Exhibiting intangible heritage in a museum: the *Voices of Africa* experience

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ABSTRACT

Museums are places for education, but they can also offer opportunities for cross-cultural discovery. With a focus on enhancing the impact of our own research, this paper describes the experience of mounting an exhibition at the *Musée d'Ethnographie de Bordeaux* on the theme *Voices of Africa*. The aim of this exhibition was to investigate the social, cultural and political aspects of language – oral and written – on the African continent. But how is it possible to display the intangible in a museum exhibition? It poses a real challenge because it requires not only finding ways of exhibiting language itself, but also making visitors feel its impact by associating sound, imagery and objects. How could we share with the public our concerns about the various and complex ways that contemporary African societies have of understanding, organizing, preserving and enhancing language, that most intangible of all aspects of cultural heritage? In these times of identity politics and political tension, conceiving of an exhibition with the theme *Voices of Africa* required us to dismantle any notion of what is essential to culture, and we did this by means of exhibition designs that were intended to make people to think. That is why we chose to end the tour with a dialogue room in which visitors were asked what Western societies, suffering from strained social relationships even in schools, can learn from concepts and understanding of language that have already demonstrated their effectiveness in the African societies from which they originate.

Keywords: popular education, ethnolinguistic, exhibition, language, intangible heritage.

In memory of Geneviève Calame-Griaule

1. INTRODUCTION

This article[1] focuses on that aspect of a researcher's work that in French is known as 'valorisation', that is, activities that enhance the value of one's academic research. In particular, we describe the experience of mounting an exhibition at the *Musée d'Ethnographie de Bordeaux*[2] (MEB) on the theme

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Voices of Africa[3] which was open to the public in 2012–2013. The exhibition, mounted by two ethnolinguists and a team of colleagues most of whom had worked with the ethnolinguist Geneviève Calame-Griaule,[4] aimed to question the social, cultural and political aspects of language – oral and written – on the African continent.

Museums are places for education, but they can also offer opportunities for cross-cultural discovery. The MEB is unique in its aim to disseminate scientific culture by means of creative exhibition designs. In order to present the main features of the *Voices of Africa* exhibition and to critically review it, we will reflectively examine three crucial questions we had to answer in seeking to meet the ambitious aims of the museum and the exhibition:

(1) *How could we display what is intangible (mere "words") in an exhibition?* This was a real challenge, both in terms of design and from an educational perspective. It required not only finding ways of exhibiting words themselves, transforming the intangible into the tangible, but also making visitors feel their impact by associating sound, imagery and objects. In this way the public would hopefully arrive at a more intuitive understanding of the roles and functions of language, in a way that would be accessible to all.

(2) How could we share with the public our questions about the various and complex ways that contemporary African societies have of understanding, organizing, preserving and enhancing language, that most intangible of all aspects of cultural heritage? How could we establish a dialogue with the public – specialists and laymen, adults and children – by offering a different perspective on so-called "African" voices. We wanted to dismantle one by one the many clichés often associated with Africa, such as the vague idea of a monolithic continent,[5] or the image of a traditional Africa, forever limited by its oral culture, which, according to some, "has not yet taken its place in history"?[6]

Victoire, under the direction of Sophie Chave-Dartoen. See the museum's website at: http://www.meb.u-bordeaux2.fr/index.htm. See also Yvan Amar's (2012) radio program about the exhibition.

[3] The French title of the exhibition was « Paroles d'Afrique ». The exhibition ran from 23 October 2012 to 31 May 2013, under the scientific direction of Sandra Bornand and Cécile Leguy. (Download the exhibition pack at:

http://www.meb.u-bordeaux2.fr/DP%20EXPO%20PAROLES.pdf).

[4] In addition to the MEB, the exhibition received major support from LLACAN-CNRS (UMR 8135). This research laboratory replaced *Langage et culture en Afrique de l'Ouest*, an Equipe de recherche associée (ERA) of the CNRS and INALCO, which was directed by Calame-Griaule from 1977 until she retired.

[5] Improper generalizations are frequently made with regard to Africa, in domains such as language (as researchers, we are sometimes asked if we speak "African") or customs (calling all singers 'griots', a term that is actually only used in some West African societies).

