry is notable for its tenderness and appreciation of the beauty and, not seldom, the inaccessibility of women. The Somali balwo poems,⁸ a new genre that developed, particularly among the younger, urban, population in the mid twentieth century, provide striking articulations of romantic and emotional love –and the women know it. These are “miniature” and intense love lyrics, often only two lines long and characterised by genuine and deeply felt emotion. They are typically addressed to a beloved woman, either near or far off, sometimes seen only once and whom the poet has little hope of ever seeing again:

Woman, lovely as lightning at dawn,
Speak to me even once.

Or, longer,

I long for you, as one
Whose dhow in summer winds
Is blown adrift and lost,
Longs for land, and finds –
Again the compass tells –
A grey and empty sea.

and

A camel burdened with curved hut-poles broke loose and ran over
me
He set me alight like a blazing log-fire.
I saw you in a dream, adorned for a wedding-feast
I cry out to you - have trust in me!

or, as if struggling, vainly, with the beautiful cruel forces of nature:

O Distant Lightning! Have you deceived me?⁹

Press for University Press of Ghana at Legon, 1963, p. 37.

⁸ Described and illustrated in Bronislaw W. Andrzejewski, *The art of the miniature in Somali poetry*, «African Languages Review» 6, 1967, pp. 5-16.

⁹ The Somali examples are taken from Andrzejewski, *The art of miniature*; Id., Ioan M. Lewis, *Somali poetry: an introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1964; Margaret Laurence, *A tree for poverty. Somali poetry and prose*, Nairobi, ECW Press, 1954; and Ruth Finnegan, Graham Furniss, Martin Orwin (eds.), *Carried by a mystic wind. Andrzejewski on Somali language and literature*, Milton Keynes, Callender Press, 2013.

The Tanzanian Nyamwezi sing:

My love is soft and tender,
 My love Saada comforts me,
 My love has a voice like a fine instrument of music.¹⁰

The Kuanyama Ambo of South West Africa used antiphonal love poems in courtship, with call and response between man and girl. Usually some analogy is made between nature and human relationships. This comes too in the light-hearted love song by a young Soga in East Africa:

All things in nature love one another.
 The lips love the teeth,
 The beard loves the chin,
 And all the little ants go “brrr-r-r-r” together.¹¹

There are humorous and satiric songs too like the cheerful “town dancing song” sung in mid-twentieth-century Zulu townships in South Africa where words are subordinate to melody:

This is the girl that jilted me,
 The wretch of a girl that jilted me.
 At Durban, the dance leaders are afraid of us!
 Zululand, my home, I love you.
 Goodbye, Willie I like you too.¹²

We find the same sense of fun in the plentiful “drinking songs” which for all their lightness, can express the thought with economy and grace in true lyric form, as in the Zimbabwean Shona:

Keep it dark!
 Don't tell your wife,
 For your wife is a log
 That is smouldering surely!
 Keep it dark!¹³

¹⁰ Hugh Tracey, *Behind the lyrics*, «African Music», 3, 1963, p. 20.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ Hugh Tracey, *Songs from the kraals of Southern Rhodesia*, Salisbury, Rhodesian Print, 1933, song no. 9).

What of the women's views themselves, in their own voices?

In my own field research in Sierra Leone, not unparalleled, especially in West Africa, it was women, not men, who were the recognised expert in the highly revered specialist arts of song and dance, taking the lead role in the midst of the circling female chorus – the men were merely the exponents of the vastly less esteemed prose narratives. And if the Zulu and Xhosa praise poets were predominantly men, among the great Yoruba people they were women, handing down their expertise from mother to daughter documented now in the perceptive work of Karen Barber¹⁴ – one would never have thought it from the writings of earlier (predominantly male) researchers.

We hear women's voices directly in the poetry with which Africa, we now know, is so prolific.¹⁵ They sing reflectively for instance of their endless labour in the homestead or the fields:

If there were a little shade in the sky
If there were a little milk in
the gourd
If there were a little porridge in the calabash
The plowing would be more pleasant
The plowing in the mid-morning would be pleasant...¹⁶

Or of the need for patience before difficult mothers-in-law, death of children, widowhood, a song taken up by the women's chorus:

Patience, everything comes out of patience
Yes everything depends on patience.¹⁷

Girls and women speak for themselves, deploring or commenting, for example on the nature and experience of marriage or its prospect:

Chienquetues!
Tufais: oua-oua!¹⁸

¹⁴ Barber, *I could speak until tomorrow*.

