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Memory, orality and 'God-talk' in sub-Saharan Africa

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The indigenous people of sub-Saharan Africa approach their Supreme Being and express their reverence in diverse ways, as depicted in the different local names that describe this supernatural being. The African cultural worldview foregrounds that virtuous rapport with the Supreme Being provides wisdom and facilitates good cohabitation among humans. It is argued in this article that teachings from the Christian Bible contribute negatively to the disintegration, fragmentation and death of indigenous knowledge systems, which include African cultural values, memory and oral traditions. Recently, some African scholars have begun to create awareness of some of Africa's lost treasures. However, such contributions are disappointingly few. This study argues that memory and orality among Africans should be promoted and supported through various platforms, such as academic writing. This article will discuss memory, orality and 'God-talk' in terms of the following: teachings on moral values (e.g. relationships, marriage, humaneness [*ubuntu* or *hunhu*]) and the preservation of cultural heritage. The discussion uses qualitative analysis of secondary data and personal observation.

Contribution: Firstly, the present study will provide for the readership in general, and academia in particular, a new perspective on African customs and indigenous belief systems about a Supreme Being. For example, *Musiki* as a Shona local dialect name for 'God' was already in use before the emergence of Christianity in Southern Africa. Secondly, previous contributions have not sufficiently explored memory and orality. This investigation serves as a resource or starting point for further research on memory and orality.

Keywords: African cultures; colonialism; indigenous knowledge; memory; orality; *ubuntu*; *hunhu*.

Introduction

Memory and oral tradition[1] have always been part and parcel of the history of 'pre-industrial cultures' (Botha 2018:1). Identity and life orientation in Africa are preceded by memory and orality. This article will explore the themes of memory and orality, specifically focusing on the following sub-Saharan African countries – Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe. The choice of these countries is due to the fact that 'all the black people in Southern Africa believe that they have the same origin here in Africa' (Mndende 1994:12). Chifungo (2013) writes that:

> Oral culture is also a mind-set of a society; this is to say that orality is not necessarily a question of a written or unwritten culture, but also a mind-set of the people who have not been deeply affected by the technology of writing and reading. (p. 16)

The weakening of African customs, cultural practices and values can be attributed to the gravity and impact of colonialism on African societies. In this article, four distinct examples of the impact will be given. Ong's *Orality and Literacy* (2002) is a ground-breaking initiative to sensitise readers regarding one of the forgotten treasures of Africa. When Masoga writes that '[p]art of this journey[2] included being introduced to the intricacies of orality and healing',[3] he is referring to the uniqueness of orality in Africa. In *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (1987), Graham (1987) also subscribes to this view, stating that:

1. For the biblical view of this concept, see Horsley (2010:93–114).

2. By the phrase 'this journey', Masoga (2021:18) refers to the family experiences he went through from birth, childhood and manhood in a typical African community.

3. It is important to note that some practical examples of orality will be drawn from Masoga's 2021 book project. The examples will be used to develop the present conversation around orality in Southern Africa.

The fixing of the holy word in writing always carries with it potential threats to the original spontaneity and living quality of the scriptural text, for it places it ever in danger of becoming only a 'dead letter' rather than the living word. (pp. 59–60)

This article will explore Graham's findings, among others, in order to establish the relevance of the insight they provide and the contribution they make to the issues under consideration. Previous contributions have described memory and orality among indigenous Africans as 'primitive'. This classification of orality and literacy also led Burton-Christie (2001:219) to make a distinction between 'the unlearned and the learned, popular and elite spiritualities'. Botha (2018:6) also writes that 'speech *and* writing are present and influential in "traditional" cultures, as significant oral modes of communication that persist powerfully in communities acquiring and practising literacy'. Citing the works of Graff (1987:5) and Killingsworth (1993:27), Botha (2018:6) argues that '[a]fter all, literacy was *formed, shaped,* and *conditioned* by the oral world that it penetrated'. In the present contribution, it is argued that sub-Saharan African societies were shaped and defined by memory and orality. In fact, as it will be demonstrated in the current debate, the current Judeo-Christian sacred book known as the Bible developed into its present form from oral tradition. Another practical example is that of country boundaries. The boundaries of most modern countries are not demarcated by fences or walls. Rather, nations agreed on perceived boundaries and maps were drafted accordingly. This article will discuss memory and orality in terms of cultural value systems among Africans, such as teachings on moral values (e.g. relationships, marriage, humaneness [*ubuntu* or *hunhu*] and the preservation of cultural heritage). For example, African indigenous healers do not attend medical schools, but the manner in which they familiarise themselves with medicinal properties and concoctions demonstrates the preservation of the cultural heritage they have acquired and sustained over the years through memory and oral tradition. Teachings and narratives on life issues are taught and conveyed to young people across generations. The recipients of these teachings commit them to memory and put them to practice, hence the argument that 'writing destroys memory and, by implication, other reasoning faculties; and, finally, that a written text cannot participate in a debate with an audience' (Mason 1998:306).

