

MEMORISTS

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1. Memorizing the Face: Skulls and Sculpture

During excavations of one of the earliest city-cultures in Jericho in 8000 B. C. remarkable sculptures came to light at burial sites which lay in the old settlement in or beneath the houses. Apart from complete buried corpses, there were skeletons with heads missing, while the lower jaw often still lay nearby. The skulls were found at another place individually or put together in larger quantities, the facial parts modeled over with stucco, which in part still kept recognizable carefully fashioned individual features; the eyes were reproduced by shells.

This clear attempt at striving for portrait-like similarity in sculpture represents something completely new in the history of humanity. It can hardly be considered as "art", because the skulls were obviously buried again. But that there was a religious notion involved here, according to which the skull as the seat of special forces was subjected to separate treatment, is certain. In this cult of the skull the endeavor to restore the individual appearance of the dead person must also have played a role. Whether the dead treated in this way were slain enemies or their own ancestors has been the subject of much debate. But if one bases a conclusion on the indications at our disposal, the interpretation of one archaeologist that this treatment of the dead was the expression of an ancestor cult seems more probable than the other explanation. Buildings for cult

purposes as well as the treatment of the dead certainly make visible pronounced and sharply delineated religious notions which were corroborated by another find of three almost life-sized figures painted in red brown color and with shells inserted for eyes.

Deleuze and Guattari define faciality as the substance of an expression, which is redundant, because it reproduces what is already known; in other words, it is nothing. They argue that not only is language always accompanied by faciality traits, but also that the face crystallizes all redundancies; it emits and receives, releases and recaptures signifying signs. It is a whole body unto itself with a center and a border which separates it from other signs. The voice emanates from the face; that is why, however fundamentally important the writing machine is in the imperial bureaucracy, what is written retains an oral or non-bank character. The face is what gives the signifier substance; it is what fuels interpretation, and it is what changes, changes traits, when interpretation returns the signifier to its substance.

The ancient sculptured skulls of Jericho could be interpreted as the earliest known example of the fascination with the face and the desire to imprint it in memory. By trying to salvage the uniqueness of one mortal from the inexorable passage of time, human beings asserted their triumph over death, which in mythology appears as the great leveler of difference. These sculptures, then, also bear testimony to the attempt to tear the face away from the anonymity of the signifier, which uses the same markers for every individual. In this regard, it was an important step in the evolution of humans to be able to recognize a face at once, in order to tell friend from foe and to react appropriately. Here memory of the face as the unique combination of visual signs played an important role, and the eye as the seat of human perception and expression of emotion probably became privileged. Ironically, in the sculptures this organ is replaced by shells, which symbolize sameness, but also hide the horror of empty eye sockets as a potent reminder of death.

There is an equally important organ localized in the face, however, one that is intimately connected to memory: the mouth. Through it the memory of times past are vocalised in stories, songs, chants, rhymes, riddles, curses, in short the entire oral tradition of a people. This rich store of cultural knowledge is transmitted through language, the first sounds that the child hears from his or her mother. The importance of the oral memory culture is underlined by the desperate situation of the Bushmen in the Ghanzi district in Botswana, whose collective designation is *k'am-ka kweni*. Literally this term means "mouthless people", or, moving to more figurative glosses, "people without a voice", "weak and ineffectual, useless and dispensable people". A yet more figurative and poignant gloss given by one Bushman was "rubbish people". He pointed to the garbage bins beside one of the farmer's storage sheds, where, at that moment, some people were once again busily picking through the refuse, looking for edible or usable scraps.

There were two reactions to this experience of social degradation. One was anger and resentment, a determination to get something done to change things via a political route; the other was to take a positive attitude towards themselves as an ethnic group and a distinct culture. Instead of the self-denigrating designation mentioned above, they referred to themselves by the neutral term *n/oa kweni* ("red people"), employing a "chromatic" term equivalent in meaning and sentiment to terms referring to the two

other population groups of the society. They told and retold the old stories, unselfconsciously, delighting especially in trickster tales, as this genre frequently casts Lion - or his modern cognate, the Boer baas - as the duped antagonist of the trickster. The latter, in the farm-set tales, is almost invariably the Bushman laborer.

