

# ORAL LITERATURE IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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## Abstract

It is an indisputable fact that African oral literature is at the moment almost going into extinction. Hence the aim of this essay is to examine in retrospect, its concept in terms of definition, origin, contribution to national development and the various factors besetting it. It is also aimed at suggesting plausible ways that will awaken interest, preserve, enhance, promote its enjoyment and literary scholarship at all levels and improve upon its contribution to national development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Introduction

Much as the focus of this essay is not on definition of terms, suffice it to say that the writer needs a cursory working description of the word "Oral literature" and "21<sup>st</sup> Century" to be able to facilitate a better understanding of its treatment. Oral literature embraces the unwritten literary expression of our people, which is orally composed, orally transmitted and orally realized. In other words, it is a form of literature that is usually delivered in the spoken form. History has it that in all societies, oral literature started when the early man felt the need for entertainment at one point or the other. It therefore suffices to say that oral literature predates written literature. On the other hand, 21<sup>st</sup> century which, in the context of this essay, refers to the oral literary journey for the period of one hundred years that has just begun. It must be acknowledged that the discourse on orality, generally has been articulated both by the West and Africans. This fact then places a duty on African scholars in this dispensation to, as a matter of urgency, consider how the category of "African orality" permeates literary criticism, how it is subject to ideological pressure and how it has come to define and confine the scope of our interest in and perception of African writing. In line with the above and the view that an African essence can be found in and indeed bound to orality, this essay intends to do a detailed discussion of the problems and prospects of oral literature, its contribution to national development and the various attempts to perpetuate our oral literature in the face of obvious threats and challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century such as high improved Technology, Globalization, Internet, Computerization, use of Global System of Mobile Communication (G.S.M), video games etc.

Reacting to the threats of oral literature, Niyi Osundare (1981:1) states that "a people's culture and tradition inevitably colour their existential experience and definitely inform their creative operations". It follows, therefore that when a people's culture and tradition are, in any way influenced or altered, their ways of life and creative instinct become affected.

## Problems

In retrospect, colonialism was a great experience in the history of the African race. It was an experience that destroyed the people's creative culture and introduced a new way of life. It brought a new form of religion, economy, government, education and an entire different form of socialization.

From its origin, oral literature has always been a shared communal or collective experience and expression. But the influence of western culture on the oral artist and his audience in Nigeria has, no doubt, affected their loyalty to tradition. The oral artist who is one of the custodians of tradition and the people's history in the African setting would be expected to ensure that every aspect of the tradition is intact and not violated by external influence alien to the tradition.

On the contrary, in order to suit the exotic taste of the European explorers, he has had to deviate a little. This has led to the weakening of the old creative integrity and as a result

the loyalty of the oral artist has so much been affected. Today, despite the vigour of oral literature there is a considerable decline in its performance.

It is an incontrovertible fact that oral literature thrives best in a purely traditional society, but it has been discovered that another negative impact of modernity in its entire ramifications in both the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries is the dislocation and sometimes dismantling of structures that were

traditionally set up to contribute to the growth of oral literature. Many of the traditional festivals, celebrations and beliefs were challenged by modernity. The two great world religions - Christianity and Islam were able to subjugate traditional African religion and beliefs. They saw most African festivals and celebrations as forms of idolatry and fetishism. It has become abominable for African Christians and Moslems to participate in these 'heathen' celebrations. It is even forbidden to listen to such stories as told to children in moonlight.

Oladele Taiwo (1967:50), quoting Chinua Achebe while talking of his plight as a school boy. says:

When I was a school boy, it was unheard of to stage Nigerian dances at any of our celebrations. We were told and we believed that our dances were heathen.

What we find generally, is that modern religions have done a lot to decimate and destabilize the existing traditional structures that would have promoted the growth of oral literature in Nigeria.

Apart from the religious changes, communities in Nigeria also witnessed a change in their economy. There was a rapid growth of towns and cities. A once subsistence economy was transformed to a market - driven capitalist one. With this new economic experience, a once communal community became individualized, egocentric and materialistic.

In the olden days, it was possible for the oral artist to survive on the metaphorical "merger income" because of the simple ways of living as opposed to what Niyi Osundare refers to as "the baffling complexity of modern life". To survive the modern life and its complexity, the Bata drummer in Yoruba land, the griot in Senegal, Ogbesia in Urhobo land and similar oral artists have to look elsewhere, for the resources needed to satisfy their wants as earnings from oral performance cannot cater for their demands. They therefore have no adequate time and commitment, which are necessary for their art.

