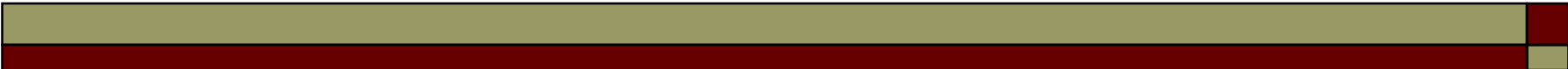


Literature in Ancient Egypt ?!

HPFY3015 Language and Culture

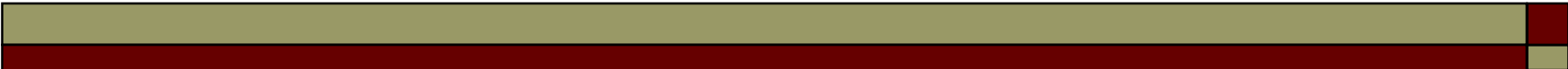
Dr Katharina Zinn

Associate Professor in Egyptian
Archaeology and Heritage



Before we start:

- Define
 - What is literature???
 - What is literature in a past civilisation???
- Not easy, includes many layers, too contemporary biased



Assmann, Jan: *The Mind of Egypt: History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs*. New York:

Metropolitan Books, 2002. p. 9.

- We are what we remember, which is another way of saying that we are nothing other than the stories we can tell about ourselves and our past.

Ways of remembering: Orality

- The importance of the spoken word:
- *Every plant perishes, even as it exists – but not the spoken word.*
 - P Ramesseum 2 vso ii,5 (BM EA10755,2)



Ways of remembering: Literacy

- Words are given authority – writing:
- *His Majesty decreed that (it will be) put in writing on his tomb which is in the necropolis. His Majesty caused that there should [be made for him] an authorisation in respect of it, written beside the king himself on the stone-workshop of the palace, to write what was said in his tomb in the necropolis.*
 - Giza, tomb of Rower – G 5270 (5th dyn., Neferirkare)



Fluent borders between orality and literacy:

Orality of letters

- The nature of ancient Egyptian letters
 - Written as direct speech: sender *says* things, recipient *heard* their words
 - Way of communication: words are *send*, identical to polite oral behaviour
- *I say to Pre-Horakhty, when he rises and sets, “Make you healthy! Make you live! Make you youthful!”, every day.*
 - (Pap. Mallet, V 1-5)

Presented orality and literacy of
letters – direct communication?



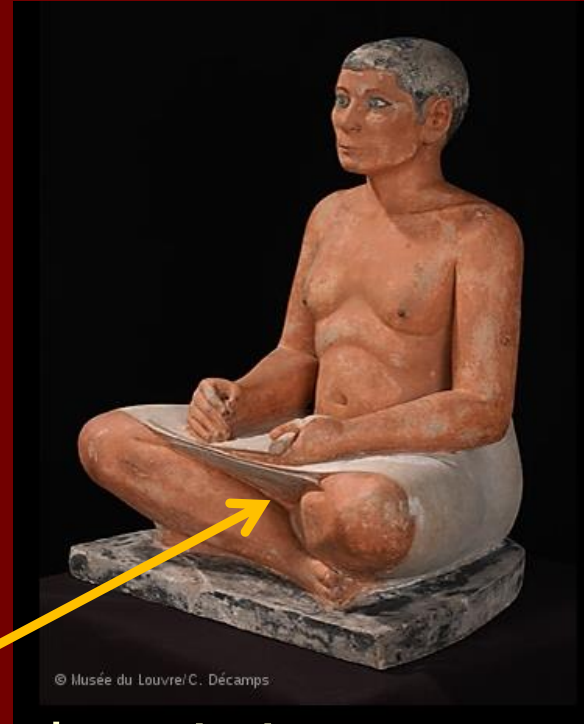
Seated Scribe
(Paris, Louvre E 3023)

Seated Scribe

(Paris, Louvre E 3023,
Old Kingdom, 4th Dynasty (?), c. 2620-2500 BC)



