

Call for Papers

Orality (ies)

Yesterday – Today – Tomorrow

Conference in honour of the fiftieth anniversary (1976-2026) of the journal
Cahiers de littérature orale (CLO)

Carcassonne, Maison des Mémoires, 27 and 28 May, 2025

Organized by *The Cahiers de littérature orale* in collaboration with l’Ethnopôle Garae

The editorial in the 20th issue of the CLO [1986, 7-8] looked back on ten years of publications in the *Cahiers de littérature orale*, a scholarly journal founded and edited by Geneviève Calame-Griaule from 1976 to 2011 [Belmont & Leguy 2018]. The article evoked the “anthropological bias of the journal”, as well as the “scholars studying orality” and “oral literature.” Anthropology as the main disciplinary paradigm, oral literature as the core corpus and orality as the foundational question in the study of language, these ideas continue to be at the heart of our research. The editorial also emphasized to what extent, even today, “the theoretical reflection on the specific field of orality has not been sufficiently explored” and how this question has even been the source of “multiple controversies.” Who could imagine today – when we are about to celebrate the 100th issue of the journal – that our theoretical resources, our own terrains or methodologies and even the very definition of orality, continue to give rise to questions and even to fundamental changes?¹ It is precisely the scope and pertinence of the present changes and those to come – full of promise? – that will be the focus of the Fiftieth Anniversary Conference.

To begin with, one could certainly point out that the disciplinary fields, the places and objects of study, like the central concept of orality, have been multiplied and complexified. This plurality covers the disciplines of anthropology and those related to them – linguistic anthropology, the anthropology of symbols, the anthropology of voices, comparative speech anthropology, ethnolinguistics and (ethno)poetics, but also the anthropology of sound, ethnomusicology, sound studies, etc. This complex and diversified plurality also covers the fields of investigation – urban as well as rural, endotic as well as exotic, traditional as well as radically new – and the corpuses, from the Mother Goose tales to the *néo-oralité* dear to G. Calame-Griaule, and feminist slogans. If we speak only of the concept of orality, as an example, the changes, additions and shifts in problematics are numerous and significant:

- The primary and secondary oralities identified years ago by cultural historians and anthropologists specializing in communication are being supplemented or even replaced by tertiary oralities (media and digital), even in literature (multimodal and multisensorial systems of codes).

¹ To clearly illustrate this extension of the field of research in recent issues of the *Cahiers de littérature orale* it suffices to look at the key words (in French) indexed under the letter B, chosen at random: bandit – bàra – base de données – battles (rap) – Bella ciao – bénévolat – berceuses – bibliothécaire et conteuse – Bobo – bonnes et mauvaises filles – Bosavi – bouffon rituel – Brésil – bruits – Burkina Faso.

- Oralities are becoming the subject of analyses which are increasingly well documented and affirmative when they are seen as oral praxes inscribed in contexts largely structured by and for written culture [Goody 1979; Duranti 2009, 23-47; Bornand et Leguy 2013; Ong 2014; Belmont 2017].
- Oralities centred on oral performance (storytelling, oral rituals, oralities in professional contexts, street oralities, artistic oralities, scholarly oralities, etc.) tend to be supplemented by an ethnographic attention to perceived oralities. These oralities/auralities [Privat 2019] lead to the study of the situations and conditions of listening between humans but also “beyond the human” [Ingold 2021, Kedzierska-Manzon 2018, Feld 2023, etc.]. Post-humanist anthropological paradigms [Descola 2005; Ingold 2011, 2021; Kohn 2017; Viveiros de Castro 2021] may represent new theoretical frames and point toward new interpretative horizons. These oralities seem more and more suggestive of post-modernity, or at least of our present context.
- Oralities in literature seem to be increasingly visible, from J.M.G. Le Clézio to M. de Kerangal, from Doris Lessing to Ahmadou Kourouma and Mo Yan, perhaps constituting a field of resistance to the empire of the written word at the very heart of a scriptocentric civilization. A cultural counter-song perhaps? Eco-poetics, ethno-poetics and ethnocriticism (emergent interpretative paradigms gradually gaining international recognition) are paying greater and greater attention to the pragmatics, the semiotics and the stylistics of these textualized worlds of sound, even in the images embedded in language (the murmuring of the river, the roaring of the wind, waves of sound ...).