¹⁵ Finnegan, *Oral literature in Africa, passim*.

¹⁶ Aissata G. Sidikou, Thomas A. Hale (eds.), *Women's voices from West Africa, an anthology of songs from the Sahel*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2012, p. 79.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 107.

¹⁸ Henri A. Junod, *Les chantes et les contes des Ba-Ronga*, Lausanne, Nabu Press, 1897, p. 46.

sing a Ronga bride's girlfriends cheerfully warning her of the ill-treatment she will likely receive at his parents' hands. A Ugandan (Baganda) song of farewell by a young girl going off to be married in the mid twentieth century is more reflective and personal:

Oh, I am gone,
 Oh, I am gone,
 Call my father that I may say farewell to him,
 Oh, I am gone.
 Father has already sold me,
 Mother has received a high price for me,
 Oh, I am gone.¹⁹

Akan "maiden songs" are good examples of verse that is both sung and composed by women, with women taking it in turns to lead the verses. Here they sing ecstatically to honour a loved one:

He is coming, he is coming,
 Treading along on camel blanket in triumph.
 Yes, stranger, we are bestirring ourselves.
 Agyei the warrior is drunk,
 The green mamba with fearful eyes.
 Yes, Agyei the warrior,
 He is treading along on camel blanket in triumph,
 Make way for him.²⁰

In the women's voices marriage is, perceptively, viewed from many angles, both blunt and subtle. Thus a Baganda song lightly warns young suitors:

When he sees a pretty girl he falls for her,
 "I will go with you, let us go".
 Not knowing that he is going with a girl with a fiery temper.²¹

Among the Congolese Bashi marital relationships were the most common song subjects. One popular ditty gives a vivid picture – historical source indeed as throughout the world, in their riddling and indirect way are many stories and songs– of a young girl reject-

¹⁹ Joshua F. K. Sempebwa, *Baganda folk songs*, «Uganda Journal», 12, 1948, p.18.

²⁰ J. H. Kwabena Nketia, *Akan poetry*, «*Black Orpheus*», 3, 1958, p. 20.

²¹ Sempebwa, *Baganda folk songs*, p. 17.

ing her suitor (for good reason too!) and of the economic setting in which she did so:

“You want to marry me, but what can you give me?
A nice field?”

“No, I have only a house”.

“What? You have nothing but a house? How would we live? Go to Bukavu; there you can earn plenty of money. You can buy food and other things”.

“No, I won’t go. I don’t know the people there. I have always lived here, and I know the people and want to stay here”.

“You are a stupid man. You want me to marry me but you have nothing. If you don’t go to Bukavu and earn money to buy me things then I won’t marry you”.²²

Humour is after all one of the best ways out of oppression.

A different point of view again is expressed in one of the many Chopi songs on this subject in southern Africa. The girl is pictured as sad and solitary without her husband, only too common a situation (but leaving her with much power too...); like so many others he has gone off many hundreds of miles to work in the mines. She is still concerned about material possessions of course:

I am most distressed,
I am most distressed as my man has gone off to work,
And he does not give me clothes to wear,
Not even black cloth.²³

The songs composed and sung by Luo women and, especially, girls in Kenya are among the most delicate. Filled with imagination and art they convey a vivid, first-hand, picture of a young girl’s reflective and imagined internal world:

I am possessed,
A bird bursting on high with the ree lament
I am the untiring singer.
Dear bird, let’s sing in rivalry
Our doreereeyo...;

²² Alan P. Merriam, *African music in perspective*, New York, Garland, 1954, p. 224.

²³ Hugh Tracey, *Chopi musicians*, London, Oxford University Press, 1948, p. 46.

