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Aspects of African Oral Literature and Performance Aesthetics

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Abstract

This paper gives an overview of an ethnographic portrait of the artists who recreate the tradition of oral performance as well as samples of performance situation of Ereno festival of Epe people in Lagos. The essay spells out certain aspects of oral tradition and critically examines how they did have the appreciation of beauty through performance. African oral tradition and folkways deal with man's existential being. It grapples with man's dilemma and adventure in life. The utilitarian value of the oral tradition is to utilize its various conventions for instruction and entertainment and to stimulate human feeling through songs, song-tales, riddles, beast-fables, parables, jokes, proverbs, anecdotes, legends, myths, fables, spics, folktales and stories. In traditional African literature, the oral performer spoke in prose and verse and song. The dynamism with which the performer exhibits the aesthetic potency of the oral forms makes the African poets and storytellers the community chroniclers, entertainers and collective consciousness.

Introduction

This paper begins with the definition of the African oral literature. It discusses a few examples of the genres of oral tradition and illustrates performance aesthetics in the dramatic genre with a specific reference to Erenu traditional festival among Epe people of Lagos State (Nigeria). The concept of oral literature remains largely contentious among various subscribers to the discourse. Oral literature appears contradictory in terms. Literature emphasises a written art form often associated with conventional texts as the novels of Charles Dickens, the plays of William Shakespeare and the poetry of Alexandra Pope among numerous others. To consider literature as oral (spoken words), therefore, appears contradictory.

Eurocentric's definitions, thus, seek to limit the term literature to only the written texts to the exclusion of all unwritten art-forms. For instance, Claude Levy Bruhl cited in Akporobaro (41) contends in his popular text entitled *The Primitive Mentality* that the primitive African man lacks the ability of logical reason or intelligent. The mentality of the African man was assumed to be illogical. The implication of this assertion is that the African man's organisation of ideas, his creativity, modes of perception, his rational ordering of ideas and experience of reality are chaotic, lacking coherence and intellectual qualities of the European's rational and logical approach. Most European thinkers and literary anthropologists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did not only denigrate the intellectual ability of the black man, they also maintained that the primitive African man had no literature.

However, Bukenya and Nwanda cited in Ajadi (241) contend that literature refers to any utterances whether spoken, recited or sung, whose composition and performance exhibit to an appreciable degree the artistic characteristics of accurate observation, vivid imagination and ingenious expression. With this definition, African oral literature qualifies as an aesthetic composition. Killam and Rowe in *The Companion*

To African Literature (202) posit that with the advent of colonialism, Africans established and employed folktales as a reaction to the new oppressive reality. They affirm that:

In the 1960s, the Oxford Library of African Literature edited by E.E. Evans Pritchard, G. Lienhardt and W.H. Whiteley provides an avenue for the scholarly study of folklore, and in the 1970s, Frantz Boah's widely accepted view that a people's folklore is a repository of their culture and history led to the introduction of oral literature into school and university syllabi. This scientific approach to the study of folklore resulted in mass proliferation of folklore texts in many parts of Africa.

The oral nature of African unwritten art forms depends largely on words as its mode of transmission. Oral literature embodies a large corpus of artistic oral creativities which could be given effect through performance. Finnegan (2) posit accurately that the significance of performance in oral literature goes beyond a mere matter of definition. The nature of the performance constitutes an important component that impact on the literary form being exhibited. Performance encompasses the modulation of voice and tone, facial expressions, movements, gestures, emotional situation, humour form the aesthetic elements which are artifacts that accentuate the full actualization of a poem, a drama or a narrative prose. Oral tradition can achieve a tremendous aesthetic grandeur among performers and the audience through visual effects and music which are essential components of performance.

Performance Aesthetics and Aspects of Oral Traditions

Performance is a discourse or speech act in which music, dance and drama are fully integrated to constitute an indivisible aesthetic form. Performance is extremely important in oral literature because without it, oral tradition remains lifeless. Oral literature is vastly enhanced and it is given its proper character by the manner in which it is performed. The nature of

performance, the voice and the mimicry, the stimulus and the response of the audience is central to oral literature. The performance also needs to be placed in its proper setting – the time of the day and the season. The performance has its messages as well as its aesthetics which can be learned through the language of drum, songs, the clapping of hands, the characterization and the elastic and plastic body of movements of the actors; the participation of the audience and their imitation of the masquerades and the ululating, the rattles and songs which accompany these dramatic aspects. (Azuonye 97)

Oral tradition refers to the primitive level of literature. According to Babajo (20) it begins orally when people chant songs, tell stories and folktales in moonlights, perform religion chants or incantations, the improvisation, imitation of the stories, folktales and fairytales as performed by story teller who uses gestures, pantomime, actions and movements of the body or even instruments to convey messages to the audience. The aspects of African oral tradition can be classified as drama, prose narrative and sung expression/poetry. The generic separation is not fixed or rigid as one finds in a formal written literature such as prose, poetry and drama. In other words, these forms overlap. Each of the forms represents the creative and imaginative art of composition that relies on verbal art that culminate in performance.