[6] In reference to the speech given by Nicolas Sarkozy on 26th July 2007 at the Université Cheikh-Anta-Diop in Dakar, Senegal.

(3) Finally, the educational goal of the exhibition was political. *What role can a museum exhibition about African voices – including oral literature – play in these times of identity politics?* Are there no lessons to be learned from African notions of speech and dialogue that could prove useful to the public, not only to help them open up to otherness, but also to learn how to make better use of words in general?

These three issues were closely linked, since exhibition design – like speechmaking or storytelling – is a means of representing the world to the public. The central question here is about the educational role that can be played by language processes – including oral literature – when they are displayed in a museum. The exhibitions invited visitors to discover not only the complexity of an entire continent but also the universal faculty of human language.

2. PROJECT HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

2.1 WHY AN EXHIBITION?

The MEB is located in Bordeaux city center and entry is free. It is designed as a public venue to promote scientific culture by means of creative exhibition designs. Its mission is to offer an original perspective on current issues in society by inviting researchers, professionals and the public to view thematic exhibitions. The museum opened in 2011, but Chave-Dartoen, the museum director and research professor in the Department of Social Anthropology and Ethnology, was already asking her colleagues[7] to prepare for future events back in 2005. *Voices of Africa* was programmed to be the second major exhibition at the new MEB, following an exhibition about the anthropology of health, a highly innovative topic, but fitting for a university with a famous medical school. Planning for an exhibition about language began in 2005 by bringing together a team of collaborators, and intensified in the year running up to the event itself.

   The primary aim of the exhibition was to renew, through a museum experience, scientific inquiry initiated by Calame-Griaule (1986) about the emic representations of language and oral literature. A second aim was to reflect the state of scientific research on this issue. This was a novel challenge in the French museum world: not only to present the intangible in a museum setting, but also to make visitors feel the impact of language as a force.

   In preparation for this event, we drew together a scientific committee composed of anthropologists, ethnolinguists, linguists and literary specialists,

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[7]   At this time, Cécile Leguy was also teaching in the Department of Social Anthropology and Ethnology at the *Université de Bordeaux*. It was as we discussed various potential themes together that the idea for an exhibition about African languages was born.

some as collaborators actively involved in planning and carrying out the project,[8] others as consultants or suppliers of items for the displays.[9]

2.2 EXHIBITION OVERVIEW: A TOUR THROUGH SIX ROOMS

Let us follow the visitor's tour through the six rooms of the museum. After a lead-in time brought to life by greetings, the visitor was plunged into a setting where language was heard all around. Then the tour led the visitor through various types of words, from the most banal to the most esoteric.

The first room was devoted to common words and considered various aspects of how language is used when socializing. Visitors followed in the footsteps of a Central African Gbaya child learning to master speech (Roulon & Doko 2009). They solved Mossi riddles from Burkina Faso, and pieced together increasingly complex Bwa proverbs from Mali (Leguy 2001). Various texts were then displayed from daily life (Mbodj-Pouye 2013), school (Lafon 2008) or the street, including colored signs, shopping lists, accounts of dreams sent to a radio program (Van den Avenne & Mbodj Pouye 2013), and bi- and trilingual text messages from Senegal in Wolof, Fula and French (Vold Lexander 2011, Deumer & Vold Lexander 2013). Next came the issue of audiovisual media, increasingly present on the continent (Lenoble-Bart & Chéneau-Loquay 2010). This room, with its focus on everyday words, ended with some displays of indirect language and common procedures for subsidiary communication that can be seen on printed cloth (Ayina 1987), lids inscribed with proverbs (Faik-Nzuji 1989), grinding songs[10] and the names given to children.

The second room presented ways of defusing a crisis, such as jokes exchanged between "joking relatives" or jousting with verbal insults – known as

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8   Anne-Marie Dauphin-Tinturier, Alice Degorce, Jean Derive, Gérard Dumestre, Annie Lenoble-Bart, Aissatou Mbdoj-Pouye, Yves Monino, Katell Morand, Sophie Moulard, Loïc Perrin, Suzy Platiel, Alain Ricard, Paulette Roulon Doko, Christiane Seydou, Henry Tourneux, Yvonne Treis, Cécile Van den Avenne.