It is my wayward self,
Singing in rivalry
The doreereeyo;

I am the untiring singer
That rocks far-off Mombasa
With the areereeyo;

It is the voice crying the doree
That rocks far-off Nakuru;
I am the compelling Ondoro drum,
The bird bursting with the doree's plaintive tones;
I am the untiring singer
Choking herself with the doreereeyo.²⁴

The song expresses the singer's sorrow and the way she is possessed by the song. At other times we are given a picture of the wilful and unpredictable side of her nature, disrupting ordinary rules of behaviour. A picture of girlhood otherwise unrecorded in the historical sources at our disposal, is articulated in song – as with poetry anywhere it is scarcely an exact reflection of reality, but, conventional in this particular art form, pictures how the singer

lives in a dreamland, though much tempered by the idealised role she longs to fill in the community. [...] As with a bird, singing appears to be the natural outpouring of the life force itself. The prestige of clan and family depended not only on the prowess of its young men but also on the zealous way in which its women represented its interests in song and dance. For a group of girls the oigo [song] was a means of announcing their presence and of differentiating themselves from the older married women; for an individual a way of expressing her idiosyncrasies.²⁵

Zulu love poetry is frequently by women. H.I.E. Dhlomo gives a mid-twentieth-century girl's song that is both realistic and romantic:

Never shall I fall in love with a suckling.
Joy, joy, O mother, this one sleeps unrealising.
Never shall I fall in love with one who is no ladies' man.

²⁴ Henry Owuor, *Luo songs*, «Black Orpheus», 10, 1961, p. 51.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 52.

Joy, joy, O mother, this one sleeps unrealising.
 I would like to fall in love with a dashing he-man.
 Joy, joy, O mother, this one sleeps unrealising.
 Would love him-who-appears-and-causes-heart-aches!
 Joy, joy, O mother, this one sleeps unrealising.
 Yes, I would like a whirlwind of a man!
 Joy, joy, O mother, this one sleeps unrealising.²⁶

More disillusioned is another Zulu love song, this time by an older woman in Durban where amidst the constraints of apartheid she still successfully ran her own small group of singers. The song expresses her despair and the mundane yet heart-breaking aspects of parting, historic text revealing emotions for a fraught historical period that would otherwise be lost to us:

I thought you loved me,
 Yet I am wasting my time on you.
 I thought we would be parted only by death,
 But to-day you have disappointed me.
 You will never be anything.
 You are a disgrace, worthless and unreliable.
 Bring my things. I will put them in my pillow.
 You take yours and put them under your armpit.
 You deceived me.²⁷

Or, more succinctly –and realistically?²– the Bamana,

I love those people who love me
 I separate from those people who are not interested in me.²⁸

Speakers of the Ila and Tonga languages in Central Africa are notable for their recognition of the personal ownership of songs, notably by women. A girl is expected to sing her own song on the day she is dons adult dress. Their individual songs are composed and sung by women at beer drinks or at work. Every woman must have her own solo repertoire while her friends and relatives interrupt with praise and small gifts. Composition is difficult and each village has a few women who are specially skilled in the art.

²⁶ Herbert I. E. Dhlomo, *Zulu folk poetry*, «Native Teachers Journal», 27-28, 1947-1948, p. 7.

²⁷ Tracey, *Chopi musicians*, p. 41.

²⁸ Sidikou, Hale (eds.), *Women's voices*, p. 977.

When someone wants to make an impango [personal song] she first thinks out the words –perhaps praise of herself, her lover, or her husband– then calls in her women friends to help. Together they go to a well-known local composer. After hearing the woman’s initial ideas, the expert then, usually over a period of several days, composes the complete tune for the whole song. She calls together a group of women to practise each evening after supper, and they continue until the new song is complete and they have all mastered it. The group can then disband and the woman who “owns” the song sing on her own. She knows that if she forgets at any point she can ask one of the practice party to help out. She is now fully mistress of her impango and proud of her accomplishment. Whenever she is invited to a festival she keeps “singing it in her heart” until it is time for her to stand up and perform it in public.²⁹

Women organise too and use song to do so, as in the striking twenty-first century Sahel song for The Association of Women of the North, sign of women’s gathered power and a notable force in the politics of today (and tomorrow too no doubt): what greater force throughout history than collective song?

In the name of God, I will compose a song
About the solidarity of women in the north
I invoke God’s aid, may he increase my insight

and so with full detail of the many countries and regions taking part, thanks and the name of the composer for 47 full verses³⁰

Or again:

I, the singer:
Wrestle men
Wrestle people
When there will not be men in the arena
It will be for the women.³¹

and expressing the experience of women in and from Africa (and often and children too). They recount tales of migrating with their children across the desert; of long stays in refugee and marauded

²⁹ A[rnold] H.M. Jones, *African music*, Lusaka, Rhodes Livingstone, 1943, pp. 11-12.

