

AFRICAN ORAL LITERATURE AND THE CHALLENGES OF THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

In the days gone by Oral Literature nay African Oral Literature in its artistic and aesthetic forms used to be functional and thriving. But with modern development and sophistry, it is on the descendancy. This paper will attempt to define the concept of Oral Literature; look at its various forms, characteristics and functions. The paper will also seek to examine the shift in emphasis or the paradigm shift as it were from Oral Literature to modern sophistry, and the enormity of challenges confronting African Oral Literature in the wake of the 21st century.

Introduction

Before an attempt to define Oral literature is made, it will be proper to first look at 'folklore' as a broad term or juxtapose it with oral literature. Folklore as a term covers all aspects of the people's culture and traditions which are transmitted or handed down orally from generation to generation while oral literature is specifically those aspects of the folklore that involve verbal arts. Oral literature can thus, be defined as a kind of literature that is composed and transmitted orally from generation to generation.

The study of oral literature, nay African oral literature, will be tasking and rewarding for many reasons:

- (i) It will enable us know whether the large corpus of oral materials in oral literature possess qualities with which we normally associate literature,
- (ii) It will enable us assess the level of artistic consciousness of the Africans before the Whiteman came.
- (iii) It will help us, as independent people, to assess our identity, civilization and culture.
- (iv) It will help us access the information and materials that are available in oral literature since modern African written literature draws extensively from the oral literary traditions and resources.

Forms of Oral Literature

There are various forms of oral literature and in the world over are identified as such:

1. Oral Narratives- these are in prose form and have subgenres:
 - a) Folklore- these are purely imaginative stories that are not seriously believed as true by those who tell them or those who hear them. Families' age groups or grades may involve themselves in telling stories especially, in the evenings or at nights after the day's hard work at farms or trading. Some communities see it as a taboo to stay at home and tell stories during the day in order to discourage laziness and idleness. Folktales are stories set in an imaginary world of the supernatural, a world where the impossible becomes possible, where inanimate objects assume human qualities and functions.

These stories are told primarily for entertainment and instruction since they tend to be moralistic and didactic in nature.

- b) Legends- this is a form of oral narrative. Legends are stories that are told and believed as true in society by those who told them and those who hear them. These stories are set in the time past but not as quite remote as a myths-set when the world is not in this very shape it is now. Legends tend to be secular because they tell of migrations, the origin and founding of towns/villages, of lands and tribes, of heroes and their exploits in far-flung places or communities.
- c) Myths- these are stories, which in communities where that are told are believed as true by those who told them and those who hear them. They are set in remote past and usually held as sacred since they are treated with and associated with religion and dogmas. They explain the origins of

- various natural phenomena, customs and practices in the society.
2. Oral Poetry- this covers a wide variety of expressions which have poetic qualities. In traditional African setting, there are wide variety of expressions like songs, incantations and chants, which have poetic qualities and are forms of oral poetry. Ruth Finnegan (1970) suggested that there are eight kinds of oral poetry viz, panegyric poetry, elegiac poetry, religious/festival songs, special purpose poetry e.g. war songs, lyrical poetry, tropical and political songs, children songs and rhymes. In African, different ethnic groups have different names for these kinds of oral poetry.
 3. Oral Traditional Drama- this is another major form of oral literature. Although critics and scholars of African oral literature tend to see oral drama as not well- developed because they view it in terms of the Aristollian concept of drama. In Africa, dances, traditional festivals, rituals are all manifestations of drama since they are replete with elements of drama such as imitation, mime, action, costume, etc In Africa settings, where traditional festivals, ritual dances and dance drama, certain drums talk and tell the dancers and dramatists what to do or how to act.
 4. Minor forms of oral literature- these include proverbs, riddles and tongue twisters. They are not minor to the point that they are insignificant or consider inconsequential. They are as artistically and aesthetically rich as those in the major genres. Proverbs are brief apt sayings with deeper meanings than are obvious at the surface level. In African society, a saying is regarded as a proverb because it has profound meaning and contains the wisdom of the ages. Proverbs function in a variety of ways; for advice, abuses, correction, mock and sound judgment. Riddles are also brief apt sayings with deeper meanings than are obvious at the surface level but are characterized by a question and answer structure. Riddles provide medium for entertainment and help to sway the imaginations. They embody artistic qualities like imaginary, symbolism and parallelism. Riddles are basically used to provoke the children's imaginations and sharpen their sensibilities.

Features of oral literature

Orality: This is the most dominant and distinguishing feature of oral literature. Orality means that it is told and transmitted orally, that is by words of the mouth. Ajuwon (1985:306), explains: Pre-literature Nigeria 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 traditions.

There is no doubt that what today forms the bulk of modern African literature is the oral traditions and past experiences of the people-modern written literature draws extensively from oral literature.