9   Sylvie Abbé, Saoudé Ali Bida, Marie-Rose Abomo Maurin, Nicolas Aubry, Thomas Bearth, Noël Bernard Biagui, Julien Bonhomme, Mélanie Bourlet, Nthatisi Bulane, Jean-Marc Boutonnet-Tranier, Bernard Caron, Catia Miriam Costa, Jacint Creus Boixaderas, Etienne Damome, Marie-Jo Derive, Olivo Diogo, Sokhna Bao Diop, Jean-Baptiste Eczet, Etienne Féau, Gérard Galtier, Xavier Garnier, Sylvie Grand'Eury Buron, Chantal Ghisoma, Mohamed Hassan, Jean-Charles Hilaire, Nicole Launey, Agnes Kedzierska Manzon, William Kelleher, Michel Lafon, Guy Lenoir, Marie Lorillard, Marie Lorin, Nicolas Martin-Granel, Jean François Joseph Nunez, Thierry Ouéda, Juan Manuel Pedrosa, Jean-Dominique Penel, Nicolas Quint, Jean-Luc Raharimanana, Christian Rapold, Suzanne Ruelland, Gertrud Schneider-Blum, Frank Seidel, Marie-Claude Simeone-Senelle, Douo Geneviève Singo, Françoise Ugochukwu, Kristin Vold Lexander, Julien Volper (Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren), Valentin Vydrin, Hugo Zemp.

10   In conjunction with the film by Marie Lorillard (2012).

gate gate in Côte d'Ivoire[11] (Derive & Derive 2004, Derive 2008) – and also ways of resolving a crisis, such as Zarma trials[12] in Niger.

The third room was devoted to literary language, both spoken and written. First, visitors were plunged into the world of oral literature with various films productions.[13] Then they were invited to pause silently in a reading room where they could discover novels, poetry collections and children's literature in African and Western languages. The transition between the spaces devoted to oral and written literature was marked by a display of original drawings by Dialiba Konaté, recounting the epic of Sundiata.[14] These covered both sides of the partition, signifying the continuum of the different kinds of literary expression, and showing that there is no clear boundary between orality and writing. The room devoted to written literature showcased specific works such as:

- Soni Labou Tansi's manuscript *Roméo et Juliette jouent au football* ("Romeo and Juliet play football");
- an experiment in collective writing. A Lingala manuscript recounting the life of a child soldier by Serge Amisi was typed and translated into French by the author and Jean-Christophe Lanquetin. This in turn was re-edited as a novel by Jean-Luc Rahamarimana, and published as *Souvenez-vous de moi l'enfant de demain* ("Remember me, tomorrow's child", Amisi 2011);
- a Hausa novel, written by a woman who comes from the male-dominated culture of the north, Hajiya Ramat Yakubu (1990), and published in Nigeria;
- a Bambara novel originally published with the title *Kanuya Wale* in Bamako (1996), then republished in 2010 and also translated and published in Fulani (with the title *Jili*), Songhay (*Baayan allaahidu*), and French (*Un acte d'amour*) by the same publisher[15].

This quiet moment devoted to the discovery of books and manuscripts from different times and places made the transition to the fourth room deliberately abrupt. Here, the visitor was invited – through a dynamic audiovisual presentation – to feel the resonance of "powerful language" in the power of

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[11] Yvan Amar devoted a program to this on 4th March 2013.

[12] The extract presenting a Zarma trial, from the film by Joël Calmettes (1993), was displayed in parallel with a Central African Gbaya trial from the film by Paulette Roulon-Doko (2008).

[13] These films are based on the research of Christiane Seydou (1991, 2008), Sandra Bornand (2005), Agnes Kedzierska Manzon (2013), and Paulette Roulon-Doko and Raymond Doko (1982). Concerning griots, see also two radio reports by Amélie Tulet (2011, 2014) and a CD that contains two epics (Badjé, 1998).

[14] Dialiba Konaté is a Malian artist who is fascinated by the epic tales that he heard as a child. He now seeks to pass them on through the medium of colored crayon drawings with written commentaries. He is the author of several works published by Seuil Jeunesse (*cf.* Leguy 2010).

[15] Derive (2006) is an analysis of this novel.

performance: prayers invoking the ancestors, diviner proclamations, initiation rituals (Dauphin-Tinturier 2003), rain incantations,[16] marriage vows (Bornand, 2006, 2013), blessings, etc.