Statement of the problem

It is widely documented that orality was the norm in the ancient world (see e.g. Carr 2005; Chafe 1982; Culley 1986:30–65; Foley 2002; Horsley 2010:93–114; Johnson 2016; and Ong 1978, 2002). This article focuses on memory and orality in sub-Saharan Africa (Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe) as significant aspects and critical modes of communication. The main problem to grapple with is that (Ong 2002):

Modern studies in the shift from orality to literacy and the sequels of literacy, print and the electronic processing of verbalization, make more and more apparent some of the ways in which this evolution has depended on writing. (p. 174)

During the colonial era, sub-Saharan Africa memory and oral cultures were weakened. It is the view of this article that the Christian or missionary church has always discredited memory and oral traditions in the ways they have been practised in African cultural societies. Yet it is widely held in critical scholarship that both the Hebrew Bible and Christian Bible emerged from oral tradition (e.g. Horsley 2010:93–114). Thus, Negedu and Ojomah (2018) could not have been in the wrong for stating as follows:

The problem of African history is not documentation as such but the written script of the Western historicist that is the norm for others to follow. This is the practice of white supremacy that is inextricably interwoven with Western expansionism that culminated in colonialism and slavery. Since Africans have been bedevilled by Western historicism and its brain child white supremacy, it is therefore necessary for the Africans to become the narrator of their own history not on the ground of sentimental reaction, but on the reality of authenticity, because history from a biased point of view cannot be regarded as history. (p. 312)

While Magesa (1997:24–26) argues that oral tradition 'will be located in peoples' lives', the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (2010:6) observes that oral tradition is represented by African artefacts, national monuments and heritages, festivals, shrines and symbols.

Methodology

The research method is generally defined as a strategy of enquiry, which moves from the underlying assumptions to research design and data collection. Hence, Guba (1981:76) remarked that '[i]t is proper to select that paradigm whose assumptions are best met by the phenomenon being investigated'. The present research uses qualitative inquiry (QI) as a method (Creswell 2007; see also Berg 2001; Dey 1993; Hoepfl 1997; Miles & Huberman 1994 and Patton 2002). When examined holistically, QI comprises secondary data analysis and personal observation. However, this is not an easy exercise. Guba (1978:53) argues that '[t]he task of converting field notes and observations about issues and concerns into systematic categories is a difficult one. No infallible procedure exists for performing it'. He also admits that 'qualitative researchers should use credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to evaluate trustworthiness' (Guba 1981:75–91; see also Guba 1979:268–276). Secondary data analysis examines previous contributions in a given field of research in order to either develop existing findings or come up with a completely revised or improved dimension of the theme or subject under investigation. Secondary data analysis is also known as 'discourse analysis' (see for example, Gee 2011) or 'content analysis' in the social sciences (see, for example, Allen & Reser 1990:251–260; Hsieh & Shannon 2005:1277–1288).

Definitions

This section is dedicated to defining five terms and a phrase which are key to this study's discourse. These are as follows: colonisation, culture, God-talk, memory and orality.

Colonisation

Ocheni and Nwankwo (2012:46) define colonialism as 'the direct and overall domination of one country by another on the basis of state power being in the hands of a foreign power'. According to Ocheni and Nwankwo (2012:47): 'The colonisation of Africa by European powers was necessitated by several factors'. It is widely acknowledged in the literature that chief among the factors was the socio-economic transformation in Europe that was driven by the industrial revolution. Masoga and Shokane (2019:2) discuss indigenous knowledge systems (IKSs) in the context of colonialism as follows: 'Prior to colonisation, communities throughout the Global South had been using IKS as part of their livelihood'. Some critics still maintain that Africa would not have originated without Western and European exploration and civilisation. This view should be strongly challenged. Africa's origin cannot be linked to Western or European influence. The fact remains that Africa was already vibrantly existing long before the Westerners and Europeans came to explore.