© Musée du Louvre/C. Décamps



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While the mimic suggests a **direct communication**, the scribe has papyrus on stretched skirt on which he **writes**

The “reading” scribe

Min-nakht

(Baltimore, Walters Museum 22.230)



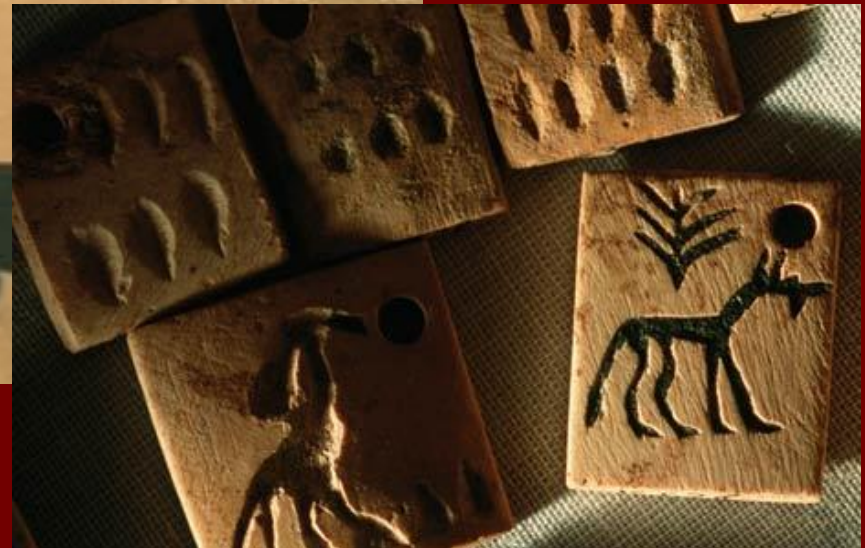


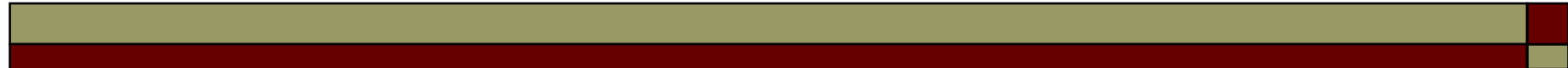
The agency of writing and reading

- Agency to produce written documents
 - Development of writing systems

- Writing and literacy as communication across boundaries
 - Space
 - Time
 - AND for AE: communication over the boundary between life and death – mediating the relationship between the living and their ancestors