In the last two rooms, our journey through the African continent ended with a call to be open to other influences: customs,[17] like language, spread from continent to continent (Moñino 2002, 2007). They invest modernity with new ways of doing things, adapting to the ever-present need to communicate more effectively. A particular example of this is the use of local languages for literacy in the context of development projects (Tourneux 2006, 2008; Tourneux & Métangmo-Tatou 2011).[18]

The visit ended with an invitation for visitors to think about their own behavior. At this point, the exhibition spotlighted various initiatives and events in France whose aim was to help adults and children work towards easing strained social relationships by encouraging the renewal of dialogue (Platiel 1993, 2002; Launey & Platiel 2010).[19]

In each room, then, original and thought-provoking displays, always with an emphasis on interactivity, provided the basis for communicating a specific message.

2.3 TARGET AUDIENCES AND FRINGE EVENTS

In its role as a tool for communication and education, the MEB welcomed a cross-section of the public to the *Voices of Africa* exhibition. To extend this educational aspect, Marie Lorillard, an anthropologist specializing in Senufo oral literature (Lorillard 2013), ran workshops based on each of the exhibition rooms for children from schools and community centers in the city, with different activities depending on their age. The accompanying booklet is available online[20] and can be used by teachers and parents who want to share a language experience with their children, even if they don't actually visit the exhibition themselves.

Various other highlighted events also took place during the *Voices of Africa* exhibition offering visitors insights into language related issues in the various worlds that make up Africa. Bornand and Derive organized a public

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[16] This was an extract from the film by Olivier de Sardan (1974).

[17] See Wolof rap music (Moulard 2004, 2013), Swahili poetry slams, Zulu and Cameroonian cartoons (Cassiau-Haurie 2013), and Kannywood film productions in Hausa (Furniss 2003, 2005).

[18] For example, the CD *Le baptême peul du VIH* (2009) sung by Alfa Barry with lyrics by Henry Tourneux, Abdoulaye Boubakary and Konaï Hadidja.

[19] See also the two films by Alexandra Ena (2013, 2014) and the radio program by Amélie Tulet (2013).

[20] http://llacan.vjf.cnrs.fr/val_expos_guide.php

international symposium[21] to take stock of research on fundamental aspects of language use in Africa in a way that would be accessible to everyone. A series of film screenings accompanied this conference. This event was coordinated by Dragoss Ouedraogo[22] and shown in different Bordeaux cultural centers, thus reaching various other audiences, such as those who frequent the *Utopia* art-house cinema; customers at the alternative cafés in the vicinity of the *Boulevard des Potes*; residents of the suburbs at the *Rocher de Palmer* cultural center; and those who enjoy cultural outings at the *Musée d'Aquitaine*.

We also organized conferences[23] and a seminar[24] to coincide with the exhibition and reinforce its message. Researchers and authors were invited to speak to a wide audience, while performances and workshops held during the exhibition were an opportunity to attract other members of the public to the museum and to build relationships. For example, a performance by Souleymane Diamanka, the Franco-Senegalese slammer, invited the public to make a connection between slamming and the poetry of Fulani herdsmen that they had seen in the exhibition.[25] As for the workshops, they were an opportunity for the

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[21] The participants were Thomas Bearth (University of Zürich, Switzerland), Anne-Marie Dauphin (France), Jean Derive (Université de Chambéry, LLACAN, France), Graham Furniss (SOAS, Great Britain), Daniela Merolla (Leiden University, Netherlands), Christiane Seydou (France), Paulette Roulon-Doko (CNRS, LLACAN, France), Tal Tamari (CNRS, IMAF, France) and Ndiabou Touré (Université de Saint-Louis, Senegal). Their papers are to be published in an issue of the journal *Cargo* (Derive and Leguy, forthcoming).

[22] A Burkinabe filmmaker and lecturer at the University of Bordeaux.