The impact of colonialism in South Africa cannot be overemphasised. According to Mwansa (2011, cited in Masoga & Shokane 2019:3), '[t]he effects of colonialism and apartheid are still visible in South Africa and are manifested in various social issues such as poverty, disease and hopelessness', and this resonates with many other views on the problem of self-expression in South Africa today. As argued by Masoga and Shokane (2019:8), '[i]t is ironic that the democratically elected government that replaced the colonial and apartheid governments still chooses to ignore people's indigenous knowledge'. There are some historians who articulated the history of colonisation in sub-Saharan Africa (e.g. Zimbabwe) in view of community protest and/or mass resistance. Smith (1998:9) states that: 'The ways in which Africans resisted colonialism and suffered exploitation as workers since 1900 were essential to an understanding of Zimbabwean history'. Some pan-Africanist critics have argued that colonialism brought more harm than good, observing that: 'There is no area where African culture is not contaminated, though not fully eroded' (Speckman 2016:210), and that '[c]olonisation was initially responsible, but currently this may be ascribed to cultural imperialism, which has continued beyond colonialism' (Speckman 2016:210). Although to some extent Speckman's opinion above may be granted some attention, one would also find some inconsistencies in the unfolding socio-economic factors in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in Zimbabwe. It seems China has successfully managed to manipulate the current situation in some parts of postcolonial sub-Saharan Africa by controlling key economic sectors such as land and infrastructure development. A term that describes China's activities in Africa is Fanon's (1963:152) notion of 'neo-colonialism'. Ellingsen (1993:28) concurs with Fanon by stating that 'the neo-colonial dynamic created by the importing of technology led to the same outcome as did the older version of colonialism'. Mathole (2005) advances the view that:

> The development of the West was propped up by a history of slavery, colonialism and imperialism that resulted in the looting of Africa by the West. That terrible legacy has sown the seeds of the present instability, poverty, and chaos in some parts of the African continent. (p. 133)

De Gruchy (1997:38) proposes that '[a] successful indigenous incorporation of aspects of the African culture into Christianity will result in the invention of new constructs and new understandings of Christianity'. This is taken further by Acquah (2011), who writes that:

> The Christian church and colonialism were, sometimes, seen as the two faces of the same coin. Indeed, it has often been expressed by the African nationalists that the presence of some of the European missionaries facilitated the exploitation of Africans by the colonialists. (p. 89)

Culture(s)

Matsumoto (1994:4) defines culture as the 'set of attitudes, values, beliefs and behaviours shared by a group of people, communicated from one generation to the next via language or some other means of communication'. When Vanhoozer (1993:1–30) wrote about 'cultural hermeneutics', the readership might have wondered what he meant. However, when one reads further in consultation with other considerations, it emerges that hermeneutics as the 'science of interpretation' (see for example, Terry 1983:20) would have no meaning outside culture. In this case, one notes that the practice of hermeneutics accounts for the context in which it is applied. Hence, Bosch (1991:358) argues that the Christian faith 'never exists except as "translated" into a culture'. In Africa, one cannot discuss hermeneutics in isolation from culture(s) and religious practices. Pobee (1998:5) thus argues that 'African cultures are through and through religious'. Berry et al. (1992:n.p.) mention six uses of culture as follows:

- *descriptively* to characterise a culture
- *historically* to describe the traditions of a group
- *normatively* to express the rules and norms of a group
- *psychologically* to emphasise how a group learns and solves problems
- *structurally* to emphasise the organisational elements of a culture
- *genetically* to describe cultural origins.

Although these uses of culture could be applicable to the holistic study of culture(s) in Africa, the second use, namely 'historically to describe the traditions of a group', will be utilised in this exploration of memory and orality in sub-Saharan Africa.