Early writing: The important tomb Uj in Abydos





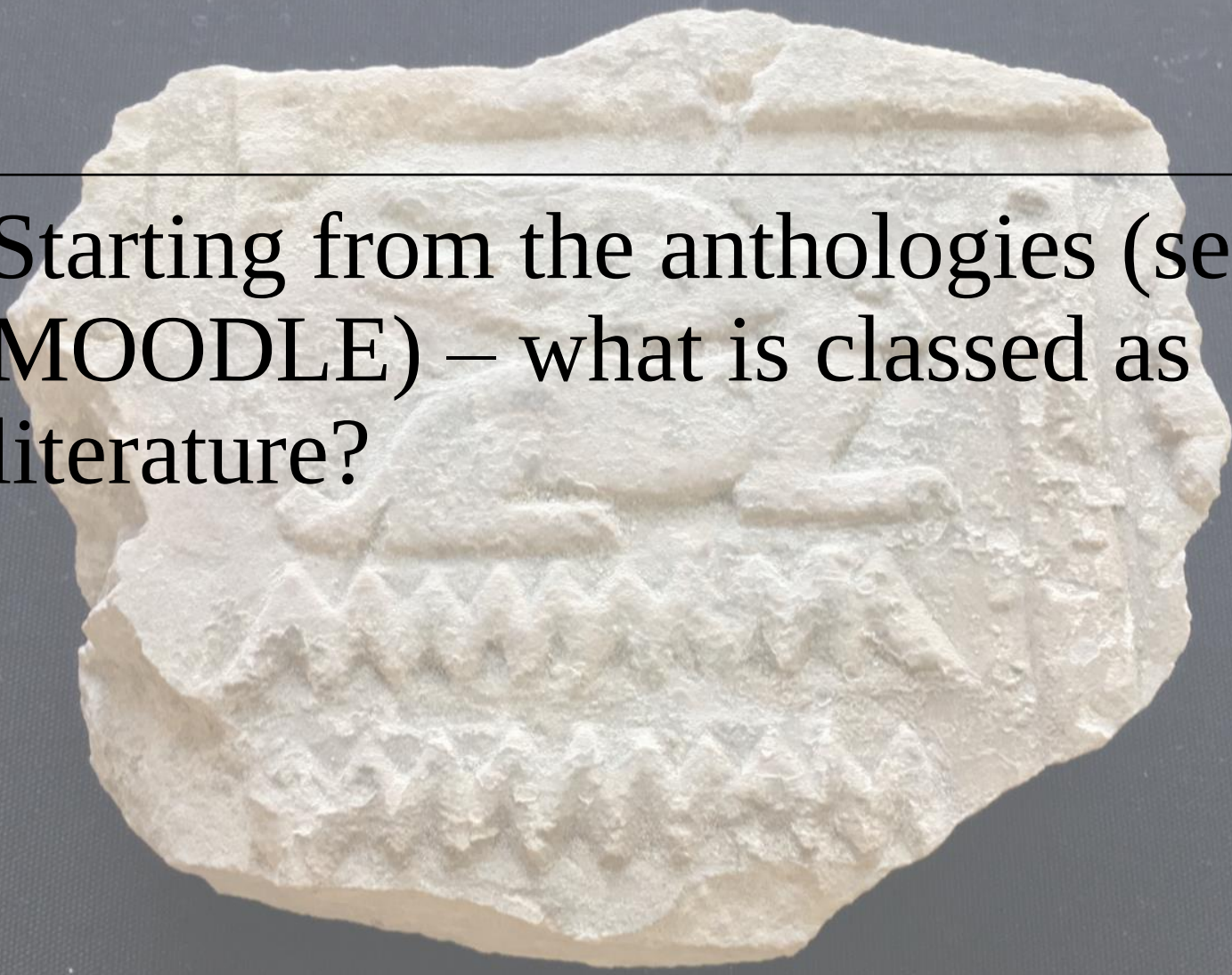
Defining early Egyptian writing

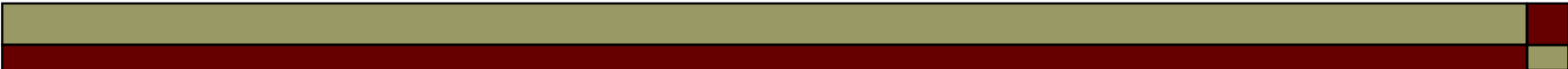
- ❑ Very short inscriptions (“principle of scarcity” – J. Baines)
- ❑ Fluid boundaries between art and writing – encoding meaning, but also specific words?
 - What is iconography?
 - What is word?
 - Do we need to differentiate?
- ❑ expression of relationships between king + those close to him (court, family, high officials) during life + death
- ❑ Establishing authority in this life
- ❑ Writing displays prestige

**WHERE DOES LITERATURE
FIT IN?**

Ancient Egyptian Literature: problems of definition

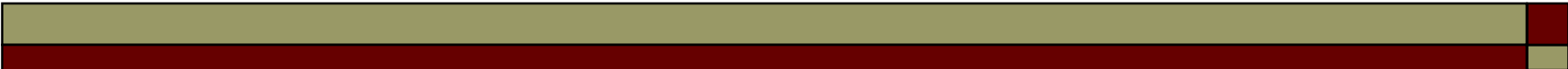
- ❑ Since late 19th century – Egyptologists labelled certain composed texts as 'literary'
- ❑ BUT: criteria not always been made explicit
- ❑ Criteria, implicit and explicit, vary and can be classified by
 - Function
 - Form
 - Content
- ❑ allows modern reader to locate a composition on spectrum from least to most self-conscious **communication**
- ❑ relative place of communicated words defines literature as act of engagement
- ❑ work = literary when read as widely as possible → different genres to our liking

- 
- Starting from the anthologies (see MOODLE) – what is classed as literature?