[23] Serge Amisi (author), Jean-Christophe Lanquetin (stage director) and Jean-Luc Raharimanana (author) « Débat autour du livre *Souvenez-vous de moi, l'enfant de demain*. Un manuscrit à trois, entre oralité et (r)écriture » ("Debate about the book entitled *Remember me, tomorrow's child*. A manuscript with three authors, between the oral and the (re)written word"); Boukhary Ben Essayouti (director of the Timbuktu municipal museum) « Conférence-débat sur les manuscrits de Tombouctou » ("Conference and debate about the Timbuktu manuscripts"); Maëline Le Lay (CNRS, LAM, France) « Le théâtre en République Démocratique du Congo : Approche d'un genre artistique urbain contemporain » ; ("Theater in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: a contemporary urban artistic genre"); Annie Lenoble-Bart (Université Bordeaux Montaigne, France) et Etienne Damome (Université Bordeaux Montaigne, France) « "Paroles d'Afrique" : l'appropriation des médias » ; ("'Voices of Africa': media ownership"); Yves Moñino (CNRS, LLACAN, France) « San Basilio de Palenque, un village colombien de "Nèg'Marrons" originaires du Congo. Diasporas africaines des Amériques » ; ("San Basilio de Palenque, a Columbian village of runaway Congolese slaves: The African diaspora in the Americas"). Sophie Moulard (LAM, France) « Rap au Sénégal » ("Rap music in Senegal"); Henry Tourneux (CNRS, LLACAN, France) « La question linguistique dans le developpement en Afrique » ("The place of languages in the development of Africa").

[24] Annie Chéneau-Loquay, (CNRS, LAM, *Sciences po Bordeaux*) and Mirjam de Bruijn (African Studies Centre, Leiden, Netherlands) « La nouvelle parole en Afrique, le téléphone mobile : e-innovations, e-mobilisations » ("The cell phone, a new voice in Africa: e-innovation, e-mobilisation", 25 April 2013).

[25] See Antoine Perraud's radio program *Tire ta langue*, 31 March 2013, « Le slameur et le linguiste » ("The slammer and the linguist").

audience – children and adults – to feel what it is like to hear folktales or try out slam and graffiti for themselves.

To conclude, we should note that the scope of this exhibition and the surrounding events, made no claim to be exhaustive, but it did fulfill our desire to create a meeting place where visitors could acquire new knowledge alongside the other events offered by the museum.

3. SHARING RESEARCH FINDINGS: ISSUES AND OBSTACLES

Calame-Griaule and her colleagues were devoting themselves to language as a research topic as far back as the 1960 and 70s. Later, in 1982, the term "intangible cultural heritage" was coined at a UNESCO international conference in Mexico, giving value to the language arts. However, museums often continue to ignore the theme of language, tending to be more interested in the preservation of material, tangible objects. The *Voices of Africa* exhibition, with its innovative and educational ambition, was thus faced with three challenges: how to display words; how to help visitors feel the impact of those words; and how to offer an immersion learning experience.

3.1 HOW TO DISPLAY WORDS

This was a pioneering exhibition in France. Exhibitions on the theme of intangible cultural heritage and the issues it raises are rare[26]. True, the theme of language was included, along with noise, sound and music, in an exhibition entitled *Bruits* (Noise) held at the *Musée d'Ethnographie de Neuchâtel*, 2 October 2010 to 15 September 2011. This exhibition was first in a trilogy[27] dedicated to intangible cultural heritage in the context of research conducted by the *Institut d'ethnologie de l'Université de Neuchâtel* and several other Swiss partners. However speech and oral literature occupied a marginal place in this exhibition.

In contrast, these themes were central to our project, and they take us back to two concerns raised by the notion of "intangible heritage" as defined by UNESCO: what to choose and how to avoid fossilization. Choice involves risk taking, focusing on one object or practice at the expense of another. Might we not inadvertently reproduce the political and social domination seen in societies

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[26] A number of museums around the world are dedicated to language (see http://www.languagemuseum.ca/language-museum-map). However, the motivation for such museums often lies in identity politics, and they are more devoted to illustrate linguistic issues than to language's uses. See for example Crystal (2008) and Mir i Fullana (2008).

[27] The second exhibition explored the creation and use of images in anthropology and was entitled *Hors-champs* (3 November 2012 – 20 October 2013, extended to 15 December 2013). The third exhibition, *Secrets,* is programmed for early 2015.

in general, such as the UNESCO Convention with its stipulation that only governments can nominate world heritage sites? In our exhibition planning, we had laid out a roadmap, or synopsis, of what we wanted to display, but actually our choices were limited by material and spatial constraints. The choices we made to be consistent with our theme were dependent on whatever material the researchers who actively collaborated on the project made available to us, and also on the space available. If certain African societies were more represented than others, it was because some researchers invested more time and energy and shared more data.