Oral tradition relates to the use of utterances as an aesthetic means of expression. Prose narrative, for instance, is a genre of oral tradition that involves a story telling. The theme of oral narrative could be light hearted, satirical or even serious. The plot of some of these stories involves the tricks and competitions of various kinds of animals who constitute the main characters. Spirit and inanimate objects such as rock, stream, tree also function as characters. The didactic function of themes such as ethological, myth, thriller and so on are part of these oral narratives. The tales are not mutually exclusive of the other. In some tales, the themes overlap. Prose in oral narrative could be in the following forms, myth, legend, folktale, proverb, riddles and jokes. For instance, myth deals with the

philosophical and metaphysical universe of man. It attempts to explain the origins of man as it relates to the cosmology. Okpewho (11) argues that myth is a 'fictive fancy' of the human mind and it occurs when a 'historical personality has been treated to a fictive fancy which nevertheless succeeds in affecting an audience. Myth expresses the history, the culture and the inner experience of the African himself. The myth portrays the wishes and fears of the African man as he gropes to understand the unknown by dissecting and remoulding it to fit his frame of reference. In the myth, Africa's metaphysics are created and his beliefs constructed. Oduduwa myth among the Yoruba, Mumbi myth in Kenya, Bayajidda myth in Hausa to mention but a few. What gives myth a literary status is that it is performed as tales with all aesthetic components of song, clapping and ululation. Kipng' eno koech (21) buttresses the literary realization of myth when he notes that:

The African mythologist...seeks to employ all forms of theatrical skill and put to use, every faculty in his delivery. The tale is told using hand, head, eyes, and even breathing (an emotion is evoked in the audience by changing breathing patterns). Like a good play, the myth evokes suspense, sorrow sympathy, and most of all laughter – for death and laughter are interwoven.

As observed above, in the enactment of oral narrative of myth, artistic elements are utilized to raise its aesthetic appeal. Moreover, myth is the 'fictive fancy' of human creativity. Critics allude to the literary status of myth in the attempt to have an insight into it. Therefore, myth is literature and a matter of aesthetic experience and the imagination.

Oral poetry is another genre of oral tradition that is chanted, sung and performed. As an aspect of oral tradition, it is performed to provide entertainment, give information and create form through which the African man adopts process and worship of deities. Okpewho (60) notes that:

The essence of true poetry lies in its power to appeal strongly to our appreciation and, in a sense, lift us up. There are basically two ways in which a piece of poetry can appeal to us. One is by

touching us emotionally, so that we feel either pleasure or pain; the other is by stirring our mind deeply so that we reflect on some aspects of life or some significant ideas.

Like other genres of oral literature, performance is essential in oral poetry. In fact it is an integral part of it. Again, poetry performed for public entertainment might reveal the effort that the performer makes to give the audience a satisfactory event, such as singing a song, making digressions either to clarify certain details or to give members of the audience some pride in their history and culture. All this gives the oral poetry performed before an audience a certain quality of fullness and the sense of a communal event. There are various types of poetry: panegyric poetry incantation, and lullaby among several others. For instance, panegyric poetry is usually chanted by professional poets. Finnegan (32) identifies this poetry as 'the type for court poetry and is one of the most developed and elaborate poetic genres in Africa'. The poets in this category are attached to the royal court of kings, or sometimes employed by wealthy and powerful individuals to sing their praises. The content of this poetry is highly restricted.

