Barber, Karin. The anthropology of texts, persons and publics: oral and written culture in Africa and beyond. ix, 276 pp., bibliogr. Cambridge: Univ. Press, 2007. £45.00 (cloth), £16.99 (paper)

The anthropology of texts, persons and publics: oral and written culture in Africa and beyond – tracking key contributions from British and American anthropology, poststructural analysis, and literary criticism – offers a much-needed theoretical and methodological framework for a new anthropology of texts. The brilliance of Karin Barber’s book unfolds in her analyses of oral and written texts – praise poetry, epic poems, songs, novels, letters, and unpublished journals – from a wide range of African cultures and historical periods. As we follow Barber’s linguistically, culturally, and historically grounded analyses of specific texts, we gain layers of insight into a variety of cultures’ constructions of personhood and publics at particular places and times.

Barber builds on an ‘entextualization’ perspective (Michael Silverstein & Greg Urban, Natural histories of discourse, 1996), which views texts as instances of discourse that have been ‘rendered detachable from their immediate context of emission’ and then ‘made available for repetition or recreation in other contexts’ (p. 22). Thus, Barber develops and models an anthropology of texts that argues for attention to how and why people create particular genres, forms, modes, and conventions of oral and written texts; after all, by creating such texts, people are intentionally ‘fixing’ culture. Barber is
interested in how and why this process of ‘making culture stick’ happens through what she terms ‘acts of instauration’, the simultaneous creation and maintenance of texts (p. 4). Through her analyses of African oral texts as particular genres, Barber keenly illustrates how ‘preservation and innovation are inseparable’ (p. 211): because the convention of Yoruba praise poetry (óríkì) has been established, new poems and forms of praise poetry (such as the neo-traditional genre of ewi) can and will emerge. This insight is extremely helpful to social scientists, cultural critics, and activists who have assumed that the processes of preservation and innovation are opposites rather than mutually constitutive.

Barber’s approach to an anthropology of texts is masterfully comparative: comparing texts across cultures, she is able to show how locally produced texts are sites through which people shape and are shaped by larger historical forces such as colonialism, missionization, and capitalism (p. 223). Barber’s methodology requires a rigorous focus on conditions of textual production, institutionalization, and distribution: how texts are or are not part of social life; how texts are related to local forms of power and hierarchy; how genres are defined and maintained; and how texts are locally created, interpreted, and deployed (p. 224).

Examining the rise of the vernacular press alongside the English-language press in colonial Africa, Barber compares the first substantial work in the Zulu language by Zulu author Magema M. Fuze with the work of the father of the Yoruba novel, D.O. Fagunwa. Illustrating how different texts have created different kinds of publics during colonialism and missionization, Barber offers insight into African cultures’ changing identities and notions of personhood. Drawing on authors such as Anderson, Ricard, and Nnodim, Barber shows how the emergence of local-language print cultures helped to unite previously disparate ethnic groups, creating language-specific publics within nation-states. Furthermore, while early African-language publications addressed a local public, they also addressed a broader, global public, such as the pan-African or black community. The way in which Barber arrives at her point that colonial African subjects began to imagine themselves in a world that was at once local and expansive (p. 161) is a wonderful example of the kind of analysis she demands.

Barber’s latest book provides a call and prescription for a renewed focus on the analysis of texts and the conditions of their production and reception. Building on her extensive fieldwork in the Yoruba town of Okuku, her numerous publications analysing African oral and written texts have already modelled such an anthropology. In order to produce these kinds of analyses, today’s anthropologists need to be re-trained. Having trained as an anthropologist during the popularization of multi-sited fieldwork, poststructuralism, and postmodernism, I seem to have witnessed the fragmentation of ethnographic fieldwork. To acquire the necessary tools for Barber’s methodology, anthropologists need to go back to the basics: achieve fluency in the language of the oral and written texts being examined; spend uninterrupted periods of time living in the setting in which the texts are produced; and spend time talking with a wide range of text composers, co-producers, and audience members about the texts themselves. If anthropologists and cultural critics strive to explain how other cultures produce locally specific meanings while engaging in the world, they will benefit from Barber’s call to take seriously the texts we constantly preserve and innovate.

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