

THE AFRICANITY OF AFRICAN LITERATURE AND ORALITY OF AFRICAN ORATURE IN A WORLD OF CHANGE

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Abstract

African literature is a form of literature that originates from Africa and deals on African issues. It is mostly told by Africans or those who have indebt knowledge about African cultures, traditions, values and literary styles. Orature on the other hand is a type of African literature that imbeds all the unique African mode of narrative and in the pre-colonial era, it was a literature performed orally with the help of an oral artist and the presence of an audience. This paper using the evaluative method of analysis critically questions the deviation and loss of true African literature to a western African literature. It goes further to suggest that literary works embellished with African salts of writing should be appreciated and commended and should not be seen as inferior works as it greatly contributes to advancement of Africa's ideologies and identities in our world that is constantly changing.

Keywords: Africanity, Literature, Orality, Orature, African Literature, Proverbs,

Introduction

African literature is a type of literature that has its root from Africa and deals with African issues. It is a form of literature that is peculiar to the Africans because of the African varieties it possesses. Put in another way, African literature is a literature of Africans, by Africans and for Africans. Although, this definition does not stand in all cases because, a European who has lived in African and have been able to understand African ideologies, norms, values and culture can also tell African stories in such a way that it will still depict the African style of writing and general way of life. An African who has lived in Africa but does not understand the African ideologies may not be able to write African literature. To tell African story well, a writer must have understood to a large extent the history, tradition and belief system of the African in conjunction with evolving African issues alongside the changing world.

A striking disparity between African Literature and the literature of other people is that others view literature a separation of art and content while African literature combines both art and content. This assertion is in line with George (1996) view about African style of literature:

Literature can also imply an artistic use of words for the sake of art alone... Traditionally, Africans do not radically separate art from teaching. Rather than write or sing for beauty in itself, African writers, taking their cue from oral literature, use beauty to help communicate important truths and information to society. Indeed, an object is considered beautiful because of the truths it reveals and the communities it helps to build

Africans naturally leave their lives with stories. Before the advent of writing, African events were internally stored in the human brain and were often related from one generation to another with the help of an oral artist. African literature springs from an in born love of telling a story, of arranging words in pleasing patterns, of expressing in words some special aspects of our human experiences. Over the years, Africans have been able to pass their messages, unravel mysteries and entertain themselves through their literature. Some of the peculiar features of African literature are; African literature is imaginative, expresses thoughts and feelings and sometimes deals with true life stories or are stories told to teach humans lessons.

Therefore, the onus of this study is to unravel striking differences that exist between the orature and the contemporary African literature which can simply be seen as a means of telling African stories with European styles of writing. It further seeks to suggest that African writers writing about African experiences ought to employ African styles such as proverbs, music, African idioms and even African words and expressions to give a better explanation of some words and expression which may not have English equivalents or even if they do have equivalents, in order not to lose the beauty of in such words and expression and to tell better tell their stories.

Meaning of Orature

Oral literature is described as orature, traditional literature, folkloric literature or folklore. Oral literature simply means "literature delivered by word of mouth" and it has turned out to be very important concept for scholars to study cultural relations between literate and illiterate or between orality and written. And there is a claim that there are certain techniques that work in oral literature but does not work in written literature. According to an African writer, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, orature or oral literature passes from ear to mouth, generation to generation, it consists of songs, poems, drama, proverbs, riddles and sayings and it is the most ancient and richest in the African heritage. Orature, which defines the oral character of literature, is a recent term that is used for oral literature. Oral literature comes from the past and it is passed down from one generation to the other from mouth to mouth. It includes riddles, puns, tongue-twisting, proverbs, recitations, chants, songs, and stories and also represents only the verbal aspect of folklore.

In the "theory" book, Mugo argues that orature partakes fully in the social production and reproduction processes of pre-colonial African communities. The dynamics of composition, subject matter, and performance show that orature contributes to the society's perpetuation of itself (as cited in Adéléke, 1999). The verbal arts express both the society's negative and positive qualities, strengths and challenges, justice and injustices, realities and ideals. The productions and performances advocate in various ways both the people's basic rights such as the rule of law, fair play, justice among others and those that pertain to subsistence and material survival (work, fair compensation, freedom from want, healthy living, etc.).

