

CALL FOR PAPERS

16th conference of the International Society for the Oral Literatures of Africa (ISOLA)

April 13 - 16, 2027

Faculty of Languages, Arts and Humanities - Aït Melloul
Ibnou Zohr University - Agadir - Morocco

Theme

The Art of Orality: Improvisation at the Crossroads of Artistic, Cultural, and Social Dimensions

Oral traditions occupy a central place in many African cultures, constituting essential vectors for the transmission of knowledge, history, and values. In this context, improvisation proves to be a determining resource for the enrichment of these practices, thereby rendering each performance unique and adapted to its environment.

Indeed, from the 1980s onward, the notion of performance has become central to the study of oral literature (Ruth Finnegan, 1992). This term reflects the fact that these are “creators,” who are often singers, actors, dancers, as well as musicians, since they frequently accompany themselves with their own musical instruments, such as the kora, the balafon, the lute, the tam-tam, the tambourine, or the xylophone, etc. As a result, oral literature is no longer considered solely as a fixed text, but rather as a dynamic performance: an ephemeral, interactive, and contextual event in which meaning is created by the performer before an audience.

Improvisation is undoubtedly one of the most striking aspects of performance. The eminent intellectual and writer Abbé Manuel Lukuona (1894–1987) describes it as an “astonishing and distinctive phenomenon.” The term itself instills fear in speakers engaged in verbal contests and unprepared performances. Orality does not enjoy the privilege of the wastebasket! It evokes fear, the unexpected, surprise, the loss of speech or concentration, memory lapses, the absence of response... From a scientific perspective, it presents itself as a concept for the analysis of any activity of oral, musical, or bodily production. Also referred to as “improv,” it may be defined as the capacity for spontaneous artistic creation without prior calculation. Specialists in the field sometimes refer to the “unconscious calculation of improvisation” (Jouad, 1996), particularly when analyzing oral songs.

Moreover, the relationship between formal training and improvisation is also noteworthy (Ruth Finnegan, 2012: 10, 260), for, as Okpewho (1992: 33) indicates, “the nature of oral composition [...] always involves a certain compromise between tried and tested techniques and new elements invented or substituted for a particular occasion or purpose.” Furthermore, in several cases, such as that of Yoruba *ijaba* bards, “the apprentice is not trained in the rigid use of memory, but in the flexible technique of improvisation” (Okpewho, 1979: 40). In this context, improvisation assumes a particular dimension within oral traditions, where it becomes an art of collective performance.

In many societies with strong oral traditions, improvising poets who engage in these high-level verbal contests skillfully adapt to the general conditions of the arena and often act in accordance with the overall dynamics of the exchange. Although this exchange is subject to a tacit ethical code, the debaters frequently orient one another with respect to the objects of the contest, which may range from social issues to intimate invocations of their respective opponents. These exchanges do not merely represent one of the high points of spontaneous improvisation in popular culture, but also constitute its noblest form.

Academic research devoted to this phenomenon reveals the possible existence of mechanisms of improvisation acquired through the constant practice of oral poetry and the memorization of a substantial poetic repertoire. It is therefore, in all likelihood, a matter of pre-established and inherited frameworks that enable experienced improvising poets to undertake verbal disputes that are manifestly spontaneous, while nevertheless adhering to strict rules of meter, musicality, and perfect harmony, encompassing a high aesthetic value. It is precisely these demands of eminent sophistication that allow poets on stage—through their performance—to enjoy the admiration of the audience, to forge a solid reputation as formidable adversaries, and to become highly sought-after stars on the occasion of major festivals attracting a wide audience that extends far beyond the boundaries of communal identity.

These artists of verbal culture, whether poets, storytellers, or others, emerge as indispensable figures, playing an essential role as transmitters of knowledge and traditions. In Morocco, they are found within the family (particularly grandmothers), as well as in the guise of professional storytellers in the *halqa*, the circle of spectators who gather around the storyteller and their assistants in public squares and markets. In Mali, it is the griots, as professional storyteller-historians, who present themselves as masters of powerful speech capable of illuminating the past and shaping the present. In South Africa, the *imbongi* are traditional praise poets for chiefs and warriors, those who also comment on historical events as well as on social and political issues.