The poet is charged with chanting a specific type of poetry and would need to have undergone a formal training for the purpose. The king is glorified with exaggerated image appropriately chosen to swell his pride and give him a high sense of his ancestry. If however, he suffers any failure in war or commits an unwise act of leadership, the court poet takes care to choose words of caution or blame that would not earn him the anger of the king. (Okpewho. 42)

The griot of Mandinka ethnic group, Kwadunfo of the Asante and Umusizi of Rwanda are few examples of court poets. Also, these highly specialized poets could be found in ritual. The Babalawo (diviner) among the Yoruba and the Lodagaa of Ghana are professional poets who are usually involved in the Bagre initiation ceremony. Elegiac poetry is a traditional funeral dirge. This poetry is sung or chanted by a bereaved relative or

friend or any other person as the case may be to mourn the death of someone dear. The content of this poetry reveals a deep sense of sorrow and helplessness brought about by death. Okpewho observes that well-chosen songs of sorrow are used by professional mourners to enhance the solemnity of the occasion". Similarly, the poetry of mourning is a refined art among the Akan ethnic group of Ghana.

Occupational poetry is peculiar to member of a particular occupation. A good example is the *Ijala* or hunters poetry among Yoruba hunters. The *Ijala* chant is known to the hunters whose occupation of haunting is consecrated to Ogun, the God of iron, and patron of all crafts conducted with metal. During the celebration of 'Ipale' (hunters' festival), *Ijala* is chanted to seek the protection of Ogun, and praise him. Also, when a member of the hunters dies, *Ijala* is sung to celebrate his deeds and greatness. In both cases, the performer chants in a high tone to 'provide,' according to Okpewho, 'the right pace and level of excitement for the words which are chanted at some speed.'

Dramatic performance is a genre of oral tradition of which J. P. Clark (12) identifies two major types in African literature: traditional and modern. He maintains that:

of the first still very much in the original state...we can again determine two main sub-groups. One of these is sacred because its subjects and aims are religious while the others are secular drama ranging from the magical through a number of sub-kinds to the straight play and entertainment piece. Within the sacred species there are again two types: one grouping together what they have been termed ancestral or myth play and the other which are masquerades or plays by age groups and cults. The drama of Obatala and Oshagiyen performed annually at Oshagbo and Ejigbo provide indisputable examples of the first sacred kind. Against this set are the masquerades for examples, the *ekine* of Bunguma

In the enactment and representation through actors who imitate persons and events in these performances, various elements of artistic creativity are brought in to play. During some festivals and ritual performances, a drama piece may be enacted. For instance, the prayer of Epe people in Lagos before the commencement of a ritual performance of Ereno rites as recorded by Oludipe (41):

Our father
We your children on earth
Are the ones calling on you
Don't sleep in heaven
May we not experience evil?
May we not die prematurely?
May we not be barren?
All we your children
Men, women
Who are at home, in the bush?
And abroad.
Are praying unto you
May we not be ill-fated?
Let our prayers receive answer.

Before the prayer above is said, the family head with all the members would have gathered by the grave of their ancestor. The family head (usually a man) approaches the grave with two Kolanuts in his hands. Right in front of the grave, he stretches forth his hand towards the grave and then touches it with the kolanuts three times. After this, he says:

My father; I so and so (he will mention his name) is the one who has stretched forth his hands to you this period. As we want to start the traditional Ereno rites, we have all come to you to touch the grave where you were buried. Please, accept our sacrifice.

Apart from the aesthetics of the overtones and symbolic association of words and phrases, the actual poet's appealing beauty of voice, his facial expression, vocal expressiveness and even movement (all indicating the sincerity of his supplication and intercession) and, not the least, the musical setting of the poem are effectively displayed. Indeed, all the various aspects of

performance such as tone, gesture, and facial expression, dramatic use of pause and rhythm, the inter-play of passion, dignity, or humour, receptivity or the reactions of the audience are all displayed. Before the performance begins, the people chant with each other, looking forward to some great entertainment. They laugh, scream, shout, make body movement, sing and so on. The performers sometimes wait eagerly for the ceremony to commence so that they can display their expertise, release their tensions, and experience a mental state different from everyday activities. The drummers introduce their drumming patterns. Songs are rehearsed so that everything is well articulated and mastered for performance. The audience already knows the song as it might have been sung in the previous years. The rhythmic clapping of the hands, the rhythmic body movements, which is in tandem with the drumming, the melodious singing, the language, the facial expressions to show feelings, the costume of the performer, all combined aesthetically to reveal the beauty and the semantic content of the song and the performance. The chorus of the song enable the audience to participate actively in the performance. Again, there is repetition of some lines which contributes to the rhythm and substance of the song and the performer.

