Oral Literatures, Challenges of Nationhood and the Politics of Representation in Nigeria

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Abstract

Oral literature also known as orature, traditional literature, folk literature, and folklore have been the focus of researchers and researches due to its importance in day to day human endeavours. Oral literature plays a leading role in the development of education in Nigeria. The national policy on education recommends the need for Nigerians to develop an education policy that would be geared towards meeting the needs of the immediate environments, socially, economically, politically, and spiritually. This paper explores oral literatures, challenges of nationhood and the politics of representation in Nigeria. This paper discovers that oral literature is a popular knowledge, it is the product of culture and culture is the product of intellectual faculty of man. Nationhood cannot thrive without culture and every society no matter its technological advancement employs one form of oral literature or the other in its day-to-day activities consciously or unconsciously. This paper establishes that there is a close relationship between oral literature and the process of up-bringing of children (socialisation). It also presents orderly creative accounts as in folktales and the expression of moral truth/didactic lesson which is present in proverbs. The paper concludes that oral literature transmits important cultural and social value, knowledge, and behaviours

which individuals are expected to learn and these help to structure nationhood. Relying on the qualitative research methodology and adopting ethnopoetic theory. The paper examines the social-cultural features in oral literature and foregrounds the implication on nation building. This paper recommends that individuals and governments should recognise the importance of oral literatures in the society.

Keywords: Oral Literature, Challenges, Nationhood, Politics, Representation.

Introduction

The study of oral literature was for a long time dominated by anthropologist, historians, psychologists and pseudo-scholars such as Christian missionaries and colonial administrators. These scholars and pseudo-scholars made blanket generalisations about art and erected theoretical structures that ignored the "intrinsic" literary merits of oral literature. Nevertheless, belated as it is, literary scholars have in the middle of the 20th century taken their place at the banquet of oral literary studies. According to Isidore Okpewho:

> A major advance in the study of African oral literature as literature came when native African scholars began to undertake research into the oral traditions of their own people. Here were scholars who spoke the African languages before they went out to be schooled in foreign languages and who understood perfectly well what constitutes a beautiful expression in their own tongues before being exposed to the same sense of beauty in other tongues (12).

The generally biased opinion that oral literature, whether narrated, sung or chanted or performed is meant for mere entertainment fails to appreciate the significant roles played by oral literary genres in the socialisation process. The overall social structure of the Nigerian society seems to operate against a common cultural background both in the life cycle and through fixed annual ceremonies. The different genres of oral literature to be used as illustrations against the background of the Nigerian society are communal creations of almost every African society and they are meant to teach the various aspects of the society's language, cultural norms and values as well as the nature of the environment and ethnics through entertainment. For instance, in the folklore of Ogba people of

Rivers State, much of the information dealing with history of the people are contained in their mythology (oral tradition) which is didactic. Kingdom Orji notes that "The popular tradition states that the Ogba people migrated from Ancient Benin during the reign of Oba Ewuare the great (1440 – 1473). Tradition states that the ascension of Oba Ewuare (popularly known as Oguaro in Ogba folklore) was marked by tyranny and socio-political upheaval" (144).

African oral literature, as it is today is a composite art which needs a separate set of cannons for its evacuation different from that used for the judgement of written literature. This literature grew out of a specific people's worldview and any evaluation that does not take into consideration this basic fact is misguided and will in turn lead to a deceptive and unreliable conclusion. Before we go any further, we need to understand what constitutes African literature. Many critics over the years have been making efforts at defining African literature. Obi Wali holds that "any true African literature must be written in African languages" (149). The later views of Chinweizu et al that oral literature is a cogent component or the literature of Africa, "works done for African audience by Africa and in African languages whether these works are oral or written constitute the historically indisputable core of African literature" (11-12).The inclusion of these definitions of African literature is to drive home the incontrovertible fact that African literature is not merely for entertainment as it goes far beyond this but instead on the framework of teaching and education ritual.

It is pertinent to sate that the survival of African oral traditions (oral literatures) is under threat due to the pressures of modernisation, urbanisation and the influence of formal education systems that prioritise written over oral knowledge. The federal and state governments of Nigeria act as catalysts to erode African oral literature as they fail to acknowledge the roles of African oral literature in educating the people on socio-cultural moral values. The advent of digital media, while offering opportunities for cultural dissemination also contributes to the diminishing role of traditional forms of storytelling and cultural transmission. The younger generation, in particular, is at risk of losing touch with these traditions as they become more in touch with these traditions as they become more integrated into global cultures and digital communication platforms. This poses a serious challenge for the future of Nigerian cultural heritage, as the oral traditions that

have sustained the communities in the country for centuries may fade away if not properly preserved and revitalised.

