
African Oral Literature: The Despondency of the Nigerian Artist in the 21st Century

Akporherhe Friday (Ph.D) & Udi Peter Oghenerioborue

Department of Languages (English)

University of Delta

Agbor, Delta State, Nigeria

E-mails: akpochrisoke@yahoo.com & udipeter4@gmail.com

Phone Nos: +2348033596583 & +2348063841019

Abstract

Indigenous and pre-literate societies in Africa have vibrant traditions and customs which guide their state of affairs. It is an indisputable fact that oral literature berthed and flourished in Africa with the oral artist as a touch bearer before the advent of colonization and western education. Thus, this paper aims at examining the place of the African Oral Artist both retrospectively and prospectively with a view to leveraging his battered status in the 21st century. It will specifically explore the role of oral literature and the artist in pre-colonial days, the challenges confronting the Artist and suggesting possible ways to alleviating, preventing professional decay and promoting interest in the rich cultural heritage of Nigerian oral literature.

Keywords: African, Oral Literature, Despondency, Nigeria, Artist, 21st Century

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I. INTRODUCTION

This paper is premised on the understanding that African oral literature is alive, dynamic and responsive to the needs and development of Africa. Every human society gets anchored on its culture. Pre-literate societies were enriched by their various forms of oral tradition and literature which have become legacies for the modern traditional societies. 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 is therefore an undeniable fact that African oral literature and all the activities associated with it thrive best in a purely traditional society. In as much as the focus of this paper is not on oral literature per se, but on the despondency of the oral artist, suffice it to say that the writers need a working definition of the term 'oral literature' to be able to facilitate a better understanding of its treatment.

According to Okolo (2016:47), oral literature is associated with orality, demonstration, imitation, spontaneity and anonymity. It arises from a people's traditions and varies in versions from place to place and from performer to performer. Oral literature in the view of Parangu and Salim (2018:1222) contains cultural values and local wisdom as characterize the region itself. Local wisdom can also be interpreted as an original knowledge that is very unique from every culture or society.

The view of the above scholars can be expanded by defining oral literature as the heritage of imaginative verbal creation, stories, folk beliefs and songs of pre-literate societies which have been evolved and passed through the spoken word from one generation to another. In corroborating the foregoing, Dasylva and Jegede (2005:39) state that oral literary tradition although often described as belonging to non-literate society transcends the boundaries of time and it still exists side by side written literature in most nations of the world today. Investigations have shown that oral literature is not peculiar to African societies because it is a traditional form of preservation and transmission of knowledge from one generation to another that is common to many pre-modern era societies. Interestingly, scholars including but not limited to Finnegan (1970) and Okpewho (1990) have done much study on it in the past.

In European countries such as Germany, interest of people in field collection of traditional folklore was aroused long ago. Grimms Brothers were particularly known for wide travelling and collection of oral literature in Europe. To expatiate on this point, one should state that given the oral nature of the African society in the pre-colonial era, there has always been an important role the verbal resources play in the effective running of the society. This fact was affirmed by Akporabaro (2004:18) who states that:

The forms and techniques of African oral literature have not been borrowed from external cultural traditions, and are by and large uncontaminated by western influences. For this reason, they constitute the most authentic expression of the creative intelligence and world-view of the African people.

There are alluring and enduring legacies that subsume the concept of literature in the verbal arts otherwise known as oral literature. In most cases especially in Nigeria, oral literature serves as the first contact of the people with issues pertaining to literature (Mgbubu 2017:1). Without mincing words, Nigerian literature originates from the verbal arts. In the words of Ajuwon (1985:306):

Pre-literate Nigerian once enjoyed a verbal art civilization which, at its high point, was warmly patronized by traditional rulers and the general public. At a period when writing was unknown, the oral medium served the people as a bank for the preservation of their ancient experiences and beliefs. Much of the evidence that related to the past of Nigeria therefore could be found in oral tradition.