These choices also raise concerns about fossilization. The intangible heritage of humanity as defined by UNESCO is itself subject to this risk: even though the Convention emphasizes the dynamic nature of oral traditions that must be preserved, it still contains a certain level of ambiguity. In the same way, a museum exhibition carries the risk of sharing a fossilized, or simplistic view of orality, either because it cannot show the real complexity of the subject, or because visitors might make generalizations about what they see. To minimize this danger, we tried as much as possible to display examples from many different cultures, showing Africa's diversity.

3.2   HOW TO HELP VISITORS FEEL THE IMPACT OF WORDS

A major challenge of the exhibition was to raise the visitor's awareness of the power of language, as highlighted by the work of Calame-Griaule (1986) and other ethnolinguists. Indeed, in a society like ours where it is all too easy to say "words disappear; writing remains", we are not necessarily aware of the scope of certain words. So it seemed important to help the visitor think, for a moment, about the weight that words can carry and the effect they can have on their audience. More specifically, by displaying what we termed "powerful words" (blessings, curses, prayers, incantations to the ancestors, initiation songs, therapeutic lyrics, etc.), we sought to make the visitor feel the impact of speech acts as performance.

3.3   HOW TO OFFER AN IMMERSION LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Gaining knowledge comes through hands-on experience that calls upon all the senses. Inter-active learning, first proposed early in the 20th century, encourages the individual to be active, to gain knowledge through participation (see the proposals of the French education specialist Célestin Freinet in the 1920s). Anthropologists like Michael Houseman (2004, 2008) and Professor of Performance Studies like Richard Schechner (2003, 2004) also consider hands-on experience and emotional involvement to be ways of accessing knowledge. Houseman encourages his students to actually experience dance in his

workshops on the anthropology of dance,[28] and he places them in simulations of rituals in his *Rite-action* events.[29] So hands-on experience, participation and emotional engagement are all considered to be ways of accessing knowledge.

With this same desire to teach by means of hands-on experience and immersion, we conceived a visit to the exhibition as a digression from daily life, a passage from one state of mind to another, where the visitor would acquire knowledge that not only informs, but also, and more importantly, transforms. A tour of the exhibition, as we have seen above, was conceived as an initiation process. The entrance was designed as a kind of decompression chamber full of greetings and this was followed by a word-bath. From there, visitors gradually progressed from the most ordinary to more esoteric use of words, culminating in the point where, in total darkness, they feel the full impact of "powerful words" before coming back to the familiar world, where they had an opportunity to respond practically to what they had experienced. Before leaving, visitors were invited to step back and leave a little of themselves as a "memory seed" hanging it on the tree that marked the end of the visit.

3.4   COMMUNICATING A COMPLEX MESSAGE SIMPLY

One of the main obstacles encountered during the preparation for this exhibition was the need to keep the message simple. At the same time, we wanted to draw attention to the complexity of a subject that is seemingly banal, both in itself and more specifically in the African context. Since our aim was to educate, how could we do this in simple terms that would be accessible to non-specialists without making unfair generalizations? How could we share the notion of language and open the visitors' minds to scientific reflection without using jargon or long, involved scientific explanations?

A major challenge for us as researchers was to write little and say much, in order to truly reach all our intended audiences. A good exhibition matches scientific research with suitable designs. But researchers as a whole, even those who are interested in sharing and enhancing the value of their work, are not used to condensing it, representing it visually, staging it, and communicating it concisely. As the scientific organizing committee, we could decide what we would like to say, but not always how it was going to be said. We were not in the habit of seeing our written work displayed in large font size, but still we had to work with the exhibition coordinator and designers to understand their requirements. They were responsible more for what was to be exhibited and less for what was said. We had to engage in continual dialogue to understand each

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[28]   « La danse comme objet anthropologique » ("Danse as an anthropological theme"), a workshop led by Michael Houseman (IMAF, EPHE) and Georgiana Wierre-Gore (PAEDI, Université Blaise Pascal-Clermont Ferrand 2).

