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## Book review

**Katrin Pfeiffer.** *Sprache und Musik in Mandinka-Erzählungen.* With an English summary. (Wortkunst und Dokumentartexte in afrikanischen Sprachen; Band 10). Köln: [Rüdiger Köppe Verlag](#). 2001. 379 pp., 2 maps, 11 tables, 8 charts, appendices, bibliography, audio CD. Paperback, € 49.50 ISBN 3-89645-265-7

Reviewed by

**Marloes Janson**

*Research school CNWS*

*e-mail:*

[m.janson@let.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:m.janson@let.leidenuniv.nl)

*address:*

Research School CNWS  
School of Asian, African, and Amerindian Studies  
Leiden University  
Nonnensteeg 1-3  
P.O. Box 9515  
2300 RA Leiden  
The Netherlands

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The subject of Katrin Pfeiffer's book are fictitious narratives, called *taaliŋ* in Mandinka, from The Gambia (West Africa). *Taaliŋ* are one of the five main genres of Mandinka speech art. The other genres include epics, songs, proverbs, and riddles. Mandinka, which belongs to the Niger-Congo language family, is the most widespread language in The Gambia. Its speakers, who are also called Mandinka, form 42% of the Gambian population. Only one third of the Gambian population is literate. Mandinka *taaliŋ* are orally handed down in informal settings in order to entertain people, especially children. In the dry season, when people are not busy working their fields, grandmothers spent their evenings narrating *taaliŋ* for their grandchildren in the compound. However, nowadays narrating is not a prevalent phenomenon. The school and the media have taken over the educating function of *taaliŋ*.

*Taaliŋ* appear in the Mandinka context in a particular form that differs from the form in which they are narrated elsewhere in Manding, an area which stretches over West Africa. Pfeiffer draws a distinction between two subgenres of Mandinka *taaliŋ*: narratives in which people are the main actors and animal stories in which the hare and hyena are the protagonists. In addition to the actors who feature in both types of *taaliŋ*, another difference is that the former usually contain songs while the latter do not. A similarity between the two subgenres of *taaliŋ* is that they both describe events that reflect the norms and values of Mandinka society. The first subgenre, i.e. the *taaliŋ* dealing with the actions of human beings, is central in Pfeiffer's study.

The book is structured as follows. Chapter 1 sketches the theoretical and geographical background of Pfeiffer's study. Pfeiffer combines insights from different disciplines, but she is influenced by the orality-literacy debate in particular. Because oral texts have other characteristics than written texts, they require their own strategies for memorizing. Pfeiffer takes a great interest in these strategies. In Chapter 2 the link between speech, music, emotion, and memory is analysed. It becomes obvious that these four components are interwoven. Chapter 3 considers the form and content of Mandinka *taaliŋ* at length. While *taaliŋ* are central in Chapter 3, the songs in the *taaliŋ* are the main topic of Chapter 4. Pfeiffer studies the verbal and musical structure of the songs and their function in relation to the form and content of the narrative text. In Chapter 5, the longest chapter, attention is paid to constants and variables in *taaliŋ*. The constants enable the narrators to memorize their narratives. In this chapter Pfeiffer attempts to define the concept of *taaliŋ*. Chapter 6 is a summary of the previous chapters. Pfeiffer concludes by giving themes that have to be explored in future research into African oral art. The appendices contain musical transcriptions of examples of songs, a comparison between three narrative texts that are presented in both Mandinka and German, and an example of an interview.

Narrating *taaliŋ* is not reserved to a specific group in Mandinka society, and the narrators do not receive a formal training. *Taaliŋ* are usually narrated by women and this may explain why issues like the education of children and the relationship between husband and wife or between co-wives are central in this genre. For many women in Mandinka society narrating is the only means to give expression to negative feelings, such as jealousy, despair, and anxiety. Consequently, *taaliŋ* have a cathartic function. Unfortunately, Pfeiffer does not elaborate on this function of *taaliŋ* and she does not study this function in relation to, for example, the Mandinka gender ideology.

Mandinka society is a strongly Islamized society. Pfeiffer claims that narrating *taaliŋ* is not considered appropriate for adult men, who are perceived as more pious Muslims than women. In contrast, narrating epics - a genre in which male griots excel - is regarded to fit the status of men. *Taaliŋ* are inventions, and they are therefore compared to 'lies', while epics have a historic content. Pfeiffer deems it necessary to draw a distinction between a female genre: *taaliŋ*, and a male genre: *jaliyaa* ('griotism'). She associates the female genre with the informal and domestic domain, while she relates the male genre to the formal and public sphere. The significance of this dichotomy is highly debatable. Several decades ago feminist social scientists have already demonstrated that such a distinction is too simplistic. By associating *jaliyaa* with the male activity of narrating epics, Pfeiffer passes over the activities of female griots in the public domain. Her statement on page 30 that Gambian female griots do not produce 'öffentliche Kunst' (public art) is plainly offending. During my field research in The Gambia, I met female griots who saw it as part of their professional duty to narrate *taaliŋ*. It would have been interesting if Pfeiffer had also incorporated *taaliŋ* narrated by professional performers in her analysis.