God-talk

When one reads various propositions on African cultures and religions, the relevance of the phrase 'God-talk' becomes apparent. Firstly, it suggests rhetoric about the existence of a Supreme Being or powerful spiritual force. Secondly, it expresses the notion of a human vessel who speaks on behalf of a Supreme Being (God), such as in sermon delivery or homiletics (Thompson 2013: xx). The first point is the focus of the present discussion. Every society, both ancient and modern, generally believes that there is a spiritual force

behind everything created on the earth. Hence, when humans could not explain how things came into existence on the earth, the search for a Supreme Being emerged. It appears that sub-Saharan African societies were overwhelmed by the overarching power that brought the pieces of the puzzle together. In that sense, people began to search for a technological expert and/or archivist of the created order who works behind the scenes. So the idea of a Supreme Being (or in Hebrew Yahweh, God) was born. What the Israelites perceived as 'idols' among the Canaanites were actually the gods that the local people worshipped. In 1 Kings 11:33, we read about 'Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, Chemosh the god of the Moabites, and Milcom the god of the people of Ammon'. In the New Testament (especially in Acts), both the epicurean and the stoic philosophers thought of the Apostle Paul as the proclaimer of foreign gods (Ac 17:18). For the Athenian altar to carry the inscription 'To the unknown God' (Ac 17:23) suggests the idea that, among the known gods that the people of the city worshipped, there were also other gods which were not known. Some of the known gods were Zeus and Hermes and the goddess Diana (Ac 19:24, 27, 28, 34, 35). At Lystra, the people of the city thought of Barnabas and Paul as gods and spoke in their Lycaonian language in this way: 'The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!' (Ac 14:11). So the readership gets the impression that already in ancient Israel, the belief in a Supreme Being or God influencing and manipulating the psyche and behaviour of people was very strong.

Memory

Loosely defined, the term memory may refer to the art of remembering what has been done, acted or said. Bomer (2006:524–536) describes memory as 'reading with the mind's ear'. Much of what happens in school is memory, because it is prohibited for a learner to bring a reading resource into the exam room, unless every candidate is told that it is an 'open-book' examination, which does happen in some instances. Although, in practical terms, in modern science and technology a manual is required for reference in order to accomplish a certain critical task, during ancient times, sub-Saharan African ideas and knowledge about life were kept and transported to future generations through memory. Discussing memory and orality together is in order because the two terms share a common ground in both outlook and practice (Botha 2018:1). This is why Bae and Van der Merwe (2008) argue that:

> In most societies where the belief in ancestors is common, a record of people who have lived and died is kept in the memory of the living members of the community. (p. 1300)

Orality

The term is derived from the word 'oral', which can be defined and interpreted in many ways. Most dictionaries (eds. Hornblower & Spawfort 2005; Collins Online English Dictionary) define it as a synonym of spoken, verbal, uttered, said, verbalised, voiced, sounded and so on. According to Sherwani, Ali and Rosé (2009:37), '*orality* describes how

people think, communicate, and learn in a culture where writing has not become internalized'. They further state that '[o]rality theory argues that writing has so fundamentally transformed the consciousness in literate'. Prinsloo and Breier (1996, cited in Johnson 2016) note that the:

> Social Uses of Literacy (SOUL) research conducted in the 1990s emphasised the importance of secondary orality as a social practice in people's understanding of what they do, the values they attach to their actions, and the ideologies and practices in their everyday lives. (p. 1)

Ong (2002:177) remarks that '[m]ost of the major work on orality–literacy contrasts has been done in English, much of the pioneering work by scholars in the United States and Canada'.

Memory, orality and God-talk in Africa

It is not an exaggeration to posit that Africans had some ideas and belief systems about God before the emergence of Christianity in Africa. Mbiti (1975:29), among others, convincingly argues that 'African people know the existence of God and have a notion of God as the Supreme Being'. Africans not only use audible language (voices), but they also sing, use musical instruments, sign language and/or various other methods. Immink (2004:118) makes the point that 'God-talk is related to structures of human consciousness, and in preaching we use images, symbols, metaphors, and myths in order to get access to the mystery of God'. It is, therefore, malicious to claim that Africans were primitives that needed to be converted to Christianity. Although literature about God among Africans was nonexistent, the notion of a Supreme Being can be found in the archives of their memory and oral traditions. It cannot therefore be said that Africans were sacrilegious.