Oral Literature as a Medium of Communication and Socialisation

African oral literature is oral in nature. Orality is the thought and verbal expression in societies where technologies of literacy are unfamiliar to most of the population. The dearth of technology in African (Nigeria) society poses a big threat to the transmission or communication in written form hence oral literature maintains the quality of being orally/verbally communicated. Richard Gill notes that "oral literature should be viewed right from the outset, as an artistic expression of a community's cultural heritage through spoken words and performance. It is a dynamic and living tradition that reflects the history, customs, and world view of a particular group" (530).

Oral literature deals with activities of farming, hunting, fishing and other experiences which are song, performed and/or recited after labour through peculiar arrangement of words, sometimes in novel forms. Jasper Ahaoma Onuekusi posits: The arrangement is done in such a way "to increase the pleasantness of expression and the content and functions of words as carriers of information, education and emotion" (1).

Further, Karibi George notes: Egudu categorises the stories in oral literature into origin, explanatory, trick, contest and didactic. The contents of the stories do not invite any sharp divisions and we are not informed by what other criteria, if any, the divisions were made" (33-36).

Since education is the process of comprehension, learning skills, beliefs, and habits of members of a society, the proper method of imparting, it is highly significant and this no doubt can be done through oral literature. Socialisation as the method through which individuals acquire the knowledge, language, social skills and values needed for society to function, therefore, the role of oral literature in the development of education cannot be pushed to the background. Oral literature as an art is found to reflect the patterns of Nigerian national life as well as play a role in the socialisation process which broadly seeks to prepare members of the society to internalise its norms as demanded by the various facets of its life. All genres of

oral literature depict social realities and help to preserve happenings and events of the past and the present for the future generations.

Oral literature is sometimes referred to as popular knowledge (Espinosa, 257), folklore (Dundes, 257) oral art (Finnegan, 168), popular literature (Kurath, 261), expressive art (Nandawa and Bukenya, 361), or folk literature (Harmon, 259). Oral literature is the product of culture and culture is the product of the intellectual faculty of man. Culture is: "the sum total ways of life of a particular people. It is all embracing and it explains what the people, collectively and as individuals do, what they think or hold dear or sacred. It gives one a sense of belonging and commitment as it paves the way for one's identity at all times. Od Oamen notes that "it includes customs, traditions, conventions, practices, values, beliefs, folkways, plays, songs, food, dressing, laws, religion, craft and language..." (69).

Oral literature is simply a kind of literature, one that can be considered a different entity from written literature in several ways. In spite of such distinctness, however, oral literature shares a variety of features and written literature. Thus, one effective way of defining the field lies in exploring some differences between it and some others with which it is commonly confused. In contrast to the written, oral literature is spoken, sung, intoned, recited, or chanted depending on the context. It is clear, then, and as the name implies that the first quality of this kind of literature is that it is oral. Oral literature is to be aurally appreciated. In other words, it is communicated or received through the sound waves of human speech. It presents us basically with a visual and aural means when enacted or realised and actualised. According to Nkem Okoh, "the difference is that oral literature lacks a tangible existence. Better still, it remains far more influenced by the aural factor, by this we mean that it is essentially to be heard, rather than read, while the term oral means spoken or by word of mouth. Then, aural deals with the sense of hearing" (73).

In a different perspective, the fundamental attribute of orality has several implications, as our discussion in this paper will show. More important for our purposes here is the point that the underlying quality of orality is greatly linked with the other two – the transmission and "beingness" or oral literature. We will discover, for instance, that this feature affords oral literature not only a flexibility

of form nowhere conceivable in written literature, but also several mnemonic and repetitive qualities (incorporated for both structural and stylistic words) to which we can attribute much of its charm. It is clear that the political class in Nigeria does not in any way pay attention to the functions of oral literature especially in the area of socialisation and moral education, which to a large extent account for moral decadence in Nigeria and stifle our reach to nationhood. In the words of Helen Chukwuma: "An oral composition does not rest on a page, written and put away till it attracts the attention of a willing reader" (209). This paper asserts that oral literature is a universal phenomenon in conformity with Jerzy Andrzejewski's phrase "the ubiquity of oral literature" (33).

It is noteworthy that even western societies that claim to be highly technologised had as their artistic beginnings the phenomenon called oral literature. More importantly, the oral medium remains important in such societies.