The imprints of Nigerian oral literature cut across the writings of Nigerian authors through the first generation of Chinua Achebe, John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo, Wole Soyinka to the generation of Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Ben Okri and recently Helon Habila and Chimamanda Adichie, among others. We are enthused at the use of oral products and other traditional practices all of which are within the purview of Nigerian oral literature. No wonder then that it is widely acclaimed that modern African literature draws extensively from the repertoire of African oral literature.

Generally, African people thrive on a virile oral culture that nurtures their epistemology. In all areas of African life, oral tradition remains a potent and dynamic force for enhancing social order. Coker (2018:50) supports this view when he states that; "The growing recognition of oral art among African people is due to its functions and appeal to the various sectors of the societies." It has been observed that oral literature remains a critical reservoir of history and this implies that virtually all facets of life of the African people are vividly represented in different oral forms.

Oral literature has refused to die despite the pressure of rapid technological and information advancement. It continues to mutate and thrive through the instrumentality of the oral artist.

The aim of this paper is to examine the place of the African Oral Artist with a view to leveraging his battered status in the 21st century. Specifically, the following objectives will be achieved; to examine the Oral Artist in precolonial era, the despondency of the oral artist in modern society and suggestive ways of addressing the ugly situation.

2. THE ORAL ARTIST IN PRE-COLONIAL ERA

The Artist is the soul of oral literature and oral literature is by definition dependent on the artist. The primary role of the artist in pre-colonial days is on the cultural, ethical and spiritual to inform, educate and entertain members of the community in which he lives. He is a veritable treasure of tradition. Without a sense of tradition, communities or societies lose their identities and values.

The Oral Artist is that person who verbally transmits oral tradition from one generation to another. He treads in his own endeavour to become a carrier of a culture and in acquiring the 'uncommon skills' of creating and performing at the same time. He has meant many things to different people, that is, perhaps why he has a chain of names. Apart from 'oral artist', he is also referred to as the 'town crier', the 'singer of tale', the 'bard', the raconteur', the 'narrator', the 'performer' and so on. No artist is a stranger to his environment and he is expected to be vast in the lore of their people. He is the storehouse of indigenous thoughts and useful agent of change and positive self-expression. He parades a rich repertoire of cultural art forms which attests to the richness of folklore which include chants and incantations, prayers, folksongs, rituals performances and other verbal arts. All these form a core identity of the African people and their oral literature.

However, Darah (2014:44) states clearly that whereas other folk forms such as the proverb, song, music, folk drama/theatre, and various juvenile materials are still practised, the folktale appears to have withered away. The rural communities that practised the art are still there in Africa but most of them do not have the kind of stable socio-economic situation that generated and utilized the folktale. Apart from the performance of the moonlight tale which has almost become completely abandoned by the folk people, dramatic arts like festivals, ritual of circumcision, funeral rites inherited from past generations are being neglected because of western education and technological advancement.

The Oral Artists as scholars have investigated are the custodians of the customs and traditions of the people in the past because of their experiences in the art profession. They are vast with diverse cultural practices, legendary stories, myths, and rituals, to mention a few. Apart from the artist, research has indicated that in the primordial era, elders and custodians of traditional laws and norms, in most societies were endowed with numerous stories and experiences (Udi, 2016:121). However, the situation is different today as attention of youth audience and even adults who were supposed to listen to storytellers has been captured and sustained by the new media. Similarly, a couple of oral artists like the folksong performers have deviated from showcasing their oral traditions to evangelical work while some have abandoned the art.

3. THE DESPONDENCY OF THE ARTIST IN MODERN SOCIETY

In retrospect, colonialism was a great experience in the history of the African people. It was an experience that destroyed the peoples' 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 doubtlessly affected their loyalty to tradition. The Oral Artist who is one of the custodians of tradition and the peoples' history in African settings 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 modern life, he has had to deviate.