While the author concurs with Han and Beyers' (2017:23) argument that 'Christianity has given the old local names that designate God a new Biblical and Christian meaning and content', he disagrees with their claim that 'African theology takes the names for God from the cultural context, and fills them with new Biblical and Christian content' (Han & Beyers 2017:23). Motlhabi (1994:123) argues as follows: 'The God articulated in African theology must be an African God who is incarnated in each distinct context of the African continent'. In fact, while Christianity from the outset was determined to transform (and convert) the African ways of religiosity, indigenous African societies were not keen to imitate or disdain Christianity. What has been ideologically clear and politically assertive among Africans is the fact that Christianity was transported and introduced to Africa through the vehicle of colonialism. For example, in sub-Saharan Africa, the missionary David Livingstone's (see Bailkie 1986) manipulation and trickery remained in the psyche, memory and oral traditions of indigenous Africans. Rugwiji (2019:11) notes in this regard that '[m]ost traditions concerning the past in Africa are oral, whereas in ancient Israel traditions concerning the patriarchs and the important place attached to them by Israelite

descendants, are documented'. In a similar vein, Bae and Van der Merwe (2008) maintain that:

> [I]n most societies where the belief in ancestors is common, a record of people who have lived and died is kept in the memory of the living members of the community. (p. 1300)

Tondi's (2004:8600) study also illuminates some of the issues under consideration, noting that 'racial dehumanisation and imperialist colonialism' of Africans for extended periods 'have been alienated [Africans] from indigenous cultural values and spirituality that contribute in shaping a nation'. For Tondi (2004:8600), 'Africa is still grappling with the appropriateness of alien and foreign ideas that still permeate the continent's socio-cultural, political and economic life'. This means that the role of memory and orality in defining African identities is now undermined by European and Western cultural ideals. Tondi's argument can be further understood in the context of the distortions of African culture occasioned by colonialism and white supremacy in Africa. This has been highlighted by many postcolonial critics, who have pointed out the negative impact of colonial philosophy on African cultural practices and values. Some examples of these customs are enumerated here.

African societies are highly moral and communal. The moral fabric among Africans is conveyed orally to young people from one generation to another. For sub-Saharan African societies to reflect on global human and individual rights practices and adhere to them is critical. However, some of the so-called 'human rights' (Claassens 2015:160) interfere with and upset African mores. The fact that 'all human beings are equal bearers of human dignity' (Claassens 2015:160) is not in any way exclusive of African cultural practices and their belief systems. Heterosexual relationships are encouraged in Africa. A bride price (comprising cows, goats, etc.) is paid to the parents of the girl or woman engaged in a marriage vow with a man. Same-sex relationships, which are generally supported and prevailing in some parts of sub-Saharan Africa, are believed to be anti-African and to be in contempt of the sanctity and dignity of humaneness (*ubuntu* or *hunhu*, see Metz 2011:532–559; Mugumbate & Nyanguru 2013:86). The double standard of Christianity in this regard is also surprising, manifesting in the deliberate silence against same-sex marriage when the Bible (Old Testament) speaks in support of procreation (Gn 1:27–28). In this regard, Kaiser Jr (1986) contends that:

> When practices that are identified as integral parts of pagan culture and yet also concern God's moral nature are forbidden in the Old or New Testament, they are forbidden in our culture as well. In this category may be placed the strong biblical condemnation of bestiality, homosexuality, transvestitism, and public nudity. (p. 136)

Meanwhile, the late president of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, was reportedly opposed to legalising and legitimising same-sex relationships in Zimbabwe (see Matikiti 2012). Although believed to be a political move, Mugabe's action is celebrated by some pan-Africans to be culturally legitimate. In Mozambique, stories are told of churches that seem to neglect

African cultural values, even in the face of growing same-sex relationships and increasing immorality. Cooksey and Dooms (2010, cited in Chifeche 2018:119) opine that:

> Faith communities today face many challenges regarding sexuality, including HIV and AIDS, sexual violence, homosexuality, different forms of marriage and family life and the influence of the media. (p. 105)

Talking of Mozambique, Chifeche's (2018:42) study seeks to develop a 'holistic youth ministry which is specific and appropriate to this particular complex context [facing young people]'.[4]