The celebration of the oral tradition, its social and emotional impact and the activation of its inherent symbolic and mythological contents, instill in the Bushmen in Botswana a sense of identity and self-confidence, rebuilding and reinvigorating the integrity of their culture. Because the rich store of tales is frequently told and traded, folklore is an integral part of the social and recreational life of old and young. Stories articulate closely with social reality. *Hua* -- "the old stories" -- restore and maintain awareness of the mythological, mystical and moral essences of Bushman culture. They also foster awareness of their history as a strong and resourceful people, able to offer effective resistance to the inevitably irresistible onslaught of people vastly more powerful than they themselves were. Even more importantly yet, they reflect and engage the contemporary life situation with its issues and problems.

2. Memorizing the Will of the Gods

The despot-god has never hidden his face, far from it: he makes himself one, or even several. The mask does not hide the face, it *is* the face. The priest administers the face of the god. With the despot, everything is public, and everything that is public is so by virtue of the face. Lies and deception may be a fundamental part of the signifying regime, but secrecy is not. The despot or god brandishes the solar face that is his entire body, as the body of the signifier. Over coding by the signifier, irradiation in all directions, unlocalized omnipresence.

The Greek poet Hesiod wrote didactic poems about the gods. His deepest intention was to tell the truth and not to invent stories, thus anticipating the work of the Greek natural philosophers. To tell the truth is the task which the muses have given him. Secondly, he wants to tell about the beginning of all things, the first thing that existed. He calls this beginning, which is the root of everything that follows and that leads into the present of the questioner, chaos. He wanted to demonstrate how things had developed from the original chaos to the lawfulness of the present. In this instance, therefore, the omnipresence of the despot-god had been transmuted into the universality of the law. (see *Visionaries*)

3. Memorizing the Heroes: Ballads and Epics

Oral literature, like written literature but even more pronouncedly, satisfies the desires of mortals to transcend their mundane world. In the myths the heroes visit the otherworld; in the legends ordinary folk are taken to fairyland; and in the fairy tales the youngest son or daughter of a peasant family makes a royal marriage. Gold, treasure, and wealth are prominent in narrative folklore. Jason and the Argonauts in Greek myth set out for the Golden Fleece.

An example of pre-Homeric oral literature is the Gilgamesh epic, in which an unquestioned faith in the gods gives way to the heroic quest of individuals. The gods

under the leadership of Anu throw insurmountable obstacles in the path of the heroes and, with the exception of Schamasch, give them no advice. In an almost brutal way, the epic, through the mouthpiece of the hero, castigates the promiscuity and vengeance of Ishtar. Apparently these blasphemies resulted from the outrage over the degeneration of the Ishtar-cult in Uruk, which robbed women of their honor. At the center of this poem stands the human being who despairs because of the inevitability of death. The two friends Gilgamesh and Enkidu, who were opponents in the beginning, help each other get over their fears repeatedly in the course of their adventurous clashes with Chumbaba and whip themselves up into self-transcendence, which despises the gods. As Enkidu then becomes ill as punishment, his friend cannot console him in his desperation; only Shamash finds kind words. The death of Enkidu paralyzes Gilgamesh completely, but then drives him to superhuman exertions to change his own lot; when he fails nevertheless, he resignedly prides himself in his own achievements. The Gilgamesh-epic is fully on a par with the great heroic poems of other nations, sharing with them a tragic world view, which simultaneously demonstrates the greatness and insignificance of the hero when confronted with hopeless situations into which guilt and the incomprehensibility of the gods have led him. By refusing any traditional consolation, his fate forces the listener to look for something new.

The Germanic culture of the nobility, rooted in the combative clan affiliation of the peasantry, subsisted on oral traditions, songs of the heroes and myths of the gods and did not value scholarly rigors. We owe the few remnants of Germanic poetry, the Beowulf song and the Hildebrand song, to the diligence of learned monks.

