

1. Bury my bones but keep my words

The legacy of the dirge singer

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The author's experiences preparing and presenting at the 2013 (Nairobi, Kenya) and 2015 (Brussels, Belgium) SOIMA conferences form the basis for this reflection on the work of custodians safeguarding the sound and image heritage of the past. Drawing inspiration from the artistic reflections of acclaimed master poet Kofi Awonoor and accomplished writer Yvonne Owuor on death and life viewed through the prism of the dirge singer, the paper explores what it means to be a facilitator bridging the past and the future through the present. Using performance as a catalyst, it identifies three opportunities open to professional archivists seeking to secure the legacy of the past for generations to come: to create within collections conditions for availability, accessibility and adoptability.

Dedication

When the final night falls on us as it fell upon our parents, we shall retire to our modest home earth-sure, secure that we have done our duty by our people; we met the challenge of history and were not afraid.

–Kofi Awonoor, "To feed the people", 2014

Prologue

We gathered for the opening of the 2013 SOIMA course in Nairobi, Kenya, on 23 September 2013. The auditorium we were using had been scheduled, just 24 hours earlier, to host the closing-day activities for the Storymoja Festival.¹ Had things gone as planned, I would have been on stage that day moderating a panel that was to include, among others, the acclaimed Ghanaian poet Kofi Awonoor. Instead, that programme of events had been cancelled, the festival devastated by the news that he was among the scores of victims who had been brutally murdered in an act of terrorism that would become known as the Westgate Mall attack.²

Overnight, as the news filtered in, the organizers of the SOIMA course consulted on what to do, given that it was too late to cancel or even to postpone it. The scheduled launch event was pared to the basics. My first instinct was to pull out of delivering my scheduled opening keynote lecture. Kofi Awonoor was not only an acclaimed poet but one I held in personal esteem. I had so been looking forward to our festival panel. Coincidentally, another scheduled encounter, 15 years earlier, had failed to take place when I lost my father while attending an academic programme in Ghana at which Awonoor was scheduled to deliver a lecture. Flying home for my father's funeral, I missed that first opportunity to meet him. Once again, Death had stepped in unexpectedly to rob me of the opportunity to sit, metaphorically speaking, at the feet of this master teacher and singer of the sorrow song.

Death is an inextricable thread, then, weaving through my memories of SOIMA 2013. My presentation that year transformed into a tribute to Kofi Awonoor, becoming an opportunity to share some of the dirges, otherwise known

- ¹ The Storymoja Festival, a project of Storymoja Publishers, is an annual literary celebration of critical thinking marking ten years of existence in 2017. With the exception of 2016, when it was held in Ghana in honour of Kofi Awonoor, it is held in Nairobi.
- ² Sixty-six other people lost their lives in this terrorist attack on a mall in Nairobi, for which the militant group al-Shabaab later claimed responsibility. About 175 others were injured by the gunmen.

as 'sorrow songs', that he gave the world as his legacy. And since I cannot think about SOIMA without remembering that occasion, the SOIMA space has turned for me into a reflection on the engagement we who are still living have with those who have preceded us in death, as well as with each other and those who will come after us. Those tragic circumstances became my springboard into thinking through rituals of mourning and their place in the lives of those left behind. I have taken special interest in the role played by those, particularly artists, who step up to become the facilitators of these rituals. May this reflection, in the tradition of the great master teacher of sorrow songs who inspires it, be an inspiration to those entrusted as custodians of the promise of hope contained in the sound and image legacy of our past.

Songs of sorrow

I am a performance scholar or, as we say in East Africa, an oraturist. As a performance scholar, I am invested in the search for meaning. Performance, for me, is about engaging with the process and products of knowing. I study the world by performing it. I call myself an oraturist as a way of acknowledging the amazing transformation begun in the Kenyan academy in those first heady decades of independence that I and my contemporaries benefitted from, as members of the first generation to be born Kenyan citizens.³ My academic and artistic career has been influenced by the bold exploration of orature that was infused into our education, taking its inspiration from the processes and products of indigenous systems of education suppressed and denigrated in the colonial academy. Of particular interest here is the seminal reflection by Pio Zirimu and Austin Bukonya (1986), arguing that oracy is as desirable a competency as literacy for use in the postcolonial-era academy. This is the foundation for my definition of orature as anaesthetic intellectual tradition characterized by the transcending of boundaries in the making of meaning. As an oraturist, I use creative performance, particularly that which is either embodied or translated through objects (including paper or screens), to make meaning of the world and of those in the world.