Clearly “orality” is not just a convenient synonym for oral – contrary to the strictest scholarly meanings. It is possible to speak, from an ethnological (and not only a semiolinguistic point of view) of *orality as a culture* (exotic, first, childhood, folklore culture, etc.); of *orality as a discursive genre* (nursery rhyme, lullaby, proverb, song, verbal arts, *oraliture*, etc.); of *orality as an everyday practice* (spontaneous orality as with a cry, regulated as in a conversation or formalized/formatted as in a job interview or... an academic lecture; but also of *orality as a ritual*: (the minute of silence, the witness in a trial or a wedding, the patient in analysis, the collective prayer in church, etc.) or even of *orality as an anthropological mode of communication* (addressing the dead or God, speaking to animals, to objects, to one’s-self). Finally, of orality as a form of *cultural (ambi-)valence* (orality as *oralitude*, civilizational orality as primitivity, political orality as a form of resistance to the hegemony of writing or infra-power, orality as a cosmogonic wind, orality as the policy of cultural institutions, orality as an artistic praxis, even if it is prehistoric, etc.).

Given this situation, if we concentrate on the *Cahiers de littérature orale* and their editorial and intellectual history, it makes sense to pay less attention to *oral literature* as an obvious fact and concentrate on the way in which cultural and ethnographic resources affect our definition of literature and inversely on the way in which verbal productions modify the way we usually examine oralities. Thus we are led to hypothesize that the progressive but significant and perhaps major shift that can be observed in our publications over the past ten years involves moving from a concentration on the corpus – oral literature – to a heuristic examination of orality and of the new aura surrounding oralities [Seydou 1989, 50-68]. Has the expression

oral literature become an epistemological obstacle to the study of the new oral and auditory manifestations [Krause 2018]? Or on the contrary is it preferable to maintain the major semio-linguistic specificities of orality, highlighting presence, corporality, vocality, musicality, chorality, heterophony, polyphony, diaphony, etc.?

In any case, an epistemological and heuristic precondition would be to establish a kind of lexical and geocultural history of the use of the expression *oral literature*. The expression is obviously oxymoronic (if we apply a literal and writerly interpretation), but the real difficulty lies in the evolving and malleable, highly improbable cartography of its semantic range [Belmont 2014]. Thus expressions like *spoken literature*, *oral poetry*, *poetics of the voice*, *literatures of the voice*, *oral texts* [Fabre and Lacroix 1974; Fabre, Morel and Adell 2016], *oral genres*, *oral literature*, *oral tradition*, *spoken memory*, *civilizations of orality* [Calame-Griaule 1992], *language arts*, etc. have been and are being used concurrently, aligning themselves in some cases with the arts and *popular traditions* [the expression itself has a long and disputed history ...], in other cases with theories of performance [Zumthor 1993, 145-206], or with linguistic and stylistic traditions, or even with anthropological paradigms, etc. Which goes to show how the instability of our object of study nourishes our investigations. But in any case, that is precisely what constitutes, paradoxically, the interest of our quests and questionings. Between “orality” and “oralities”?

To summarize – and if it is true that “writing outlines an archipelago in the vast waters of human orality” [Steiner 2007, 8] – we could suggest several major themes for papers and debates:

- A- What is meant by *oral literature*? Yesterday, today, tomorrow?
 - B- Linguistic and anthropological history of the concepts of orality/aurality;
 - C- Oralities, between vernacular specificity and universality;
 - D- Written literature (including hypertexts) and other contemporary artistic practices as spaces for living and un/heard oralities;
 - E- Oralities and cultural studies [intersectionality, postcolonial or decolonial studies, studies of worlds and atmospheres of sound, etc.];
 - F- Archives, technologies and transfer of oralities (recording devices, radio, television, computers, etc.);
 - G- Orality (ies) in national and international institutions of higher education and research
- ...

Proposals for papers –in English or in French– should be sent before September 15, 2024 to the organizing committee, specifying “Centenary Conference,” at the address of the publication: cahierslitteratureorale@gmail.com.

In order to have an idea of recent research published in the *Cahiers de littérature orale*, go to <https://journals.openedition.org/clo/>

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² Loi 1901. Tax deductible.

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