Common Authorship: African oral literature to some extent has a common authorship in the sense that no one individual has the sole right or lay exclusive claim to some oral songs, proverbs, riddles and other narratives since they have existed from generation to generation and belong to the entire society. In Ogwashi-Uku, an Ibo Community West of the River Niger, the same songs are created, sung and recycled by different individuals in the community with little or no variations and no one individual can claim to be the original author. But they exist instances, where authorship of certain songs and narratives can be traced to some individuals in the society. This is rather an exception than the general rule.

Audience Participation: In African oral literature the audience is actively involved right from the conception or creation of the story or song to its final rendition. The audience does not stay aloof, it must of necessity participate. The audience plays a dual function-watching and contributing. For example, when an oral artist performs, the audience participates by clapping and chorusing or when a storyteller in Africa tells of stories of heroic nature in far flung places, the audience watches with keen interest and intermittently contributes.

Language: It becomes an exercise in futility to talk even obliquely of literature without language. It will be

akin to separating the dancer from the dance. Language is the vehicle of literature while literature is language in action. For one to be able to communicate effectively in literature, the language used has to be flowery and colorful. In Africa oral literature the language of the community is adopted and used in so far as it is accessible and meaningful. The language used is laden with images, which are highly figurative and rich in symbolism.

Functions of African Oral Literature

Though the functions of African oral literature are many and varied, it is the importance of the different forms of oral literature which are parts of people's folk lore and culture that have given it so much importance and made it to survive from generation to generation.

Entertainment: The major forms of African oral literature all serve as a form of entertainment. It is commonplace to see in traditional African settings, that after the days hard work in farms and fishing in rivers that people gather in age groups and family settings to kill boredom, the women tell stories to entertain the people, thus using such situations for relaxation.

Traditional festivals are equally important because they enable people to socialize. In traditional African settings where there is the absence of modern forms of entertainment such as radio, television, cinema. Etc, the various forms of oral literature are readily available and such serve as means of entertainment and relaxation.

Education: In traditional Africa where there were absences of books, printed materials, formal education, Internet, etc, the various forms of African oral literature serve as the means of education. Here oral artists, elderly men and women who were regarded as moving libraries and encyclopedias, custodians of knowledge on the history of the clans and records of achievement of our past heroes.

The different forms of African oral literature teach us about our beliefs, values and norms. They serve as means of instruction for both the old and the young. In fact, it is often said in Africa that once an elderly person dies, it is a whole library that has been lost or got burned down.

Preservation of Culture: Oral literature plays an important role of preserving and transmitting of the culture of the people from generation to generation. In many of the oral narratives, songs, proverbs and riddles are contained vital cultural information that are stored and transmitted from one generation to the other. By so doing, oral literature contributes meaningfully to the preservation and transmission of our cultural heritage.

The answer to what happens to a succeeding generation when the preceding generation passes away lies with oral literature. It is a veritable tool for preserving our culture and ensuring continuity.

As Mirror of Society: It has long been discovered that the various forms of African oral literature provide a mirror for the society and serve as a means of checking conformity with the accepted social norms. In these oral narratives the lives of the people are mirrored while the ethos, values, beliefs and attitudes which society accepted were enforced. Consequently, many of these stories are moralistic and didactic in nature.

The human and animal characters in these narratives are symbolical for they teach of moral values, patience, obedience, prudence, endurance, etc. On the other hand, these characters in oral literature serve as means of pointing out and checking deviance from accepted norms in the society. They were means of correcting negative attitudes and behaviors of individuals who exhibit evil tendencies. Consequently, many of the songs and stories often criticize individuals who deviate from the code of behaviour. Such people with negative attitudes like wickedness, greed, ingratitude, selfishness, etc, are satirized with a view to ridiculing and changing them for the better.

Aesthetic Satisfaction: Another important function of African oral literature is that it provides aesthetic beauty and satisfaction to the people. A beautiful song or narrative, no doubt, has both artistic and aesthetic

quality that will endear it to its audience. There should be that innate joy and satisfaction after listening to a traditional song or watching a beautiful traditional festival — e.g. Ine festival of the Ogwashi-Uku people - with its beautiful setting and costumes arrayed in equally beautiful multiple colours. In fact, oral literature represents the level of our artistic consciousness and civilization before the Whiteman came. It is little wonder then that modern African literature draws extensively from the repertoire of African oral literature.

African Oral Literature and Its Challenges

Although oral literature in its various forms still exist in our society or communities today, but they are not as functional and thriving as they use to be. The reasons for this near obsolescence are not far to seek as they are varied and quite intimidating.

Availability of Modern Forms of Entertainment

At the turn of the twentieth century came the introduction of modern forms of entertainment such as radio, television, cinema, video etc., which tend to displace the traditional way of entertainment. These modern gadgets appear to be more durable and attractive to both the old and the young. The consequence is that many people no longer see it fashionable to gather around the fireplace at night to tell stories or even rely on other traditional forms of entertainment for amusement and relaxation. It is equally no longer commonplace to find children in moonlight play or see age-grades tell stories. What we find these days in traditional African setting is a situation where there is a near total attachment and addiction to discos, home videos, browsing the Internet, etc, thus alienating African oral literature.