Folk music minstrels, for instance, have deviated from the use of indigenous language during song performances to English while also utilizing western musical instruments. The acculturation is meant to satisfy the demand of listeners in socio-cultural settings. 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 and culminating into despondency. Today, despite the vigour of oral literature, there is a considerable decline in its performance. According to Akporherhe (2003:148) in those days, it was possible for the oral artist to survive on the metaphoric "merger income" because of the simple ways of living as opposed to what Osundare (1981) 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, folk music minstrels and similar oral artists have to look elsewhere, for 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 that 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 perceives 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 then he is denied the advantages derivable from there but 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 the 21st century. These children having thus received western education find it difficult to step into their parents shoes. One therefore wonders if the continuity of the oral artist could be ensured and sustained in this modern day society.

Oral tradition certainly existed in every society but the advent of writing and other recording devices have greatly affected the tradition both negatively and positively. The idea here is not to dispute the significance of writing and these recording devices as essential ingredients of modernity, but to emphasize the need to preserve the freshness of the oral performance. In this modern dispensation, 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.

However, 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. These have helped in the preservation and perpetuation of oral literature and also dealt some blows on it. This type of performance cannot be expected to be purely original. There is the consciousness of the artist before these recording devices which will definitely affect the output of the artist.

Another challenge identified is that the attitude of the society to the oral artist is so 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. For instance, folk music minstrels in Urhobo society are mocked with the name, *ibuine re ogogoro biko* (song performers of local gin, please) which makes so many indigenes neglect their traditional music artists and patronize the western ones. Even some Christian religious leaders sanction their members for hiring oral artists like the traditional singers to perform in ceremonies. For instance, at a funeral ceremonies which such leaders will preside, oral artists may be prevented from performing which is embarrassing and frustrating. See the picture of a folk music singer below.



Fig 1: A Popular Urhobo folk music artist, Arhire Okoro and his Musical Group at a Ceremony in Agbarha-Otor, Delta State, Nigeria.

There is still European misconception seed planted in some Africans that made them believe that our oral traditions are fetish in nature and that those who still take part in such artistic performances are still living in the primitive time. They see the African oral artist as an emblem of evil. This is because they believed that everything about African tradition is evil as a result of their western way of life or belief. In addition, many European scholars who studied African oral literature from the mid 19th through the early part of the 21st century were labouring under prejudice. Often times, this is reflected in the rather cavalier ways in which they translated the piece of oral literature or sought to give them a respectability which it was thought they lack.

The result of this was that some European collectors, in their translation of songs that they encountered in African communities tried to force them into schemes of versification that made music to European ears but were characteristically un-African. In addition to the above view, there is hardly any translation that does not show some element of stylization. However, the translator may have tried to adhere strictly to the original story. The reason for this is that no matter how deeply attached, the translator is to be the proud heritage of his people. He is equally aware that some of the outlook revealed by the story no longer prevails. Things have changed somewhat and although there is a continuing need to translate the old classic tale and songs so as to save them from extinction. It is equally inevitable that they will be presented in ways that reflect the changed style of living and perception in contemporary society.

Giving credence to the above, it must be stated that any oral text without the context remains lifeless. It is under the context that we transmit oral literature. Without it being told and retold, singing songs, recite and drum by the artist, it will not be appreciated and realized. It is only in its contextual form that it will remain alive. So, it is difficult for the oral artist to get the message across exactly as it used to be in those primordial days. Government ineptitude is also significant in this discussion. The government's interest in promoting African oral literature waned and with it evaporated the enthusiasm of the oral artist. Wasamba (2014:8) while reflecting on the government seemingly lack of interest on oral literature, posits that "oral poetic genre has been hijacked and manipulated by the political class for the benefit of the ruling class, leading to its domestication and disempowerment." Consequently, the oral artists who are not ready to eulogize politicians especially during rallies and campaigns will be deprived of financial support and protection in society.