An oral artist is not just a metaphysical visionary but a defender of human rights. These adversarial stances cannot but be so because in the patriarchal African political economy, children have very little power, boys are raised to become warriors and governing elders, and girls are trained to develop into wives and mothers. In the African society, men had more power than women, elders more than youths, and natives more than strangers. Therefore, in the orature of this kind of society, the rights demanded, the injustice protested, the restitution sought, and the ethos promoted should be expected to be closely tied to gender, age grade, and social station. Proverbs, for example, are the forte of elders because the truth of the sayings is deemed to be very enduring and timeless. Oral literature has been used over the years by Africans to order their society and orature served as a means of sanitizing and sensitizing the people. Through oral literature, we could get entertained while learning both from the mistake of others and improving on ourselves. Oral literature in Africa is as old as Africa, it is often unwritten and depends on a performer who formulates it in words on a specific occasion and it helps to be actualized. Examples of oral literature are panegyric songs or story which are often used to praise and extol the mighty deeds of a person, usually a king or a warrior; satirical songs, poems or stories which are used mainly to criticize and keep the society in check; work songs which serve the purpose of relieving workers and making their tasks appear easy and others.

Features of orature

Orature which is the literature dominant in Africa and has to do with literature that is orally transmitted can be identified by some basic features. These are the things that distinguish it from other forms of literature and can be found majorly in African society. Some of these features are:

Proverbs

Proverbs according to Achebe are the palm oil with which words are eaten. Elders in the traditional African society employ proverbs during communication. It is however what distinguishes an elder or a wise man from a youth. Proverbs play important roles in communicating wisdom and before the coming of European civilization, any elder who could not interact with proverbs was not supposed to be in the gathering of elders because, he will not be able to air out his view as well as understand what

others are saying.

Proverbs are very important element in African oral literature. They were used by oral artists to embellish and teach the audience important truths. Sometimes, they made use of proverbs to communicate expressions which were not meant for everybody. Proverbs are a rich source of imagery and succinct expression on which more elaborate forms can be based. Sometimes, a moralizing story may end with, or imply, a proverb to drive home its point. As well, proverbs frequently appear in songs and poems

According to Nketia (1958), proverbs give Africans especially the Ghanaian expressions the freshness they deserve:

The value of the proverb to us in modern Ghana does not lie only in what it reveals of the thoughts of the past. For the poet today or indeed for the speaker who is some sort of an artist in the use of words, the proverb is a model of compressed or forceful language. In addition to drawing on it for its words of wisdom, therefore, he takes interest in its verbal techniques— its selection of words, its use of comparison as a method of statement, and so on. This approach to proverbs which is evident in the speech of people who are regarded as accomplished speakers or poets of a sort makes the proverbs not only a body of short statements built up over the years and which reflect the thought and insight of Ghanaians into problems of life, but also a technique of verbal expression, which is greatly appreciated by the Ghanaian. (as cited in Finnagan, 2012).

In many African cultures a feeling for language, for imagery, and for the expression of abstract ideas through compressed and allusive phraseology comes out particularly clearly in proverbs. The figurative quality of proverbs is especially striking; one of their most noticeable characteristics is their allusive wording, usually in metaphorical form.

Forms of Oral Literature

The following are such forms of orature:

The Panegyric: Although often defined simply as praise poetry, the panegyric in its pure form is a formal and fairly fixed, usually court poetry, celebrating royal, aristocratic or military might, wealth and other achievement. A typical panegyric is characterized by extensive figurativeness (especially animal imagery in Africa) praise names, long-

tailed metaphors and sustained allusiveness. The style of the panegyric is adulatory/laudatory/eulogistic. The language is lofty, hyperbolic and well embellished. The emotion is intense but it is conveyed with a sense of high solemnity despite the usually fevered pitch and speed of delivery. The consequent semi-liturgical strain is further enhanced when the presentation is in melodic prosodic nodes (as in the quasi-musical, half-chanted or recited panegyric form). However, this does not prevent the emotional intensity from exploding as gesticulations, staccato sentences, ideophonic interjections, other appropriate interjections and a generally exclamatory narration. Delivery is dramatic, often eliciting intense emphatic audience response.