Function

- ❑ binary opposition functional versus non-functional
 - literary compositions are those with no functional application - letters and accounts, rituals for temple or festival rites, mathematical and medical treatises
 - By negative definition, the literary compositions comprise the material left once such functional communication has been excluded
- ❑ But second also has communicative function of being read and therefore a readership
- ❑ ???



Function

- ❑ Need new definition?
- ❑ literature = written with the primary function of being read???
- ❑ defines the category 'literature' by usage
- ❑ change in use will broaden or narrow the boundary of literature
- ❑ The role in teaching tends to undermine a rigidly functional definition of literature.
- ❑ BUT – what is reading????

The “reading” scribe

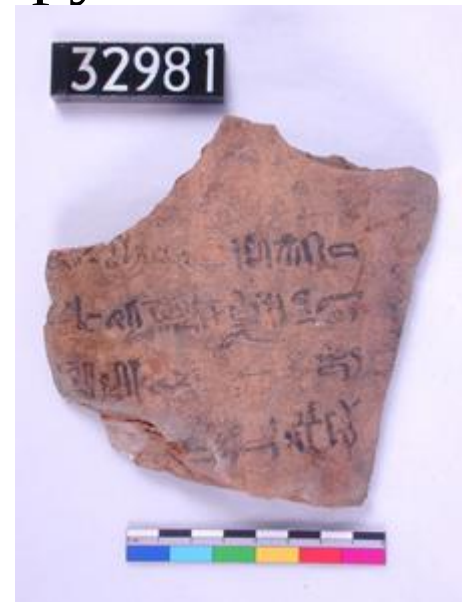
Min-nakht

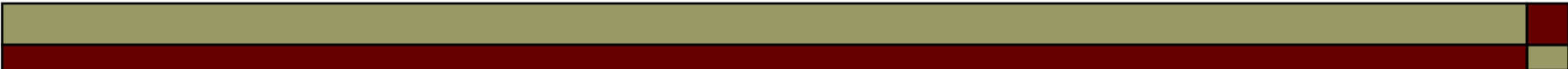
(Baltimore, Walters Museum 22.230)



Form

- ❑ If intended to be read, then text have formal
- ❑ Material
- ❑ How transmitted
 - most are known from copies on papyrus rolls
 - writing boards
 - ostraca



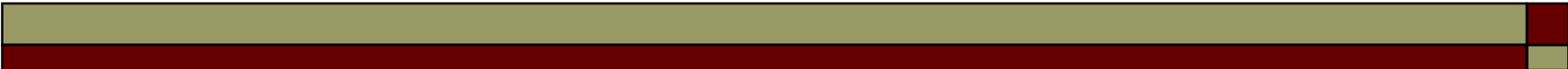


Form

- ❑ The formal criteria can include texts such as hymns and prayers alongside didactic or lyrical
- ❑ But also Tales, Teachings, Lamentations, Hymns, Songs
- ❑ As with form, content alone is not sufficient to define the literary terrain: narrative can be found in legal documents as well as in 'compositions with primary function to be read

Function (overlapping purpose!) - Form

- written with primary function to be read (aloud)
- Often share formal features
 - material
 - transmission history
- Known in AE mostly from copies on papyrus rolls (calligraphic style of handwriting, optical style - 'verse points'), but also writing boards and ostraca
- Different forms: hymns, prayers, didactic / lyrical passages → very little on our specific forms of literature
- Linguistically: semantic intensity used to identify content as literary
 - the more information is contained within each word, the more literary the composition
- meaning also insufficient criterion: hymns are semantically concentrated poems, but with a purpose - they can also be more or less strongly tied to a liturgical or other non-reading purpose