Literacy and Modern Education

With the introduction of formal education and literacy, the printing of books or other materials, and the establishment of libraries, it became possible to acquire knowledge or store and preserve important information about communities in African, records of past achievements and history of clans and tribes in books and other modern electronic gadgets on a permanent basis. It is no longer fashionable to rely on the memory of the oral Artists and the elders for the history and other valuable information of the society.

Recall that as early as the eight century AD when Arabic ideas and culture were introduced to African and western influences have started affecting African nay Nigerian literature. Between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, written and spoken Arabic flourished in Northern Nigeria and some Hausa literature had been translated into Arabic.

Besides, modern education has so systematized the process of acquiring knowledge that it tends in many ways to take away the young away from home since they are no longer available at home to participate in many of the traditional activities. Modern education is so demanding that even when one is present he might not be able to participate in the activities.

The Advent of Christianity

The coming of the Whiteman to Africa as a missionary and colonial master meant one thing—the uprooting of our culture. The early missionaries condemned almost everything in Africa including our culture and literature as paganism and helped in destroying them. They and their converts were so over zealous in presenting Christianity that they saw everything traditional as bad and evil.

Christian missionaries accelerated the importation and imposition of western education into Nigeria during the nineteenth century. In their enthusiasm they tried to destroy most aspects of our cultural heritage and often made derogatory remarks about our culture.

The missionaries have so traumatized the Africans that at baptism we would need to drop our cultural names and assume new names and new personalities. This is the beginning of African colonial mentality—cherish everything western and condemn everything African.

Urbanization

This is the process of growth of cities and metropolis, which has resulted in the growth of people from the rural areas to urban centers. This might be due to economic, social, political or even spiritual reasons. The consequence is that many people are physically far removed from their own land and ancestral homes where they cannot no longer participate in traditional activities and relish the aesthetic beauty in oral

literature.

Secondly, the growth of cities will make for the creation of a new multi-lingual community, which brings about a clash of cultures. In this situation, the individual is so alienated from his culture and tends to embrace the Whiteman's way of life.

Modern Economy

In the days gone by, what was in vogue was a traditional economy which was primarily a subsistent one-where people produce just what they needed and occupations were not highly professionalized. The places of work were within the locality and people wake up in the morning to go to farms and come back in the evening. There was even market days, farm days, historical and feast days. Because of such organization of the economy, people in African traditional settings had time to participate in traditional activities and be actively involved in oral literature. But, today with a modern-driven economy, which is so professionalized, and time consuming, the individual rarely has time to participate in traditional activities and Africa oral literature is the worst for it. In some cases he will be forced to leave his traditional area to places where his profession can be practised. In addition, modern economy is so strenuous when one gets home he wants to have time to attend to some pressing needs. There is more regulation in modern economy than in subsistent economy.

Changing Attitudes and Value Systems

Modern Africa has witnessed tremendous changes particularly in the areas of attitudes and values. The communal spirit of traditional attitudes which hitherto permeated the African culture is fast eroding or breaking down. These days the African is more individualistic and more importantly materialism has become the order of the day and the most prominent feature of our lives. The quest for money and other material things has forced people to abandon traditional activities and profession which are not materially rewarding, thus no body takes time off to tell stories or sing those traditional songs that make us a unique people. People are no longer paid or appreciated for singing and dancing around in the village, instead they have gone professional. People now have utilitarian concept and this has changed the people attitudes and value system.

The Incursion of Computer and Internet

There is no greater challenge of African oral literature than the one posed by the introduction of computer system. With the introduction and operation of these modern electronic gadgets, people most especially, the youths have little or no time of participating in the various forms of oral literature and use them for their entertainment and relaxation. Instead they take recourse to the use of computer and browsing the Internet even all day and all night.

Recommendations

From the forgoing therefore, this paper seeks to propose that for the sake of posterity and the preservation of our cultural heritage:

1. African oral literature should .be introduced in secondary schools and tertiary institutions as part of the school curriculum.
2. Government should help in promoting oral literature by recognizing oral Artists and giving them the needed incentives.
3. Every community and by extension every African nation should create the enabling environment for the various forms of African Oral literature to thrive and blossom. This is the only way we can project our common identity and destiny as black people.

Conclusion

African oral literature is still very much alive in African societies and communities today, although it is not as functional as it used to be due to the various factors earlier discussed. The function of oral literature today varies from one individual to the other depending on the extent of urbanization, education, modern sophistry, etc. The less enlightened or organized a society the more it depends on the traditional forms of entertainment, the more enlightened or organized the society is, the less dependent on the traditional forms of entertainment.

The most important function or aspect of literature is that though it is not possible to measure the degree of oral literature in various societies, what is necessary is its study and preservation for posterity.

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