[29]   He directs these events with Philippe Jespers at the *Université Libre de Bruxelles* (Belgium).

other, knowing that they were the real mediators between us, as scientific researchers, and the visitors.

Schechner, when he described shamanic experiences as "real and whole", added that "Our interpretations diminish and fragment them" (2003, p. 35). In the framework of an exhibition, it is not only our interpretations that run this risk but also our presentation and explanations. We were continually being asked to cut our texts, whereas we were concerned about them being too short and simplistic. But the exhibition coordinator and the scientific organizing committee understood that the exhibition had to be conceived as a whole, and that it was the entire experience that would give it meaning. The process of simplification that we were faced with was in any case less important than the one made by the visitors who would not necessarily read every label and would not grasp everything in a single visit. The important thing was their progression through the exhibition, as is the case with language itself and the way it is perceived.

3.5   HOW TO AVOID THE FORMS OF SYMBOLIC OR POLITICAL DOMINATION?

Finally, the obligation of scientific neutrality arises whenever one deals with linguistic facts, because they are so often closely linked to power issues. How could we avoid reproducing forms of symbolic or political domination? Inevitably we had to make choices, as we have seen above. At the same time, when mounting the exhibition, we wanted to minimize any idea of a single valid testimony or a correct template. That is why we sought to display cultural expression in all its diversity. For example, we chose to place two contrasting naming systems in parallel, both involve social relationships but in different ways. On the one hand, the Mursi people of Ethiopia with their multiplicity of names, each person giving a name to the individual depending on their relationship with them;[30] on the other hand, the Bwa people of Mali who use names as indirect messages[31] in which relationships usually play a role.

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[30]   Based on the research of Jean-Baptiste Eczet (Zaoui 2010).
[31]   Based on the research of Cécile Leguy (2005, 2011, 2012).

4. EXHIBITING LANGUAGE AND ORAL LITERATURE IN A MUSEUM: A MILITANT ACT?

In these times of identity politics and political tension in both Africa and the West, conceiving of an exhibition with the theme *Voices of Africa* requires dismantling any notion of what is essential to culture, and we did this by means of exhibition designs that were intended to make people to think. That is why we chose to complete the tour with a room focusing on dialogue between two continents in which visitors were invited to think about what Western societies, suffering from strained social relationships even in schools, can learn from concepts and understanding of language that have already demonstrated their effectiveness in the African societies from which they originate.

Evoking language to taking a stand on the issue of identity is interesting for several reasons: not only as a scientific topic, but also because language is a faculty common to all humankind, even though our ways of using it and our attitudes towards it differ from one context to another. It is particularly interesting at this time because, in Europe and in Africa, we are currently witnessing changes in communication media, such that it is no longer necessary for two people to be in the same place in order to "talk". Pondering these "Voices of Africa" is therefore an invitation – beyond a mere call to try and understand the "Other" – to examine one's own behavior. It concerns thinking about language and considering how it helps us all live together. But it is also the question of how scientific research can have a social impact, a concern that is relevant to all researchers.

Clearly, then, we are positioning ourselves in a political and social debate. Our decision to exhibit "Voices of Africa" and explain them to the public is to be understood as a kind of "social action" (cf. Schechner 1995 on the subject of performance). It contributes to popular education (Lepage, 2005,[32] 2012), and can be defined, following Maurel (2010, p. 82), as "the set of educational and cultural practices that facilitate social and political transformation, empower individuals and populations, and increase their democratic power to act."[33]

The exhibition design was designed to serve this goal in the sense that, following the example of avant-garde ethnology museums (including the *Musée d'Ethnographie de Neuchâtel*), it was interactive and encouraged hands-on participation. We wanted to tear down the symbolic barrier between visitors and exhibits, a barrier that is unconsciously put up by the visitors themselves, as seen by their reticence to touch, remove, talk to one other, and generally take an active part in the knowledge sharing process, even when they are invited to. The

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[32] This book was written following a meeting with Christiane Faure (1908-1998) who introduced the cultural policies of mass education after the Second World War.