Modern technology is not left out as a contributory factor to the despondency of the African oral artist. The 21st century children no longer have the patience to sit at the community arena for the artist to tell moonlight tales, legendary stories, render songs, riddles and make them know things about their tradition. In affirming the foregoing, Udi (2016:113) states that Africans mostly the youths have shifted their interests from oral performances to western cultures and values which they access through the new media like the Video Home System (VHS), Compact Disc (CD), Digital Video Disc (DVD), Youtube, Ipod, MP3, Iphone, and Camcorder, to mention a few. The Internet, television, radio and all forms of social media have become the order of the day and so the artist is faced with the challenge of no audience to tell what he has in mind. In buttressing the above submission, Darah (2014) observes that:

Urbanization has shifted critical audiences away for the agrarian hearths to new communities. In this new setting the concept of "moonlight tales" has lost its aesthetic significance. Any researcher who goes to the field now to record folktale performance is likely to be disappointed to find that there are neither tellers nor listeners to be enchanted. In both rural and urban settings, the children now have other forms of folk art to entertain and edify them. It is a challenging situation for folklorists and scholars of the folktale (44).

Apart from the above submission, studies have shown the values that the modern technology via the vast entertainment industry reflect, often promote excessive quest for materialism, violence and immorality. They may be totally alien to the local tradition of many countries of Africa. As a follow up, the inability of parents to transfer the indigenous languages to the younger generation is an issue that calls for a radical change.

Akpobome (2018:105) while supporting the above assertion, maintains that Darah has often lamented the loss of African identity in the use of its languages. He asserts that communicative competence in the language of one's culture is the only lasting credentials that entitled one to membership and citizenship of that cultural universe. Though oral tradition is threatened by factors like the cultural transition from orality to literacy, the decline in the use of indigenous languages, incursion of modern technology, among others, the socio-political conditions in Africa has equally filled the oral artist with a certain critical mood which is in many ways less accommodating than the performing spirit of oral traditions.

Without mincing words, a large number of people in socio-cultural settings have stopped patronage of oral artists like the folk music minstrels whose performances are seen as means of indigenous knowledge transfer, entertainment, socio cohesion, and so on. The reasons are not farfetched. The cost of hiring their services to ceremonies is so astronomically high that the average people cannot go for them. This is besides other conditions that must be meant at the venue of the ceremony. The role of the oral artists has therefore been taken over by Disc Jockey (DJ) who can even supply recorded songs performed several years ago to the happiness of the audience.



Fig 2; Disc Jockey Hired for Entertainment at a Cultural Ceremony in Ughelli, Delta State, Nigeria.



Fig 3: People Dancing to the Music Supplied by the Disc Jockey

On the average, there are more ceremonies with Disc Jockeys than the live folk music minstrels that spread across Urhobo communities as could be found elsewhere. The roles formerly played by the folk song performers in the past have been substituted with the DJs whose charges are affordable compared to that of the live oral performers.

4. THE WAY FORWARD

The prime function of oral literature is to provide aesthetic pleasure and entertainment for listeners in cultural societies. Like written literature, it has educational value since being exposed to it enhances the listeners' verbal skill, enriches their vocabulary and enlarges their knowledge of their own society. In realizing the above, the oral artist which is the torch bearer acts as a reservoir of community history, a determiner of ethics, a guide to morality and a paradigm of inter-personal relationships. To combat the despondency of the oral artist in the past and those of the 21st century, a lot needs to be done to awaken the interest of the traditional society, the academic community and the government.

Relying on the general discussion above, it is pertinent to state that while some forms of oral literature in Africa are on the decline, others have survived the threat of endangerment posed by the wave of modernity. The art of telling folktales to the younger generations have been replaced with home movies, television programmes, sports, video games and so on. However, Hamilton (2015:10) observes that "even in our digital age, live storytelling has a spellbinding effect more potent than any DVD box set". The charm and potency of the oral artist therefore lies in his ingenuity and the traditional power of orality. In addition, Akpobome (2018:102) observes that there is a new wave of public oratory in Nigeria. According to him, there is hardly any social congregation of Nigeria people in which an orator is not featured as a Master of Ceremony (MC) who usually has a rich knowledge of genealogical information like the traditional oral artist about families, names and aliases (nicknames), of people and even the accomplishments of people which he uses in eulogising them in his act of oratorical performance. Below are some pictures of orators at ceremonies.