I work through story – defined as the creative, crafted re-presentation of lived experience – to engage intellectually with questions that interest me. Storytelling for me is much more than entertainment or the mere narration of a

sequence of events. As a storyteller, I craft and perform narratives in order to explore the strange as well as the familiar, in search of a better understanding of the world that is home to humanity.

In seeking to embrace the legacy of Awonoor, I have invested in the study of sorrow songs. Using performance as my way of knowing has meant that I invest in the process of performance as much as I do in the products that emerge out of it. My exploration has most recently been facilitated through the process of researching, rehearsing, re-presenting and reflecting on a particular story, Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's magical tale "Dressing the Dirge" (2006). I have sought to take my understanding of dirges and use it to stage the story as a performance, translating the generally individual experience of reading this text into a communal exploration of the unique space inhabited by those who dare to carry the burden of mediating the liminal world between life and death.

This is a story of so much more than the lyrics of the dirges or the performances that deliver them to the world. Dirges manifest through distinct words, melody and movement, but they acquire meaning in the combination of all of these and more. Meaning is wrought in the lives that are being mourned, and it is manifested in the weight of the relationships revealed in the presence of death. It is negotiated in the response of the community to the masterfully crafted call melodically sounded by the one entrusted with the role of 'chief mourner / dirge singer', tested by the strength of the seams previously joined in shared rites of communion that the no-longer-living once participated in. Each dirge performance is as unique to the occasion of its staging as the fingerprint of the one it celebrates – coaxed forth by the mastery of the dirge singer, whose responsibility it is to preside over the communal acts of mourning that transfigure into a ritual as essential to the dead, to ease their passage into the afterlife, as it is to the living, to gently deposit them into the new existence-without-the-departed.

Central to this story – and to my exploration of it – is the role played by the cultural facilitators leading communities through the essential rituals that ease the agony of the separation that is death. The very first time I read "Dressing the Dirge" I knew I would perform it. While the language and the plot first drew me in, it was the complicated interplay between the fascinating antagonists at its heart that captivated me. Bitter rivals, the two both hold the twin office of chief mourner / dirge singer, each working diligently in her own unique way to lead the delicate rituals of communal mourning essential to this society. Their shared calling and their mutual disgust bind their souls together as intimately as the most loving of friendships. The process of performing this

³ Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) uses the experiences of those leading the struggle to transform the Kenyan academy and cultural space as symbolized by the University of Nairobi and the Kenya National Theatre respectively as a basis for theorizing what it means to decolonize the mind. I reflect on the impact of this transformation on the Uhuru generation in a chapter titled "Decolonising the mind", after his book (Mwangola, 2010).

story, of finding ways of uncovering the layers of meaning in the contrast as well as the unfolding drama between the two, would, I knew, lead me into a deeper understanding of the complexities of the role and responsibilities of those chosen to care for communities processing their way through sorrow. I knew I would have to go beyond merely memorizing the text; I would need to draw on examples of dirge performances from real life in order to unlock the essence of the characters through the story. But I had a problem.

This is not my world. I do not actually know any professional dirge singers. Dirge singing, essential for generations of my ancestors, is not an integral part of my lived experience or, to the best of my knowledge, to the experience of any of my ancestors that I personally have known. Those times that I have been in a community of bereavement where dirge singing is part of the mourning, it has been with the detachment of a bystander that I have borne witness to the performance. Yet to perform this story, I knew I would somehow have to access not just song lyrics or music or choreography; I would have to be able to engage with the very world of the dirge singer.

But how?

Lost?

In Micere Githae Mugo's iconic poem "Where are those songs" (1985), a woman asks:

Where are those songs my mother and yours always
sang fitting rhythms to the whole vast span of life?

Beginning from an acknowledgement of this absence – the death, if you like – of songs in her memory, the poem's persona goes on to identify different genres of songs once familiar to her ancestors – lullabies, play songs, work songs, journey songs, wedding songs, war songs – that she has long since forgotten, journeying through a mental anthology of the auditory archive of life until she comes to this moment of realization:

I have forgotten my mother's song my children will
never know.

I identify fully. Although like most Kenyans of my generation, if pressed, I can sing at least a couple of 'traditional' dirges, they are not literally 'my mother's song'. The dirges in my memory were taught to me in school, in literature and music classes, or in rehearsal for competitive cultural festivals. They come in languages whose words I comprehend only through translation.