4. Memorizing the Kings: Praise Poems

Praise poetry is a genre shared by all the peoples of Africa south of the Sahara, and probably by all human beings in the past. For thousands of years, panegyric of the kind have been the medium of expression for the sentiments of homage, appreciation and thanks. Forms of the *imbongi*, the praise singer, can even be traced back at least in written form to Ur-Nammu, the founder of the third dynasty of Ur. When a Sumer king is praised as a true off-spring engendered by a bull, speckled of head and body, as a mighty warrior born of a lion, the metaphors are similar to those we heard in the praises of Mandela, as are other common devices of oral literature, i.e. linking, cross-linking, parallelism, cross-parallelism, anaphora, kenning, etc.

Many of the stylistic features of these ancient songs can still be found in present day Sotho, Xhosa, Shona or Zulu praise songs. Physical power, courage and bravery are attributes highly valued. Even if the traditional praise-singer, the *imbongi*, is at work in the name of a new chief -- the union and even if the subject of his song is nowadays often a metaphorical warrior in a metaphorical battle, the *imbongi* remains, he still writes with his spear.

The recourse to traditional symbols and forms of discourse can be an equally powerful force both in the promotion of popular struggle and in the promotion of reactionary nationalism and chauvinism. The recent history of Africa is full of liberation struggles which benefited neo-colonial elites and international capital while excluding the workers. The impetus towards national self-realization in critical assessments of

literature all too often fails to stop short of nationalist myth. While not to contest this appeal to traditional and national values would be foolish, to do so uncritically can only serve the purposes of a new ruling class.

Kelwyn Sole points out that praise poetry is usually thought to be related to traditional and ethnic power (e.g. Matamzima and Inkatha). He does, however, also point to the use of praise poetry since the *Mfecane* to criticise collaborators, as well as to the traditional *imbongi*, Hlongwe, who was active praising Champion and the ICU trade union in the 1930s. An example of a conservative (patriarchal and hierarchical) concept of the rule of law can be found in Mqhayi's *UDon Jadu* (1967, p. 82): "So then it is explained to the man / the law that is passed at the royal place / and he in turn instructs the family / all the members of the family to obey it, - / the children to obey their mothers; / their mothers to obey the chiefs, / the chiefs to obey God." *Ityala lamawele* adds: "Their mothers should obey the men, / The men should obey the chiefs".

5. Memorizing the People: Struggle Poems

Another of these young poets, who is both immensely popular and a very gifted writer and who draws both on the traditional craft of the oral poet as well as the modern consciousness of the current participant in the freedom struggle, is Sandile Dikeni. Just returned from a spell in prison for his political activities, he addressed his oppressors in his poem *NDIM LO!* (Here I am back!):

Murderous advocates of Genocide
Oppressors of my black blood
Dogs that maul without Pride
Hit me now, hit me hard
I say Ndim lo

He is a poet who makes no secret of his involvement in the situation he describes, of his partisanship, of the subjective nature of his creations.

Poets like him can be found everywhere in the Third World, where the oppressed have fought against colonialism. Their voice is a rich historical and cultural record of the struggle of the people. (see *Imperialism, Resistance and Culture*)

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Biographical Sketch

Anette Horn studied German and English Literature at the University of Cape Town. She graduated with a Ph.D. in 1998 (*Nietzsches Begriff der décadence. Kritik und Analyse der Moderne (Heidelberger Beiträge zur Germanistik* 2000). She was co-editor of *Like a house on fire* (COSAW 1994). Essays on Anna Seghers, Nietzsche, Musil, Uwe Timm, Jürgen Fuchs and South African literature (Bessie Head, Nadine Gordimer, John Coetzee etc.). She has taught at the University of Cape Town and was a research associate there. She was an Alexander von Humboldt post-doctoral research fellow at the Technische Universität Berlin, and is now senior lecturer in German at the University of Pretoria.