Content and cross-reference

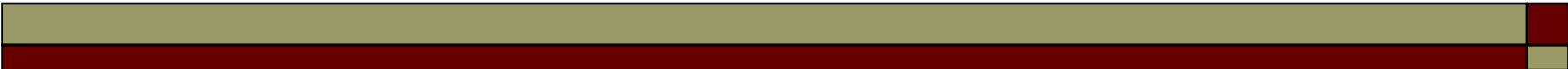
- ❑ AE part of a wider modern reception of ancient written communication
- ❑ depends on the breadth of reading by the modern reader
- ❑ depends in turn on the proportion of surviving writing

Specific literacy – the individual ability to read and write

- ❑ Who could read and write?
- ❑ During most periods: not more than 1% of the population were literate
 - population rose from one million (Old Kingdom) to 4.5 million (Graeco-Roman period: Greeks as literate majority) → estimated literates 10,000-50,000 (might be too high)
- ❑ rate of literacy, volume and range of written material tended to advance without steady increment
- ❑ Literacy likely declined between New Kingdom and Graeco-Roman period
- ❑ After: rising again in different circumstances

Specific literacy – the individual ability to read and write

- ❑ Several levels of literacy possible:
 - Reading (various degrees of competence)
 - Reading and the physical ability to write
 - Reading and narrow composing ability (accounting)
 - Reading and the full ability to compose texts
 - carving of signs with limited reading ability (relief sculptors)
- ❑ Likely to be rare:
 - literate people who did not use their skills
 - barely literate scribes (could not perform administrative functions)
- ❑ no evidence of scribes with careers separate from office



Scribal education (Papyrus Sallier II, column XI, lines 1-4)

Satire of Trade (Instruction of Dua-Khety)

Look - Abundance is on the path of the god and Abundance is written on his shoulder on the day of his birth.

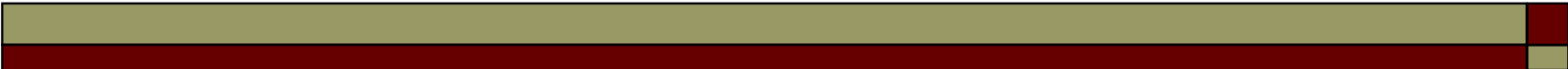
*He reaches the palace portal,
and that court of officials is the one allotting people to him.*

***Look, no scribe will ever be lacking in food
or the things of the House of the King, may he live, prosper and be well!***

***Meskhenet is the prosperity of the scribe,
the one placed before the court of officials.***

[...]