Indigenous Africans have their own ways of expressing the sacred. The term *Musiki* in Shona has existed and was known before the emergence of Christianity in Africa. It is believed that the term *Mwari* for God did not exist among the Shona before the arrival of missionaries (see Kazembe 2010:70). In this regard, Tondi (2004:8601) argues that '[i]n as far as religious matters are concerned, the knowledge of Modimo [or] Nkulu-nkulu became the monopoly of the Western Christian definition, tradition, and practice'. In the following passage, Tondi (2004) summarises the use of 'God-talk' among Africans in ways which contradict the popular colonial myths and propaganda that Africans were sacrilegious:

> The various religious aspects, practices and experiences of African people were de- recognised by the new Judeo-Christian religion and colonial legal structures. Socio-cultural concepts of African design, such as badimo/amadlozi, were decried as superstition, paganism and heathenism, with a hypocrisy, which pretended that saints, European gods and goddesses were more acceptable. There was no public outcry from euro-centrically ordained African reverends/ministers and intellectuals about the hegemonic hypocrisy that ignored the fact that *saints* are (not only) Judeo-Christian ancestors. (p. 121)

According to Mndende (1994), in sub-Saharan Africa:

> The laws were understood as coming from God (Qamata) … The local chief also organised the prayers in times of drought when people used to go up the hill when praying for rain. The rain was asked from Qamata through the ancestors (izihlwele). (p. 46)

Sculpture is also a critical part of Africa's oral tradition. Ancient African peoples were skilled in sculpture, wood carvings and paintings on mountain rocks or caves depicting men with spears and women with babies on their backs as well as paintings of animals and birds to illustrate familial, vocational and mercantile activities. Owomoyela (2002) contends that:

> [W]hereas sculpture abounds in some parts of Africa, for example as representations of gods, it is relatively uncommon in southern Africa, although groups like the Venda and the Thonga-Shangane do produce some figurative wood carvings. (p. 61)

These wood carvings and paintings represent African oral histories in which various cultural practices and belief systems of ancient communities are depicted. Another example comes

4.Insertion is author's own.

from the ancient Near Eastern world in the story of the biblical Queen of Sheba featured in Persian and Turkish paintings, Kabbalistic treaties and medieval Christian mystical works (Adamu 2009:469). Owomoyela (2002) further writes:

> The ancient sculptural skill evident in the so-called Zimbabwe birds found in the ruins of the Great Zimbabwe monument persists today in the works of numerous accomplished sculptors, some ranking among the best in the world. (p. 61)

Some of the remains excavated at historical sites in sub-Saharan Africa (e.g. Great Zimbabwe and Mapungubwe in Limpopo and beyond; see Rugwiji 2019:8) shed light on cultural practices and oral traditions which prevailed before the dawn of Christianity.

Conclusion

This article explored how colonialism has been widely criticised for the erosion of African customs and cultural values. Although all African countries are now independent from colonial rule, the impact of colonialism continues to pose serious problems to democratic governments and their peoples in terms of socio-economic issues which include behaviours, ethics, corruption and poverty, among others. The role of memory and orality in teaching, decoding and disseminating information among Africans was explored. Africans are highly spiritual, and this reflects the significance and efficacy of memory and orality in African societies. It is argued that Christianity played a key role in the emergence of colonialism as well as in the erosion of morality in sub-Saharan Africa. It can further be stated that Christianity has no cultural values because, by its very nature, the Christian faith exists as an entity that constitutes diverse stakeholders who hail from divergent backgrounds and differing contexts. The study foregrounded the fact that although African peoples are perceived as illiterate because the majority of them (especially from rural areas) can neither read nor write, they do have their own database of knowledge through memory and orality. A generation of cultural exponents deeply rooted in IKSs is still available in sub-Saharan Africa and should not be excluded from research. In fact, any authentic qualitative research which does not engage or include local communities is not reliable and the findings are not trustworthy. Although stories of how Africans lived are not documented but passed on from generation to generation through memory and oral tradition, African belief systems and customs were intact before the dawn of Christianity.

In the data collection and writing up of this article, existing sources on memory and orality were scant, an indication that not much has been written and published to date on these subjects.

Acknowledgements

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