I never heard my mother sing a dirge.

... And Found

So it is that I have had to turn to recorded archives and museums storing sound and memory to make possible my exploration of the world of the dirge. In listening and watching various clips of recorded material, I began to grasp the essence of the two dirge singers and to find the inspiration that translates into the sounds and imagery I use in my performance of this story. I have, therefore, deep investment in the work that is accomplished through the SOIMA courses and in the community of professionals that ICCROM is nurturing.

I recognize, with appreciation, the labour of love that goes into rescuing and making accessible and readily available this intangible heritage. I know that much of it is currently stored in forms rapidly becoming obsolete, or even inaccessible. I personally remember, in decades gone by, recording oral material for my school fieldwork assignments on cassette tapes. I am not even sure where they are anymore; if they survive they are probably in a suitcase or cardboard box somewhere they have been left – hopefully undisturbed – for decades. I dread to think of their condition. Even if I were I to find them, I would need to transfer the material from the reams of tape into a format more readily accessible for use today. I know I am not alone in this. If we were somehow able to rescue the entirety of the archive collected by Kenyan students over the 40 or so odd years that fieldwork research has been an integral part of the Kenyan academy, that would certainly be a treasure trove of material, and the world would be immensely enriched to have access to it. But how much would we be able to actually use today? How many of us have the appropriate technology readily available to access this material? What conditions would this material have been stored in? Would those cassettes or videotapes still be viewable or audible? Knowing that there are those who are putting in the investment to make this kind of precious cultural heritage available and accessible to as many as possible is indeed worth celebration.

Mapping the way

For me, this work has three priorities. First, there is the issue of what I call *availability*. It is essential that as much as possible of any cultural material that has been recorded is made available to humanity. This means that someone has to do the work of locating and cataloguing whatever can be rescued for posterity's sake. Ideally, the goal should be not just to have archives but to appreciate their worth as precious traces of a performance that happened somewhere, sometime; incomplete perhaps as a definitive record of a moment in the past, but valuable puzzle pieces that help re-create that moment, and the meaning it contained, in our present. I therefore think it critical that there be every attempt to fully restore that which exists in recording to as

near the condition as it was at the moment of recording as possible. It has been eye-opening to observe at the SOIMA events I have attended the variety of techniques and technology currently available or in development, facilitating the range of work that is necessary to make this possible. I suspect there will always be, hovering tantalizingly just out-of-reach, another degree of perfection when it comes to the arts and sciences of restoration. Those hours of patient and painstaking labour finessing the technology used in archiving is deeply appreciated.

Second, I recognize that this is not work that can be done by a handful of individuals or institutions. I imagine that a virtual army of trained professionals spread out as broadly as possible, in as many countries and cultural spaces as it is feasible, is needed to do this work. The range of needs is vast, dependent on factors as varied as atmospheric realities to the availability of dedicated and appropriate spaces for storage. It would be a pity if the human and technological resources for sound and image archiving were to be concentrated in only a handful of places in the world or in relatively miniscule pockets of privileged insiders. In this regard, I am conscious of global imbalances in terms of technology and expertise that privilege certain institutions and regions of the world. I also know that, for a variety of excellent reasons, institutions and individuals must make choices with regard to the priorities they invest in. This makes it imperative that we grow and diversify as much as possible the range of archives available in all parts of the world. It is therefore with gratitude that I commend ICCROM for its investment in redressing these imbalances through the SOIMA programme. This is what I would refer to as the second item on my wish list, the issue of *accessibility*.

Finally, I recognize that the work is so vast that it must be shared. The challenge is not only to make the technology and technical skills available and accessible to the small band of professionals who must lead the work but also to find ways of making those resources affordable and usable for amateurs. There is, of course, that which can only be done by professional sound and image archivists working in and for dedicated archives using equipment that realistically can only be entrusted to those with the skills to use it. But there is so much more to save, well beyond what is humanly feasible for the professionals alone to accomplish. This makes it necessary, wherever possible, to commission and enable willing amateurs to work alongside the professionals in doing what they can to lighten the load. To adopt, so to speak, a community to work with; or better still, to be adopted by a community cognizant of the importance of maintaining and amplifying their archives a community that is just as invested in the work as the professional archivist.