³⁰ Sidikou, Hale (eds.), *Women’s voices*, pp. 85-87.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 91.

“temporary” camps; of missionizing, loss or leadership; of settling in a strange land; of triumphs or of impossible suffering.

The stories come in written as much as in oral voice for Africa is a place of writing too, and, contrary to the stereotypes, has been so for centuries. So it is in the written word too that we hear the voices of women. They come in poems and reflections, in academic analyses, in drama, novels, histories, and the mass media:³² there is no end to them, nor will there be. We hear them in women’s published memoirs too, both fictional and “true”: look at Andreski’s *Old wives tales: life stories of African women* (1971) for example, Aminatta Forna’s evocative *Dancing with the devil*, or the works by novelists like Olive Schreiner – one does not have to be black to be African)³³ or Buchi Emecheta in her so aptly-named *Head above water* (1986).³⁴

Many come, in most moving form, in the historic tales of slavery. However produced at the time (this is sometimes controversial) they as surely as any autobiographical reminiscences represent the authentic voices of women. They present harrowing tales of suffering –but of strength and survival, even celebration, too. Who could forget Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the life of a slave girl*. Born a slave into a southern plantation life she escapes and writes the events of her life

My grandmother had taken my old shoes, and replaced them with a new pair. I needed them; for several inches of snow had fallen, and it still continued to fall. When I walked through Mrs. Flint [her owner]’s room, their creaking grated harshly on her refined nerves. She called me to her, and asked what I had about me that made such a horrid noise. I told her it was my new shoes. “Take them off”, said she; “and if you put them on again, I’ll throw them into the fire”.

I took them off, and my stockings also. She then sent me a long distance, on an errand. As I went through the snow, my bare feet tingled.³⁵

³² Karen Barber (ed.) *Readings in African popular culture*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997, Ead. (ed.), *Africa’s hidden histories*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2006.

³³ Olive Schreiner, *The story of an African farm*, London, Chapman and Hall, 1883. See Itala Vivan (ed.), *The flawed diamond. Essays on Olive Schreiner*, Sydney, Dangaroo Press, 1991.

³⁴ For further references and discussion see Akua Sarr, *Black novelists’ contribution to contemporary feminist discourse*, Lewiston, Mellen Press, 2003.

³⁵ Harriet Jacobs, *Incident in the life of a slave girl*, first published Boston, The Author, 1861, online.

Some things seemed more shameful than death, not least to one who was after all still only a little girl:

Everywhere the years bring to all enough of sin and sorrow; but in slavery the very dawn of life is darkened by these shadows. Even the little child, who is accustomed to wait on her mistress and her children, will learn, before she is twelve years old, why it is that her mistress hates such and such a one among the slaves. Perhaps the child's own mother is among those hated ones. She listens to violent outbreaks of jealous passion, and cannot help understanding what is the cause. She will become prematurely knowing in evil things. [...]

Soon she will learn to tremble when she hears her master's footfall. She will be compelled to realize that she is no longer a child. If God has bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse. That which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave:

My master met me at every turn, reminding me that I belonged to him, and swearing by heaven and earth that he would compel me to submit to him. If I went out for a breath of fresh air, after a day of unwearied toil, his footsteps dogged me. If I knelt by my mother's grave, his dark shadow fell on me even there.

The light heart which nature had given me became heavy with sad forebodings. The other slaves in my master's house noticed the change. Many of them pitied me; but none dared to ask the cause. They had no need to inquire. They knew too well the guilty practices under that roof; and they were aware that to speak of them was an offence that never went unpunished.³⁶

Dehumanising experiences indeed. But these women were not dehumanised. Perhaps indeed there is a detachment and a power, as many of us have learned in our own lives, in the very act of articulating what oppresses us, if only silently to ourselves. And even amidst the horrors of slavery there are indeed vivid flashes of women's resilience and of glory too.

My grandmother had, as much as possible, been a mother to her orphan grandchildren. By perseverance and unwearied industry, she was now mistress of a snug little home, surrounded with the necessaries of life. She would have been happy could her children have shared them with her. There remained but three children and

³⁶ *Ibidem.*

two grandchildren, all slaves. Most earnestly did she strive to make us feel that it was the will of God: that He had seen fit to place us under such circumstances; and though it seemed hard, we ought to pray for.