Other special features of the panegyric are the alliterative tradition, the use of assonance, drum language accompaniment, the use of special stylized intonation (as in intoned chants) the artistic interweaving of historical fragments with mainstream praise, especially where the bard or rhapsodist belongs to a specialist intellectual tradition (as with the presentation of royal chronicles).

The Lyric: It is expedient to attempt a definition of the lyric immediately following that of the panegyric since this would clarify a popular misconception that the panegyric is a sort of long lyric. From what we have said above, it is obvious that not all panegyrics are songs (for this is a term almost synonymous with lyric). The term lyric, in its pure form, applies solely to verse of intense personal emotions, tersely delivered, characterized by brevity and retaining evidence of a melodic origin. Chronicling panegyrics, for example, clearly do not come under this category. Lyrics would, therefore, be best examined as a distinct corpus or sub-genre of orature. This genre of song is often further broken into the following: recreational songs, work songs, begging songs, cattle-herding songs, masquerade songs, hunting songs, initiation songs, religious songs, folktale songs, heroic songs, funeral songs, and children verse.

Recreational Songs: These include but are not restricted to songs of exhilaration and excitement which serve either as song for song's sake or as sheer entertainment. Dance songs fall under this category. Recreational songs are usually topical, political or satirical. They are songs done during relaxations. In the pre-colonial African society, kings and warriors often had recreational artists who sing songs of praises while they are resting.

Begging Songs: These are songs used by beggars to solicit alms. They tend to be emotional and evocative of specific deities or the divine in general. Where it presented by a group of beggars there usually is a repetitive drone of alternating lead and chorus.

Cattle-Herding Songs: These are used by nomadic people especially in praise of their cattle.

Hunting Songs: These are songs associated with hunting. They are not used during actual hunts. They are used to celebrate big kills.

Work Songs: These are work-accompanying songs used to aid group or co-operative jobs where strict rhythm or coordination of multiple hands enhances performance (as in paddling). There are also solitary work songs serving either as inspirational tonics or to kill monotony, embellish labour.

Folktale Songs: These are songs that occur mostly as interludes during folktale narrations. They usually serve a thematic purpose and are useful as mnemonics for regurgitating half-forgotten folktales from the tribal treasury.

Masquerade Songs: These are intoned or ordinary songs sung by masquerades or their escorts but can also refer to any song associated with masquerade rites or celebrations. During festivals, followers of masquerades often cheer them up with eulogies. This song gives the person carrying the masquerade an added strength. He could dance for a whole day without being tired because of the praises he gets from the audience and the followers.

Religious Songs: These are songs used in traditional worship of local deities and are characterized by a spirit-possession hue. They are used for religious oblations and ritual occasions.

Heroic Songs: These are songs celebrating achievement. They are not epics or panegyrics. War songs fall under this category. War songs generally do not accompany the actual fighting. They are used mostly to celebrate victory where they present as ceremonial displays, wild cries, ululations, stamping of feet, aggressive dancing gestures, mimicry (like stalking) and clashing of weapons. War songs are also used during war preparations, to boost the morale of fighters before engagements. The onomatopoeia is a dominant artistic device employed when performing a heroic song.

Funeral Songs: These are dirges. They could be heroic if the funeral is that of a warrior. Warrior funeral songs would usually be accompanied with firing of guns and other aggressive actions. In all funeral songs balletic and musical elements carry as much weight as the actual words themselves. Aspects like drumming, instrumentation, bodily movements, flow of tears, sobbing, wailing, fasting carriage or demeanour, monologues, as well as antiphony, solos, choral chants are all important. The atmosphere through which or within which the funeral song is transmitted, therefore, invariably creates its overall gravity or effect.