Part of the work then, must be to find or create the investment and then to make available the skills and technology to attract as many as possible to this work, creating the conditions for *adoptability*, whether it be of, or by, the community. In other words, while excellence must always be the goal, there should also be a measure of adaptability attracting and enabling those who do not have the professional skills, equipment and institutional space to do their part in creating, sustaining and growing and benefiting from humanity's shared heritage. Yes, there is work to do, not only in the labs but also out in the public sphere. In this sense, the work of the professional archivist is reminiscent of that of the professional dirge singer. As chief mourner, the singer facilitates communal participation, leading the bereaved in performing rites of passage that cannot be effected by any single individual, no matter how talented or invested in the process. The professional archivist should lead the recovery and preservation of the sound and image heritage from the past, inspiring by example communal appreciation, investment and participation in the preservation of sounds and images. Even if it would be possible for professionals to do the work all by themselves, I still believe it is critical that this becomes a communal responsibility. After all, the memory-keeper is a facilitator of community, like the dirge singer and the storyteller. This work – this responsibility, this gift – is critical to the survival of any community that understands the inextricability of the past, present and future. This work of adoption, of nurture, is long-term. It is the work of a lifetime and can only be done through the commitment to empower and be empowered by the gift that is community.

A legacy for the future

This work that we do is not just for this generation. It is our responsibility to fulfil it as part of the shared chain linking humanity from the past to the future. Reflecting on Awonoor's work, I am reminded of the time-bridging *adinkra* symbol Sankofa, represented by a mystical bird. Both retrospective in that it faces backwards and prospective in that it flies into the future, it could be adopted as the insignia for both dirge singer and memory custodian. Surely it cannot be mere coincidence that Awonoor's parting gift to the world is the anthology of his collected works entitled *The promise of hope*, which he himself only saw as a finished publication for the first time during that fateful trip to Nairobi.

Therefore, understanding my role as a connector between the past and present, I appreciate that I, too, must pay attention to the preservation and transmission of the work that I do for those who will come after me. Preparing to deliver my keynote address in 2015 to the SOIMA congress in Belgium, I found myself facing another dilemma. With no doubt in my mind that I would perform excerpts from "Dressing the Dirge",

I was conflicted about not being able to take with me to Brussels George Achieng' Odero, the master *orutu* player whose skilful playing not only brings to life the contrast between the two central characters of the story but whose presence and virtuosity also reminds us that the *orutu* is as at home in the twenty-first century as it was in the twentieth.⁴ I feature the *orutu* in my performance not only because, for those for whom it is familiar, it points subtly to the social context of the story but also because it really is the perfect accompaniment to the story. It elegantly amplifies throughout the performance that which would be more noticeable in written text, where one has the luxury of being able to flip back to check a detail of repetition or of nuance. Unwilling to do without it, I chose to record Odero's performance in Nairobi for projection during my staging of the story, days later, in Brussels. This provided me with the gift of an unsought master class, which cannot be elaborated on here. Simply said, I became cognizant of the additional challenges of attempting to capture and store the nuances of live performance and the consequences of working with a recording as opposed to sharing a performance in real time with another artist well able to respond to the uniqueness that characterizes each iteration of even the most minutely choreographed and well-rehearsed live performance. These difficulties aside, I am truly excited about the possibilities this has opened up to me for the future.

As I dream on, I challenge professional sound and image archivists working to create the conditions for *availability*, *accessibility* and *adoptability* to apply these to the ever-continuing challenge of expanding the frontiers beyond what we imagine today to be possible. Only then can we be confident of bequeathing to the generations to come the very best archives our soul, minds and skills can create.

Epilogue

My journey into the past, into the sorrow songs and into an understanding of the gift of the archivist, comes full circle with the words of the Master Dirge Singer. We are bound together, artist and archivist, caught up in the challenge of bridging the gap between the past and the present, so that

⁴ Odero is a singer and composer who plays a variety of instruments in addition to the *orutu*, a popular one-stringed instrument of the Luo people of East Africa. He is also the band leader and lead singer of Kenge Kenge Orutu System Band and the Music Director for TICAH (Trust for Indigenous Culture and Health).

we may be true custodians of the legacy we hold in trust for the future. May the work that we do not be in vain, so that we will have the confidence to declare with Kofi Awoonor (2014, pp. 14–15):

When the final night falls on us as it fell upon our parents, we shall retire to our modest home earth-
sure, secure that we have done our duty by our people;
we met the challenge of history and were not afraid.

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