Western education generally has coloured the African man's perception of self in relation to his traditional heritage. Everything in form of his tradition is seen as old, barbaric and outdated. He has therefore lost touch with his African reality rooted in African oral tradition. He now sees it as a past time of the old men and women in the villages and an awkward initiative experience in the hands of the young children.

The oral artist is also a witness to the wonders of literacy. If he had no opportunity of seeing the four walls of the classroom and so is denied the advantages derivable there from, he cannot afford to deprive his own children of the same opportunity, unless he is not bothered if such children are left out in the scheme of things in this modern day society. These children having thus received western education find it difficult to step into their parent's shoes. One therefore wonders if the continuity of the oral art could be ensured and sustained in this century.

The fear of the effect of western ways was raised as far back as 1959 by Rev. T. S. Mbiti as quoted by Anozie, (1981:2) when he informed the Second Congress of Nigerian Writers and Artists that:

... phenomenal changes are taking place everywhere in East Africa, with such rapidity that the more the Africans adopt the Western ways of life ... the more the traditional literature of these Africans will drown beneath the fuming forces of Westernism.

Taiwo (1967:11) agrees with Mbiti, maintaining that:

Oral traditions form an integral part of the culture of any group of people. Before printing was invented, communities sought to preserve their identity as groups by handing down orally, from one generation to another, the most important element of their culture.

Oral tradition certainly existed in every society, but the advent of writing and other recording devices have greatly affected this tradition both negatively and positively. The idea here is not to dispute the significance of writing and these recording devices as essential ingredients of the civilization, but to

emphasize the need to preserve the freshness of the oral text.

At this point of development, one should avoid describing negatively the tremendous revolution brought about by the invention of writing, while it conferred vast benefit on humanity, did in fact deprive it of something fundamental. Many people have used writing to record the past but this invention has killed the faculty of memory among them. They do not feel the past anymore, for writing lacks the warmth of the human voice.

The act of speaking is highly developed and esteemed in Africa for the very material reasons that voice has been and continues to be the more available medium of expression. People spend a good deal of time with one another, talking, debating and entertaining. For these very reasons, there is also respect for speech as communicative and powerful social acts. Our stand as scholars should not be to isolate orality, to see it as singular, as inherently "first" or "other" in opposition to writing. Neither medium is good or bad. Neither should serve as metonymies for Nigerians. Speech and writing are modes of languages, and both modes are ours. When we look at their interaction in literary genres, it therefore should not be in an effort to prove or disprove cultural authenticity but rather to appreciate literature as a social aesthetic act.

The recording of oral literature has made it possible to read, listen to and view oral performances without necessarily being present at the scene of performance. Much as this has helped in the preservation and perpetuation of oral literature, it has also dealt some blows on it. This type of performance cannot be expected to be purely original. There is the consciousness of the performer before these recording devices, which will definitely affect the output of the performer.

Another problem identified is that, the attitude of the society to the oral artist is discouraging, that he easily loses interest in the art. He is seen as a loafer, who is not to be taken seriously. He is referred to in derogatory terms that do not befit his noble status.

It should be acknowledged that modern science and technology in the strictest sense of the word, developed more fully within western culture than in other cultures. But to pretend, on that basis, that Africa is becoming westernized in the 21<sup>st</sup> century because she in turn is striving to produce and develop science and technology in the most modern sense of the word requires an enormous mental leap. Science and technology have adversely affected orality in the society because the oral aspect has been played down and is gradually losing its ground as a result of the hooding of different modern electronic gadgets.

Looking at how modern electronic gadgets have constituted a problem to oral literature. Internet for example has brought about clashes of culture and the spread of materialistic values. Unfortunately, the Internet is not merely used to spread beneficial information, culture and commerce. Some Web Sites promote pornography, racism or gambling.

Television and films also have an enormous influence on how people think. The values that this vast entertainment industry reflect often promote materialism, violence, or immorality. They may be totally alien to the local culture of many countries of the world. Nevertheless, government, educators and parents invariably find it impossible to hold back the tide.

Apart from the fact that oral tradition is threatened by factors like the cultural transition from orality to literacy, the incursion of science and technology, among others, the socio-political conditions in the continent has equally filled the oral poets with a certain critical mood which is in many ways less accommodating than the performative spirit of the oral tradition.

### **Prospects**

The prime function of oral literature is to provide aesthetic pleasure and entertainment for listeners. Like written literature, is of educational value, since being exposed to it enhances the listeners' verbal skills, enriches their vocabulary and enlarges their knowledge of their own society and its history.

To combat the problems of the past and those of the 21<sup>st</sup> century on African oral literature, a lot needs to be done to awaken the interest of not only the academic community, but also of the traditional society and the government.