Children Verse: These include lullabies and other cradle songs, game songs, nonsense rimes, etc, used for or by children. Lullabies would usually use liquid, vowel or repetitive sounds that create a lulling effect. Assurances that mother is on the way are usual. Game songs are action songs used as part of children games. Nonsense are meaningless musical sounds used by children for the sheer delight they offer. Other types of children verse include songs taunting or commenting on things like crying, stubbornness, filthiness, shaven heads, etc. Under this category we also have hide-and-seek songs and semi-vulgar mischief songs.

Satirical Oral Literature

This is a form of orature that criticizes societal vices with a view to correcting them. Abram (1981) defines satire as the literary art of drama sharing a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking towards its attitude of amusement, contempt, indignation or scorn (as cited by Okafor, 2001, p. 2).” This means that satire condemns while using while joking. It does not come open to directly criticize and ridicule a person but does that in indirectly. Sharing the same view, Iwuchukwu (2009) says that “Any literary work which holds up a society to ridicule or shows the foolishness or weakness of an idea or custom and towards its attitude of amusement, contempt or scorn is called a satire (p. 20).” In the views of Iwuchukwu, satire is not only targeted at a person but a system, custom, culture, tradition and religious beliefs. Its main function is helping to keep the society in check and ensure that all is working out as it ought to. Satire has been a favourable and age-long tool used by Africans to maintain order, peace and stability in her society. The activities of noble and powerful men who sometimes act as though they were above the law were checkmated using satire.

Satire has been broadly classified into two main types; Formal or Direct and Indirect Satire.

According to Abram (1984), satire comprises of formal and indirect satire. Critics make a broad division between formal and indirect satire. In formal satire, satiric voice speaks out in the first person that is "I", may address himself either to the reader or else to a character within the work itself, who is called the adversaries" (as cited by Okafor, 2001, p.3).

He further pointed that formal satire is of two types; Horatian satire and Juvenalian satire. They got their names from Roman Satirists. In Horatian satire according to him, the character of the speaker is that of an urbane, witty and tolerant man of the world, who is moved more often towards amusement than to indignation at the spectacle of human follies and absurdity sometimes include his own, while in Juvenalian satire, the character, of the speaker is that of a serious moralist, who uses a dignified and public style of utterance to decry modes of vice and error, which are no less dangerous because they are ridiculous and who undertake to evoke contempt, moral indignation or an *unillusioned* sadness at the aberration of man. He finally explains the second type of satire indirect satire by saying:

Indirect satire is cast in another literary form than that of direct address. The most common form is that of a fictional narrative, in which the objects of the satire are characters who make themselves and their opinions ridiculous by what they think say and do and are sometimes made even more ridiculous by the authors comments and narrative style. Typical examples of indirect satire are *Animal Farm* by George Orwell and its Igbo version *Mmadu ka A Na Aria* by Chuma Okeke. In these novels, the two writers use the indirect approach of satire to ridicule opinions concerning the evil ergonomics system called capitalism.

Ideally, every literary work or work of art is meant to make people laugh as human beings are lively creatures with the ability to create fun and be funny at the same time. Satire however, combines this entertainment, education and criticism in one instance to convey its message. Apart from this aim satire seeks to unmask the societal vices in relation to what Soyinka calls the "rotted underbelly of society". It is to stripe his victims be it a person, society, value, norm, law bare and lose through laughter with the help of satirist, using satiric tools such as mimicry, caricature, overstatement, mock praise and storytelling in order to teach and reform.

Satire uses wit to criticize behaviour. According to Balogun (2010), in African society where there are no prisons, satire plays pertinent role. Tools like mimicry, derogatory songs, mock praise, overstatement and many others, were used and this kept men along the right path.

Components of Orature

What differentiates oral literature from every other form of literature is what is referred to as the components of oral literature. These components make oral literature unique and outstanding among other forms of literature. They include:

The Oral Artist

This is the person who tells oral stories and sings oral songs. An oral artist is an important person who composes and relates his stories in the most appropriate way. They are two types of oral artist; the innate oral artist and the professional oral artist. The innate artist is the artist who inherited story telling from his parents either the father or the mother. On the other hand, the professional artist acquires his skill by been an apprentice. Such a person may not have the gift of storytelling but have the desire or interest. In such a case, he goes to learn the art from artist who is already into the art.