*See what I have set out before you,
and for the children of your children.*



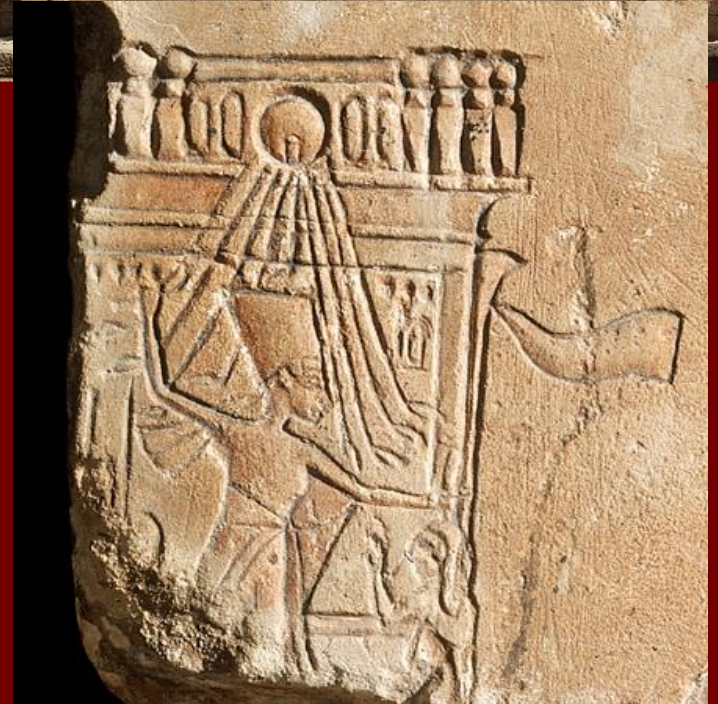
Evidencing literacy

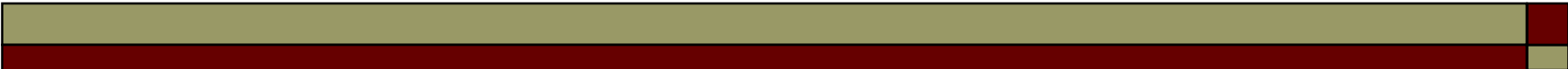
- ❑ Individual literacy
- ❑ Collective literacy

Orality and Literacy as tools to express shared historical / cultural memories

- ❑ Creating shared identity
- ❑ Creating cultural memory:
 - Re-usable texts, images, rituals (specific to particular timeframes in particular cultures) → the canonical text
 - carry society's self-understanding
 - Stabilises culture
- ❑ Orality: performed myths
- ❑ (iconographic) Literacy: media (text and image) continuously shapes interest in “history” and renews identity
 - Creates a collective literacy beyond the practiced individual literacy in the sense of being able to read and write
 - Connecting high and low culture (all levels of elite, whole society)
 - ❑ Literal elite encodes information
 - ❑ Also supplied decoding tools for non-elites

Case study: Smiting of the Enemy





Narrative literature and its intersection between orality and literacy

- ❑ From appearance in MK as reaction to need of court in re-unified Egypt
- ❑ Expanded written corpus in NK – popular text types
- ❑ Graeco-Roman Period: increasing exclusive role of priesthood in production of written literature
- ❑ → over time influence of oral traditions onto written texts increased: interaction between realms of elite and popular storytelling

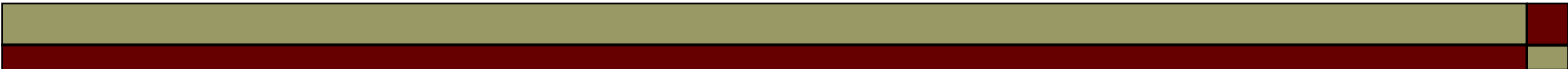


Orality in narrative texts: Blurring the lines...

- ❑ Already to be seen in Pyramid Texts – stem from oral narratives → “special language” for cognitive flow
- ❑ Written literature of elite was NOT composed orally, BUT designed for oral / aural performance – “to be heard”
 - Additive style
 - Patterned rhythm
 - Parallel phrasing etc.
- ❑ Expressions of emotions (especially in demotic literature)

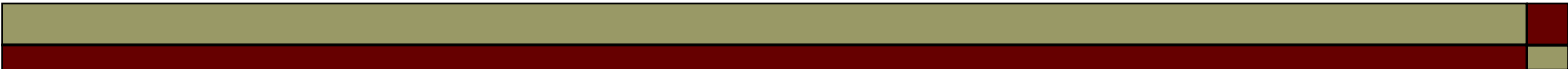
Orality in narrative texts

- ❑ To make written text accessible / functional to wider audience
- ❑ Extension of the audience, they are made literate
- ❑ Creation of cultural texts (Jan Assmann)
- ❑ Cultural memory shaped by written narratives
→ placed literate elite in special position, but connection to orators serving largely illiterate communities (villages)



Evidencing literacy

- Individual literacy
- Collective literacy
- Institutionalised literacy – book collections
 - Archives
 - Libraries



Fluent borders between orality and literacy: **Documented orality of institutionalised literacy**

- ❑ Architectural situation reveals the connection of literacy and orality
- ❑ Performing rituals
- ❑ Reciting written texts for illiterate to enable their literacy – mediated literacy