Current efforts like the staging of various festivals of arts at the states and federal government levels, commendable as they are, may not be the real solution. Besides the fact that these festivals are staged occasionally, there are various elements of western influence and unnecessary embellishments to make them qualify not as real performance, but as pseudo oral performance.

What, therefore, is needed is a purely cultural reorientation that will allow a healthy growth of the aspect of our oral literature side by side with western influence. This western influence needs to be re-examined so that only the positive aspects are encouraged.

Practitioners of African oral literature, the Bata drummer in Yoruba land, griot in Senegal, the praise singers in Hausaland, etc. were seen in the olden days as custodians of the truth of the people, but modernity has reversed that as they are no more revered. Until these practitioners can seek recognition for themselves and a viable income in their profession, they may not be too particular about its development.

As formal education is now a very important way of reaching the people, it stands to reason therefore that much has to be done in these formal institutions in the form of curriculum input so as to improve the teaching of oral literature. This is to start in the primary school and end in the tertiary institutions. The beauty, grandeur and values of this form of literature should be brought to the fore and taught to young ones so that they can admire and appreciate them. However, this noble goal can only be achieved through the government playing a major role in terms of stimulation, motivation and the promotion of oral literature scholarship at all levels. Equally fundamental on the part of the government is the provision of a conducive environment for teaching and learning, adequate and relevant materials in form of books and equipment that will help in quickening the speed of the revitalization of our oral literature that is almost going into extinction.

The artist in the modern dispensation should be accorded adequate recognition and encouraged to take the performance of oral literature to the nooks and crannies of the society for people to watch and appreciate. This will definitely increase their interest and correct the various negative beliefs about oral literature. The heroic deeds and achievements of our past and present leaders, our culture and tradition can be beautifully rendered in songs, dances, chants and poetry.

Commenting on the wealth of oral literature as a source material for modern day writers, Osundare in an interview with Adaboyin says that:

I think another very important source is the oral tradition which we all ravage .... (the) oral tradition is so rich and variegated, all one can do is just accommodate one's act towards it and create one's own poetics from it.

Giving credence to Osundare's position above, Kofi Anyidoho, in an interview with Jane Wilkinson (1992:91) also remarked: "some of my poems are very closely modeled on the Ewe traditional poetry particularly on the dirge tradition".

One of the greatest benefits of the 21<sup>st</sup> century on oral literature is the development of an improved and organic process of documentation. Since most of our oral activities are not written down there arose the need for us to preserve them and the only way to achieving this is through a proper documentation. This process will also help to avoid distortion, interference and provide materials for oral literary scholarship for the young and unborn generations.

Again, in modern society where stress has become a common issue in the daily living, the various agents of modernity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are expected to be synthesized to sustain the freshness of oral performance to relax the nerves of the modern man. This is imperative because oral performance is lively and fresh, and appeals more profoundly to an audience than performance prerecorded in the modern electronic gadgets because these recorded ones go stale rather too quickly.

African oral literature just like African culture is under stress as a result of the influence of modernity. It should therefore be recognized that modernity is here to slay and has a discrete character of its own. What then is required at this stage of development is that, there should be a conscious and deliberate attempt to fight and reduce the menace of alien elements such as the importation of corruptive foreign cultures through modern electronic gadgets. There should be a judicious selectiveness, which will prove its adaptability to the changing circumstances of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This, in turn, should also encourage the return to the tradition which all committed Africans must do with high degree of credibility and skill.

Furthermore, the transmutation from oral to written text should be seen as a plank upon which Nigeria have worked to join the wagon of world literature in its technological advancement. This journey however has been known to carry certain limitations with it. It should be noted that the distinction that is inherent here is not one of the superiority or inferiority of either, but simply the establishment that the written text does distance the writer from his audience.

In spite of some obvious limitations, this process of metamorphosis has equally succeeded in lifting the Nigerian - African motifs, themes and of course language from the oral traditions. It has succeeded in allowing other continents to partake in their collective experience, and has given the non-African audience the privilege of having access to what is African. In other words, through the written text and the use of modern electronic gadgets, the aesthetic experience of African tradition is being shared, appreciated and enjoyed by diverse races.

### **Conclusion**

Having seen the problems and prospects of oral literature in national development and Africa in general, and its symbiotic relationship with modernity, this essay is therefore suggesting that modernity should be properly synthesized to enhance orality in the sense that final ways of documentation and enhancement of performance should be explored through the use of modern technology. Rather than inhibiting oral performance, at best, modern forms of technology should grow side by side with it, so as to help give African oral literature a prominent place in the “Global village” that the world has become.

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