It was a beautiful faith, coming from a mother who could not call her children her own.

But I, and Benjamin, her youngest boy, condemned it. We reasoned that it was much more the will of God that we should be situated as she was. We longed for a home like hers. There we always found sweet balsam for our troubles. She was so loving, so sympathizing! She always met us with a smile, and listened with patience to all our sorrows. She spoke so hopefully, that unconsciously the clouds gave place to sunshine. There was a grand big oven there, too, that baked bread and nice things for the town, and we knew there was always a choice bit in store for us contentment.³⁷

The same combination of weakness and strength comes in more recent times too (suffering is not just in long-past history). Women's spoken voices come through in the tales of displacement from the atrocities of Ruanda –so often hidden from us except in song–, coming, thankfully but still in despair to a refugee camp in South Africa. Hear the mother questioned by her seven-year-old daughter

“Mummy but we are black! Mummy but we are black! Why must they don't like us?” I say, “No, no, no, no, we are not from South Africa.” “Mummy, fine you're not from South Africa. But me, I born here. I'm a South African. Mummy they won't hurt, hurt me. They won't even hit me”. I say,

“No, no, no, no because your parents are not coming from here, so they may hit you”. “No mummy, no, no, no mummy, I will fight for you don't worry”. What do I say to her?³⁸

Women's voices are expressed with striking immediacy in testimonies to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, an institution of the present-day history, bringing people together after the shared affliction of apartheid. It gives those involved, the oppressors (themselves victims too) with the oppressed, a place of peace to tell their stories in their own voice. Women even more than men were ashamed (again their voices more hidden) to speak of their

³⁷ *Ibidem.*

³⁸ Sean Field, *Oral history, community, and displacement. Imagining memories in post-apartheid South Africa*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 176.

torture or the sexual assaults that humiliated them and denied their identity as mothers, as wives, as human beings.

One woman describes the brutality of police attempts to destroy them, the language as painful as physical attack:

You are irresponsible, you are an unnatural woman, an unnatural mother. They say all sorts of things to you. [...] You are 30, you are single, therefore there is something wrong with you as a woman and that is why you get involved with politics. They were attacking your identity with their own particular conception of what a woman is.³⁹

We see lives crushed by the experience. And yet surviving. And yet able to speak.

It is not only in Africa that the famed “power from below”,⁴⁰ the strength of the weak, can be so clearly seen or that, as we know from older people,⁴¹ the verbalisation of memories can unveil new and abiding reality. But in Africa we do indeed glimpse at close up women who do draw their glory, as Rumi has it, precisely from the wounds, from the suffering, in the voices of those once seen as voiceless.

Thus it is that in Africa women’s stories and histories, both the contents and the voices that utter them, singing or speaking, known or published or broadcast, famous or “ordinary”, or, even more, hidden and in secret within their own souls –these can shape the universe.

Abstract: The paper documents women’s self expression from Africa, from Limba stories and Somali love poetry to self-told tales of women under slavery and apartheid or of young girls reluctantly but submissively going into marriage, together with the images of deceit and infidelity often attributed to women in male-generated tales and observations. The paper is illustrated by historical texts from first hand research in the field, dating from the mid nineteenth century to the present.

Questo saggio è un documento diretto di come si esprimono le donne africane, a partire dai racconti delle donne Limba e dalla poesia d’amore somala sino alle narrazioni che le donne facevano di sé durante la schiavitù e l’apartheid, e ai racconti delle giovani che andavano incontro al matrimonio, riluttanti ma sottomesse, insieme alle immagini di inganno e infedeltà spesso attribuite alle donne nei racconti

³⁹ Truth and Reconciliation Commission, online.

⁴⁰ Jennifer Carpenter, Sally-Beth Maclean, *The power of the weak, studies on medieval women*, Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 1995.

⁴¹ Joanna Bornat (ed.), *Reminiscence reviewed. Perspectives, evaluation, achievements*, Milton Keynes, Open University Press, 1993.

e nelle osservazioni maschili. Il saggio è illustrato da testi storici attinti a ricerca personale sul campo effettuata dal 1950 a oggi.

Keywords: oral literature, Africa women literature; letteratura orale, Africa, letteratura delle donne.

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