The Ereno festival started as a form of religion practice. Afterward, its rites changed in scope and objective, so that now, it plays a major role in both religion and social practice. In the performance, artistic talents are put into visible and audible form through songs and dramatic sketches, which are performed to entertain. The organisation of Ereno for public performance involves three groups of participants, namely; the priest, the performer and the audience

The priest is usually the family head who is vested with the power to announce when and where the performance should take place. He also settles disputes that may arise during performance. The performers are the dancing group which comprises men and women participants playing major roles. The performers wear masks to

conceal their identity and imitate the ancestral persons. In their masks, the performers are known as masquerades. The masquerades are not expected to expose their faces or reveal their identity in public. The performers are regarded as spirits of the dead who have back in the form of masquerade to sojourn temporarily among the living. The audience-participants should be under illusion that the masquerades are spirits of their ancestors which must be respected. The performance provides an opportunity for each performer to display their skills in singing, dancing and mimicking. The imaginative mind of the various masks is presented to the audience for appreciation. The performance provide an avenue for meeting old friends and making new acquaintances.

In traditional Ereno rites, the setting of theatrical performance is not in a specialized building, hall or theatre but in front of chief's palace or any other place designated for such a performance. Also, the actors and actresses are not professionals. While there are no prepared script and dress rehearsals, the paraphernalia of art and elements such as costumes, stage design, lightening and drumming are creativity employed to enhance performance aesthetics. The theatrical elements form an integral aspect that enhances the elegant imitation of action and event. Ogunba and Irele (21) note that in the process (of performance) the art of costuming, masking, drumming, chanting, dancing and several others are utilized in a manner not totally dissimilar to their usage in other dramatic traditions. Finnegan (5) points out again that African traditional drama, unlike 'the more verbalized types of European theatre emphasize music, song, dance and mime which are essentials elements of dramatic performances.

From the foregoing therefore, it is evident that African traditional drama is an ingenious expression that imitates some actions and events which are significant to people. The common oral dramatic performances are ritual performance, festival, and children game to mention but a few. Ritual Performance is undertaking to appease the

gods. It involves sacrifices and various forms of rituals. Ritual is sacred because of its religious aims. It is devoid of conviviality hence it solemnity, which sometimes creates awe. Similarly, it has exclusiveness – only the priest and supplicant(s) are usually the performers. The secrecy surrounding some rituals involve symbols known only to the cult of selected initiated. Schneider (34) affirms that Central to ritual action is a special kind of symbolizing which is different from that occurring outside ritual: There are visual, behaviour, and auditory symbols, which have multiple meanings for the uninitiated. Equally important is sacrifice which constitutes an essential aspect of ritual. Schneider (34) observes further that: Sacrifice is a kind of exchange act in which human beings attempt metaphorically to sort out relations with the powerful forces that rule their lives, an exchange symbolizing a social force as they relate to man.

The setting of ritual performance varies from shrine to market square, the chief's palace to location marks for it. The various songs which are associated with cults are performed in conjunction with worship of deities and consequently confined to the locations which are marked for religious services, rites of passage, or annual ritual. Okpewho (52) while acknowledging the importance of ritual in African art, considers it to be the cumulative point of the creative will. Thus, ritual performance relates to those artistic elements inherent in ritual as enacted in the course of appeasing the gods. Highlighting the ritual imprisonment of Obatala at Osogbo, Linfors (19) narrates that the second day of the festival has a feature not unlike a passion play. There is no spoken dialogue but singings which accompanies the performance and the action. Festival is a big traditional ceremony usually acted with much ovation. Unlike ritual performance, the mood is convivial. It involves large characters; usually the whole community is involved where it is performed. It is performed to celebrate certain important occasions such as new yam festival, coronation festival, Osun Osogbo festival etc.

Conclusion

For too long the impression has been given that there is little or no literary activity worthy of attention happening in Africa. However, the situation is changing fast and there are quite a large number of active scholars who take the study of oral tradition seriously and whose works speak of the enormous potential in Africa. The aspect of oral literature and performance aesthetic goes further to show the rich diversity of African oral compositions. Apart from the aesthetic appeal of the ingenious creativity, the purpose, which these oral compositions serve, is multifaceted. The socio-cultural, religious as well as spiritual lives of the African found a rich source in African traditional culture. African culture has indeed proved resilient in the face of Eurocentric bastardization. In fact, the factor among others, has led to its being reckoned with by its erstwhile detractors. The objective of the paper is to give some ideas of the variety and quality of African oral tradition through a representative sample of performance. The paper shows that oral tradition is an essential part of African's mental, aesthetic and cultural education.

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