The *taaliŋ* presented in the book have been recorded in Serekunda (Kombo St. Mary District), Salikenye (Badibu District), Kenebaa (Kiang District), Pakalinding, Japine, and Pakalibaa (Jaara District). Unfortunately, Pfeiffer does not justify her choice for these places. What is also a pity is that none of the *taaliŋ* presented in the book have been recorded in their natural setting: the narrations took place on the initiative of the researcher(s). According to Pfeiffer, the sessions during which the narratives were recorded nevertheless correspond to the 'natural' situation (page 49). There are firm reasons to doubt this. When listening to the sound-recordings on the attached audio CD, one can hear the narrators/singers bursting out laughing a few times. They are obviously not used to talking/singing through a microphone and this indicates that the recording situation differs from the context in which *taaliŋ* are narrated spontaneously.

Pfeiffer's study is based on a text corpus of 452 *taaliŋ*, recorded on audiocassettes within a space of 18 years (1979-1997). A few of these narratives have also been recorded on video for a film project (Fels 2000). It has to be remarked that not all the *taaliŋ* have been recorded by Pfeiffer herself. She also made use of the data base of the Research and Documentation Division in Banjul (The Gambia). Pfeiffer's methodology comprised a comparative text analysis of *taaliŋ* that had been compiled for a text edition project (Pfeiffer 1997). Pfeiffer focused on the *taaliŋ* in this corpus that were narrated more than once and she asked the individual narrators to relate these *taaliŋ* another time. She then selected a representative example and she put in a great effort to transcribe the speech as well as the music in the narrative. The accuracy with which Pfeiffer did this has to be praised. Both the transcription, which is based on conventions developed by W.E.C. (World Evangelium for Christ) International (1988), and the translation are well done. Altogether 11 excerpts of songs and their musical notation are presented. An audio CD with 13 recordings of songs and episodes from *taaliŋ* is attached. Furthermore, the results of interviews with 18 narrators are incorporated in the study.

The purpose of Pfeiffer's book is to explore how *taaliŋ* are reproduced. The question that is central in the book is to what extent *taaliŋ* within the individual repertoire of the narrator as well as within repertoires of different narrators show constancy and variation. Pfeiffer attempts to answer this question by means of a comprehensive analysis of three different narrations of one identifiable *taaliŋ*, titled '*Sosoo moota daameng*' ('Where the beans are ripe'). She argues that it concerns an identifiable *taaliŋ*, because the three versions contain constant elements, such as a similar song text and an analogous plot. The perspective from which Pfeiffer compares the different versions of the *taaliŋ* is interpretative. The accounts are compared on the following points: content, songs included in the narrative, and the relation between text and melody. What is remarkable is that the first version of the *taaliŋ* analysed is a text narrated by a man, while throughout the book Pfeiffer underlines that *taaliŋ* are related by women.

In order to answer the question regarding the degree of stability and flexibility in the selected *taaliŋ*, Pfeiffer bases herself principally on the songs included in the narrative. Whereas Pfeiffer uses the Mandinka term *taaliŋ* to refer to narratives, she employs the German term 'Lied' for song. In this way she implies that *taaliŋ*, in contrast to songs, are a typical Mandinka genre. However, the several examples of songs presented in the book show that also this type of verbal art appears in a specific form in Mandinka society. In Western culture a song is in the first place associated with its musical accompaniment, while Mandinka narrators make use of only their voice. Thus it would have been more accurate if Pfeiffer had used the Mandinka term for song, which is *donkiloo*. Two thirds of *taaliŋ* in Pfeiffer's corpus contain songs. Songs can be distinguished from narratives by their metric, rhythm, accentuation, and melody. Pfeiffer argues that in contrast to narrative texts, song texts show more constancy. Due to the fact that song texts are the most constant elements in the narrator's repertoire, they play an important role for memorizing the narrative texts. Crucial for memorizing a song are its semantic and syntactic characteristics and its musical structure. In addition to the melodic-rhythmical structure, the emotional component adds to the memorizability of the text. Pfeiffer explains that the emotional component refers to the feelings raised when listening to the song. In general, texts with a strong emotional impact are more evocative than 'neutral' texts and therefore better memorizable.