Fig 5: An Oral Artist Eulogizing Womenfolk at a Ceremony



Fig 6: Two Oral Artists Performing at Urhobo Cultural Carnival held at Ovwiamuge, Agbarho, Delta State, Nigeria.

The African oral artist is comparable to the Latin and Greek orators. His ability to be witty, possess excellent voice and find the right tone and language for his message and performance is a marker of identity of the noble profession. Artist like the Bata drummer in Yoruba land, Griot of Senegal, Ogbasia in Urhobo land, the praise singers in Hausa kingdom and so many other examples 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. In affirming the above view, Ighile (2013:180) reports that the oral poet, Egogo Alagiebo, the blind minstrel of Benin City has clearly represents a creative phenomenon which is of immense relevance to both the past and the present, with striking implications for the future.

His songs, most of which are embellished by proverbial and philosophical expressions, continuously strike the reflective and critical consciousness of not only the customers of the Airport Road Post Office, but indeed the entire Benin community.” The scholar captures an oral artist whose creative ingenuity is immeasurable and how he entertains audience in his immediate environment. Though he is blind, his mind pours out thoughts and feelings to the admiration of listeners. However, until artists obtain recognition for themselves and generate a viable income in their profession, they may not be too particular about its sustenance and development.

Again, 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 every 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. In corroborating the significance of physical performances of oral literature, Okpewho (1990:1) states that “the stories live, in native life and not on paper and when a scholar jots them down without being able to evoke the atmosphere in which they flourish, he has given us but a mutilated bit of reality.”

African oral literature like African culture is seriously under threat as a result of the influence of modernity. It should therefore be recognised that modernity is here to stay and it has a discrete character of its own. What then is required at this stage of development is that there should be conscious and deliberate attempt to reduce the menace of alien elements such as the importation of corruptive foreign cultures through modern gadgets. There should be a judicious selectiveness which will prove its adaptability to the changing circumstances of the 21st century. This, in turn, should also encourage and foster the return of oral traditions which all committed Africans must do with high degree of credibility and skills.

Furthermore, in modern society where stress has become a common issue in the daily living, the various agents of modernity in the 21st century are expected to be synthesised to sustain the freshness of the performance of the oral artist to relax the nerves of the modern man. This is imperative because oral performance is lively and fresh, and it appeals more profoundly to an audience than performance pre-recorded in the modern electronic gadgets because these recorded ones go stale rather too quickly. All the same, digitizing oral literature can improve the economic well-being of hitherto unknown village-bound poor oral artist and source communities through royalties and advertisement. However, Wasamba (2014:13) advises that digitalization of oral genre in Africa should be handled cautiously. He maintains that we must retain the traditional modes of collection, storage, performances and dissemination through the oral artist, just in case the digital platform collapses like the Titanic.

Multi-disciplinary fora for ethnographers, historians, anthropologists, philosophers, linguists, sociologists and economists should collaborate with scholars of oral literature under the umbrella of Nigerian Oral Literature Association (NOLA) to engage government, public and private institutions, museums, communities and interested individuals to revamp oral literature and by implication to raise the profile of the oral artist nationally and around the world.

5. CONCLUSION

African oral literature has a duty to perpetuate humanity by championing values that promotes peace, prosperity and dignity of all human groupings. Through history, narratives, songs, riddles and proverbs, people appreciate the functioning of vibrant communities with values anchored on understanding, collaboration and interdependence. As Africans, our lives are defined by narratives. Telling stories has always been a way to join people together, a way of humanising that which is in the danger of being dehumanised, of bearing witness and keeping history alive. In acknowledging the primacy of oral literature in Africa, this paper affirmed the invaluable roles of the oral artist. It recognises his power of retentive memory, devotion to poetic verses and the ability to mentor and train upcoming artist that can guarantee the continuous relevance and sustenance of our oral literature and the profession of the oral artist. It equally pointed out the challenges and concludes that in this era of rapid technology, the oral artist, is still relevant and has a positive role and his activities exude dynamic capacities which can contribute to the overall development of the African society.

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