The Audience

These are the people who listen to the story of the oral artist. The audience play a large role in the success of every story. Without the audience, there will be no reason for any performance.

The Oral Moment

This is the period when both the artist and the audience are in the mood to listen to any story or performance. With the presence of the oral moment, both the artist and the listeners can fully participate. The oral moment is equally very important in ensuring the success of any oral performance. To this effect, the oral artist has to be in a good mood to perform and the audience needs to be willing to listen. In the pre-colonial African community, it was said that any day the artist has a performance; the entire household must ensure that he is happy. Any change in mood will affect his performance. However, there are exceptions in the case of most innate artist who can get in the mood at any given time without been propelled or stimulated.

Meaning of African Literature

African literature is the type of literature that is peculiar to Africans. It can be writing or orally transmitted. This is the type of literature that tells African stories. It is mostly written by Africans or someone that has indebt knowledge of the traditions, values, norms and culture of Africans. African literature mirrors the life of the African people. As has been noted above, Africans had a way of life including how they related events, educated their younger once, entertained themselves and ordered their communities without the help of external bodies. But with the coming of westernization, and the introduction of a new religion, Africans encountered a drastic shift and readjustment in their literature. They began to embrace new ideas, language, religion, and even a new way of acquiring knowledge.

Literature constantly depicts man and his environment and the true origin and story of man and his environment can best be told through their literature. Literature across ages and continents has served as an embodiment and interpreter of people’s culture, a conveyor of a people’s language as well as their philosophy, politics, and psychological identity. African literature refers to works done for African audience, by Africans and in African language. Although, the contemporary African literature now has African literary works that are not written in African languages, what makes those works true African works is in the fact that they possess African varieties. It is quite disheartening that most contemporary African works have moved away from these varieties and works produced do not effectively relate the African stories well. They have been a gross shift from the language, means of telling their stories and even the issues that are being discussed. These changes especially in language could be traced to the fact that most African words and expressions have no English equivalence. Therefore, in a bid to fully capture their real story, they rely on transliteration which is the direct transfer of indigenous words and expression to English language without any modifications. Through this means, the meaning and intentions of the writer has often times be altered.

Bridging the Gap between African Orature and the Contemporary African Literature

African orature are not just African literary works that are performed orally or not written down. It goes beyond this definition and involves

African literary works that are seasoned with African salts of writing. This African salt which could come in the form of; African languages, music, proverb, idiom, riddle, and folktale help to give African literary works the true taste of Africanness. At a time, African writers who decided to write in European languages for instance were subjected to pressures and tensions, including an immersion in the European tradition and literary canon in order to produce texts that bears directly or indirectly a resemblance with those of their masters. With this desire to produce works that are western in quote and can be appreciated by the European writers and critics, there has been a great deviation from the act of African method of storytelling to the production of literary works that have European taste. Beginning from the use of western languages to the use of western styles of writing which most of the time reduced African works to chaff and lacking beauty in its expression. African literature is notable for its use of embellished expression while trying to pass its message. This combination makes African works educative as well as entertaining. Orature also embraces artist-audience participation and often times, a particular genre of African orature can embed other genres. For instance, most dramatic performances were accompanied with music, folktale, riddles, proverbs and chants. In the words of Gareth Griffith, he underlines what most of these African works take to by saying that these works:

inevitably concentrates mainly on the interrelationship between the European forms, structures and poetics imported along with the notion of a literature in English, and less on the equally important effect of the many and diverse local oral traditions" (Griffith, 2000).

Orature as a literary theory asks for quite a different consideration of orature works. African writers, especially Achebe, reacted against western criticism of African literary works. Achebe said that

The Latter-day colonialist critic... given to big-brother arrogance sees the African writer as a somewhat unfinished European who with patient guidance will grow up one day and write like every other European" (as cited in André, 2014).

The valuation of all African writers' works from the point of view of assimilation of western mode of writing does not do justice to them but creates problems which Lorentzon points out in the following words:

Ever since the late nineteenth century, scholars [who] have collected African oral literature (...) followed a Euro-American

literary/critical tradition. This caused problems, as the literature they encountered was most often radically different from the one they were trained to study" (Lorentzon, 2007).