In addition to the songs, there are also other elements in *taaliŋ* that promote their memorizability. Examples of these elements are the actors' names and qualities, place names, key expressions, and words that do not occur in daily speech (e.g. archaic terms whose meaning has been forgotten through the years). Songs do not only serve as memory aids: they also structure *taaliŋ*. They mark twists in the narrative and connect different episodes. In *taaliŋ* that do not contain songs (i.e. animal

stories), other constituents of the narrative, such as dialogues and formulae, take over the function of songs.

The examples in the book show that *taaliŋ* contain much repetition. Episodes that recur in the *taaliŋ* are often accompanied with song strophes. These strophes are built around a few key expressions that are repeated throughout the song. Repetition is not only a feature of the *taaliŋ* discussed by Pfeiffer, but also of her own study. In each chapter she repeats time and again the significance of songs with regard to the ability to memorize *taaliŋ*. Maybe she doubts the reader's memory? The detailed enumerations, the many bulleted lists, and the numerous schemes in the book may in this light be understood as prompts for the reader.

Nevertheless, the great emphasis on songs in the book needs to be applauded. So far, the musicological analysis of African narratives has been largely neglected while songs are an important constituent of these narratives. Furthermore, literature on Mandinka narratives in general is scarce. Pfeiffer's work offers a new approach to the study of the relationship between music and language. It convincingly shows the importance of documenting and analysing *taaliŋ*. Given this importance, I do not understand why Pfeiffer has written her book in German. By writing it in English, *taaliŋ* would have become more widely known by a larger audience. On page 266 Pfeiffer writes that documenting and analysing *taaliŋ* fits in with Gambian interests. By writing her book in English, she could indeed have met these interests. The English abstract is in this respect little helpful as it counts only one page.

The lack of research into the interrelation between music and speech explains the relevance of an interdisciplinary work, combining the fields of musicology and linguistics. In this book these fields are added with insights from psychology, to gain a better understanding of the narrator's memory. What is missing is an anthropological perspective on the subject of *taaliŋ*. Pfeiffer argues that *taaliŋ* transmit the norms and values of Mandinka society, but she hardly studies these norms and values in their cultural context. *Taaliŋ* only get a meaning in the context in which they are narrated. A context analysis, however, is lacking in Pfeiffer's study.

By comparing and analysing the sung parts of the selected *taaliŋ*, Pfeiffer concludes that each narrator has her (or his) unique repertoire. Unlike most linguists, Pfeiffer pays attention to the individual narrators, describing them as artists. Despite her attempt to show the individual behind the narrative, I cannot escape the impression that Pfeiffer is not really interested in the narrators. Only one chapter, Chapter 4, pays attention to how they perceive their repertoires and what they themselves have to say about their strategies of memorizing texts. It is interesting that the narrators are convinced that they narrate the *taaliŋ* in their repertoires in the same way as they learned them from their grandmothers, or other elderly women. They consider themselves mediators of a linear tradition and they do not regard their narratives as individual creations. However, for the most part of the book Pfeiffer does not let the narrators speak for themselves.

Summarizing Pfeiffer's argument, we may describe *taaliŋ* as a verbal art concept which allows for both constancy and variation on the individual as well as the collective level. Pfeiffer studies *taaliŋ* in the first place as individual products. The only patterns with regard to *taaliŋ* production that can be discerned on the collective level are the formal structure and the subject matter. In the individual repertoire is determined which song belongs to which *taaliŋ*. Each narrator has internalized what Pfeiffer calls a basic form of the song. She (or he) uses this song as foundation for the formulation of the matching narrative. Thus, there is a strong link between song text and narrative text. This explains why Pfeiffer studies songs and *taaliŋ* as a unity.

After reading this book, the reader has a clear impression of what *taaliŋ* are, but he is also left with many questions. He wants to know more about how *taaliŋ* are narrated, in which contexts, why they are narrated, and what the function of the audience is in the narration. Pfeiffer has succeeded well to describe *taaliŋ* as a genre, as well as a text, but she failed to describe *taaliŋ* as a performance.

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N.F.E.S. [Non-Formal-Education-Service], C.D.C. [Curriculum Development Centre], W.E.C. [World Evangelium for Christ], Banjul.

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### About the reviewer:

Marloes Janson holds a Ph.D. in Cultural Anthropology from Leiden University and is currently teaching at the University of Amsterdam. She conducted extensive field research into the daily practices of Mandinka griot women in The Gambia. Janson's Ph.D. thesis was entitled 'The Best Hand is the Hand that Always Gives: Griottes and their Profession in Eastern Gambia' (Leiden: Research School CNWS, 2002).

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