Today, this heritage manifests itself in new forms of expression, with rappers positioning themselves as the new orators of our time. Like storytellers, griots, and *imbongi*, they employ their voices to address social and political realities, while offering a platform to those who are often marginalized. Their art, deeply rooted in tradition while being resolutely modern, echoes this long lineage of orator-artists who, over the centuries, have known how to mobilize their audiences.

All these artists draw on the freedom afforded by orality to fully deploy their improvisational talent, thus offering, in each performance, a renewed interpretation of the same oral narrative. Voice, tone, gaze, gestures, silence, interaction with the audience... all constitute communication techniques that are mobilized to captivate the attention of their audience and to render their presence compelling.

The sixteenth ISOLA conference aims to bring together academics and researchers around an interdisciplinary discourse on the artistic, cultural, and social dimensions of improvisation in African oral literatures, as well as its influence on the creation of narratives and interactions within communities.

The themes proposed for the participants in this conference are as follows:

1. Cultural, artistic, and political issues surrounding improvisation in oral societies.
2. Forms of improvisation in the performing arts and their impact on African oral culture.
3. Figures of orality and their role in preserving and transmitting cultural traditions.
4. The role of improvisation in religious and spiritual rituals, as well as its impact on beliefs and social practices.
5. Improvisation, orality, and rituals: symbolic and performative dimensions.
6. Translation and adaptation of oral narratives: challenges for teaching and transmission.
7. Improvisation in literary and artistic creation: aesthetic and analytical issues.
8. Strengthening community ties and social interactions through improvisation.
9. The didacticization of improvisation in the teaching of oral literatures.
10. Improvisation and interculturality in Africa: circulations, hybridizations, and reconfigurations.
11. Reinventions of improvisational practices in the age of social media.
12. Gender relations and oral improvisation: dynamics of the creation and reception of oral narratives.
13. Reflections on African oral traditions and improvisation in contemporary practices

Doctoral students are invited to submit abstracts and full papers for the Isidore Okpewho Oral Literature Prize (ISOLA). The papers submitted must be original research works that have not yet been submitted for review at another academic institution. Each submission must include the student's name, the name of their thesis supervisor, and the corresponding university affiliation.

Suggested bibliography

Bachir-Loopuyt Talia, Canonne Clément, Saint-Germier Pierre et Turquier Barbara (dir). (2010). *Improviser. De l'art à l'action. Tracés*, n° 18. <https://doi.org/10.4000/traces.4496>

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Boehringer Sandra, Bornand Sandra et Degorce Alice (dir). (2017). *Jouer avec le genre dans les arts de la parole. Cahiers de littérature orale*, 82. <https://journals.openedition.org/clo/4119>

Cahiers de littérature orale (2016). In Memoriam : Isidore O. Okpewho (1941-2016), *Cahiers de littérature orale* [En ligne], 80. DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/clo.3020>

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Duranti Alessandro. (2009). « L'oralité avec impertinence », *L'Homme*, 189, 23-47.

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Finnegan, Ruth. (1992 [1977]). *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context*. Indiana University Press.

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Manca Maria. (2009). *La Poésie pour répondre au hasard : une approche anthropologique des joutes poétiques de Sardaigne*. CNRS Éditions, Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme.

Okpewho Isidore (1979) *The Epic in Africa. Toward a Poetics of the Oral Performance*, New York, Columbia University Press,

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Zumthor Paul (1983). *Introduction à la poésie orale*. Paris, Seuil.

Guidelines: ISOLA is committed to promoting academic excellence. Proposed papers and panels must defend a well-defined thesis, address the conference theme, and focus on Africa or the African diaspora. The working languages are English and French.

Submission guidelines for communications

Abstracts, submitted in Word format and with a maximum length of 500 words, must be written in Times New Roman, 12-point font, with 1.5-line spacing. They must also include the author's name, institutional affiliation, email address, and a short biographical note. Abstracts must be submitted in both languages via the following Google Forms link dedicated to the conference:

<https://forms.gle/YfwNM7JGmkr98bvK9>

Tentative Schedule and Practical Information

- Abstract submission deadline: July 30, 2026
- Acceptance notifications: September 30, 2026
- Registration deadline: December 30, 2026
- Presentation length: 20 minutes
- Final program publication: early March 2027
- Conference dates: April 13-16, 2027

Travel and accommodation expenses are the responsibility of each participant.

All ISOLA members-conference participants, speakers, and individual contributors-must pay ISOLA membership fees and conference registration fees.

Information will be available on the conference website:

www.isola16conference.com

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