Nevertheless, not all African writers accepted assimilation. Some, like Achebe, Ngugi, Kunene, Anyidoho, and Pacéré, to cite but a few, even reacted against and went so far as writing their creative works in their mother tongues, because they realize that "through writing in foreign languages, literature has suffered the same bastardizing fate as politics and the economy. In cases where they did not write using their mother tongue, they relied on transliteration of major African words and expression in a bid to preserve the true meaning of such words and expressions. The newness in orature as a literary theory is that it is not preoccupied with whether a work by a writer is derivative of oral traditions, but rather considers writers as thinking architects rather than prisoners of a cultural heritage or assimilated into another tradition. We cannot rightly look at orature texts with western critical norms but with conventions pertaining to the genre of orature.

African Literature and African Orature in a World of Change

African Literature and African Orature are, however, intended to enhance the African worldview which should evidently be seen in the promotion of core African ideologies, cultures, tradition and values which will in turn build the personality of the African thereby aiding integral development. African Literature and African Orature, when introduced to African schools in its crude form and originality will reflect the needed African Consciousness, keying Africans into the contemporary world of change with full identity in respect of African values and identities. Without this proper and effective appreciation and sustenance of African Literature and African Orature, our languages may go into extinct as it is gradually and continually relegated to the background and no longer considered relevant. This is why great many African literatures and studies are continued to be taught in European languages, greatly influenced and coloured in European mentality leaving the African child or learner wounded and confused, without any solid foundation laid as authentic African child and scholar. The fact that the African child at birth has a language he understands, learns while growing and communicates

effectively demands that the African child should be taught in that language he appreciates greatly. That is to say, if he is taught with that peculiar language, may be his mother tongue, the intended knowledge will sink deeper but if the concepts that are being taught and related to such a child which he can easily identify is down played, the child's personality development as a result of desired knowledge and technical know-how will be very much affected negatively. The confusion continues as long as the strange European language which the child only struggles to learn while in school is the language of instruction and literary presentation. This perplexity lingers as long as the concepts and words which the African child may never have ever seen except on the television or if he travels abroad are used to relate concepts in African worldview. The child unfortunately remains confused and lost between reality and imaginations. African Literature and African Orature, however, guarantee the needed African background in the appreciation of any work of arts and literature.

Nevertheless, even as Africans can give credence to European for the introduction of literature, it is pitiable to observe that after colonization, westernization, acculturation, ongoing neo-colonization and even indoctrination of these literatures and ever since the Europeans has left, Africans have not deemed it fit to produce their own literature which will showcase *Africanness* and great *Africanity* both in context and content. That is, a literature that can proudly discover, present and solve African problems and extol African ideologies and values. Such literatures can help to foster literary development and improve the spirit of communalism, *ubuntu* and belongingness which Africans are noted for in the community of nations. Equally such a literature will not only show the beauty and treasures in African languages but will complement our languages while giving room for technological growth and investment since technology follows language. In the evolving generation, Africans must be ready to develop, produce and read literatures and oratures which can align with the changing world. African Literature and African Orature should be real African and as well stand side by side with European literature while contributing to the world meaningfully and

positively, and be ready to lend to others as need may arise.

Conclusion and Recommendation

African philosophy of education in a world of change has aptly captured African educational system dominated by European philosophies of education. It has clearly pictured a philosophy that is nonoperational, archaic, and unconventional. A philosophy that instead of solving African problems has ended up complicating it, thereby, leading to an upsurge in continuous loss of African identities enshrined in their cultures, traditions, religion as well as values. To solve this problem, this paper outlines the following as measures to help build a true African philosophy of education which will in fit into the changing world.

By way of conclusion, this paper recommends the appreciation of works that possess unique African style of writing and revisiting the primitive way of storytelling in order to revive our African literary identity which has been severed by the total assimilation of European mode of narration. Also, African works need to undergo serious screening to ensure that the true *Africanness* is not lost and any work found lacking these varieties should not be given credence.

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