[33] Our translation of the original French: « l'ensemble des pratiques éducatives et culturelles qui œuvrent à la transformation sociale et politique, travaillent à l'émancipation des individus et du peuple, et augmentent leur puissance démocratique d'agir. »

entries in the exhibition guest book and the "memory seeds" hung on the tree, however, reveal how some were affected by their experience. Visitors could handle the exhibits (e.g. a "bookshop-on-the-floor" where they could peruse magazines). They could play with touch-screens (e.g. the "Word Journey" an interactive game for tracing borrowed words around the world). They could take things away (such as notepads with additional information scattered throughout the exhibition that visitors could tear off and take home). They could leave a trace, not just in the guest book to remind themselves of the exhibition but also by hanging a "memory seed" on the tree and picking another one off it, thereby establishing a dialogue with the other visitors. In all these ways, visitors were encouraged to interact, to participate, to become actors in their own museum tour.

The exhibition in Bordeaux can be classed with "traditional forms of dissemination of research results (reports, articles, books, films, exhibitions, lectures) that cater more or less indiscriminately to audiences outside of the social world under investigation"[34] (Olivier de Sardan 2014: 37). However, following the suggestion of Chave-Dartoen, the Director of the *Musée d'Ethnographie de Bordeaux*, we also produced a follow-up resource, a virtual exhibition that would reach other audiences. It consisted of a DVD[35] containing a virtual tour of the six exhibition rooms with extra documents and video interviews with the researchers, which will soon be available on the web. Thanks to this resource, the exhibition will travel to meet other audiences, including, potentially, "the people" themselves, in other words "the research subjects themselves, either those who were directly interviewed, or more widely, members of the social group investigated" (Olivier de Sardan 2014: 37).[36] In this way, the exhibition was a means of giving back, or "restitution" in Olivier de Sardan's definition, "in the sense of feedback, centred on a 'performance' presenting the results of empirical research to the members of the social group under investigation."[37]

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[34] Our translation of the original French: « formes de diffusion classique des résultats de recherches (rapports, articles, livres, films, exposition, enseignement) qui s'adressent pour l'essentiel à des publics plus ou moins indiscriminés extérieurs au monde social enquêté »

[35] DVD produced under the direction of the MEB by Sandra Bornand, Cécile Leguy and Paulette Roulon-Doko, with the collaboration of technicians from LLACAN and from the UPS "Cultures, Langues, Texte" resource center.

[36] Our translation of the original French: « Autrement dit [des] "sujets de l'enquête", que ce soit les personnes ayant été directement interrogées, ou plus largement les membres du groupe social investigué ».

[37] Our translation of the original French: « comme "feed-back", centrée sur une "performance" présentant les résultats d'une recherche empirique à des membres du groupe social ayant fait l'objet de l'enquête ».

5. CONCLUSION

Museums as places of education and exhibitions as social action are the two points that we consider it important to highlight in conclusion. That is why we designed this exhibition as a rite of passage, marked by an entrance in a separate space and timescale, followed by various stages designed to make visitors feel sensations and emotions, and to cause them to raise questions that would transform their thinking by the time they exit.

In this way, visitors were led to question their own relationship with language and communication through the language practices of other cultures. All the cultures in question were African, that is to say, representing an often misunderstood and stigmatized continent. The exhibition was a way to discover "what speaking means"[38] among the Malinke of Mali, the Amhara of Ethiopia or the Bemba of Zambia.

Through the various ways of speaking and writing, visitors were introduced to the contemporary language practices of a dynamic continent. The exhibition aimed to show the diversity of practices and representations of speech, challenging the cliché of a monolithic Africa; to highlight the creativity that is ever-present even in so-called 'traditional' practices, contradicting the idea of a fossilized Africa; to refute the idea that Africa is a continent without writing by displaying documents in Ge'ez, Swahili and Tifinagh; and in turn, to encourage visitors to question their own behavior in a world where direct encounters between cultures tend to be scarce.

In short, the exhibition sought to respond to Van Gennep's (1914: 21) criticism of museums. Although it was made a century ago, it is still relevant: "If ethnographic museums in their current state are hurting our scientific domain, it is because they perpetuate the old illusion that what is important to us is, above all, the knowledge of material objects."[39]

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[38] Our translation of the original French: « ce que parler veut dire ».

[39] Our translation of the original French: « Si les musées ethnographiques dans leur état actuel font du mal à notre science, c'est qu'ils perpétuent l'illusion ancienne que ce qui lui importe, c'est avant tout la connaissance des objets matériels »

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