Emmanuel Obiechina observes that:

> Each tradition has it peculiarities, but every human society, including those with long-standing literate tradition, has gone through an oral phase and returns a residue of the oral quality of its early beginnings. Goody and watt have observed of Europe that in spite of the alphabetic script, printing and universal free education, the transmission of values and attributes in face-to-face contact remains "the primary mode of cultural orientations" (32).

Africa in general and Nigeria in particular gains from the field of oral literature which is hinged on moral function, every nation requires its citizen to live a moral life. Folklore, myth, folktale and proverbs are aspects of oral literature that teach moral standard. The origin of folklore can be traced to 1846. William John Thomas, a British writer's investigation of folklore and myth led to a latter career of exposing or debunking long-lasting myth and he was also a pioneer demographer. He was credited to coined the term "folklore", which is described as the knowledge and traditions of a particular group, frequently passed along by words of mouth.

Oral Literature as a Medium of Communication and Socialisation

Oral literature can be described as a medium of communication; in fact, it is a reaction to the universal human instinct to find balance, harmony, beauty, etc. in the world in order to explain happenings in society and suggest ways of forging ahead. Every society no matter its technological advancement employs one form of oral literature or the other in its day-to-day activities consciously or unconsciously. Hence, when a literary piece has been composed orally, transmitted orally, performed orally and presented in a special literary language, it is considered to be oral literature. Oral literature is orally transmitted wherever it is found, whether among a primordial, unsophisticated, remote people or in civilised culture; whether in urban or rural, dominate or subordinate group. That oral literature is anything, which has authentic form and is manmade; and that the devolution of oral literature to writing and print does not destroy its validity as oral literature.

Genres/forms of oral literature are widespread in Nigeria as in other parts of Africa and the world. Like the written forms of literature, forms of oral literature also contain all the devices of language and they perform all the functions that the written literature performs. Various categories and forms of oral literature have been advanced by scholars, folklorists and researchers like Dundes (1965); Bascom (1972); Leach (1975); Skinner (1980); Emeaba (1987); Obafemi (1994); Okpewho (1992); Chukwuma (1994) and other critics. Folktale, for instance, is a traditional narrative that contains orderly creative accounts of events presented as if they actually occurred; but they are prose-narratives, which are regarded as fiction. "They are utterances whose composition and performance exhibit to an appreciable degree the artistic characteristic of accurate observation, vivid imagination and in genius expression" (Osofisan Femi, 88). They project the society's politics, history, philosophy, science and ethnics. A proverb on the other hand, is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorisation form and which is handed down from generation to generation. It also embodies a precept or useful moral or didactic lesson.

A nation cannot do without myth which embodies the strong belief of man that is part of a spiritual unity, a cosmic entity. Myths provide man with something to hold to or to believe. William Bascom posits:

> Myths are prose narrative. In the society in which they are told, myths are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the past; they are taught to be believed, and they can be cited as authority in answer to doubt, disbelief and ignorance (58).

Folktales, Proverbs and Legends

These aspects of oral literature project the society's politics, history, philosophy, science and ethnics, folktales, proverbs, and legends are essential in the study of oral literature in the society and for a success march to nationhood because they teach and inculcate the community's acceptance ethnics, enlighten the young about the nature of human society and the environment, about the teeming life of the forests and rivers and the appropriate cannons of social interaction and penal redress. From them we extract the valuable lessons in the narratives. Ropo Sekoni did not mince words to assert that the "oral narrator as a narrator performer utilises his creative ability to put life into his narration and to twist his story towards his desired objective" (139-141).

Proverbs are short, generally known sentences of the folk which contain wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorisation form and which are handed down from generation to generation. They also embody a precept or useful moral or didactic lesson. Similarly, legends like myths are regarded. Legends are secular rather than sacred and they deal with a past that is less remote than that of myth. As Geoffrey Parrinder rightly puts it, "a legend is a traditional story about historical,of semi historical people even if the narratives are partly imaginary" (95). The principal characters in legend are mostly human. Isidore Okpewho identifies two types of legend: "the historical legends and mythical legends" (66-71). Through oral literary genres, the concept of socialisation is brought to the fore. Non formal forms of leaving and behavioural patterns that are acceptance by society are taught to children through careful observation of oral literary performances and it could take place anywhere and anytime. Socialisation is the process of transforming norms, beliefs and behaviours

to future group that a unique "self emerges". Therefore, through the socialisation process, oral literature prepares individuals in a nation for social life by teaching them societal shared norms, values, beliefs and behaviours.

Oral literature can be used as a tool to "exercise social control". People use different genres of oral literature like, proverbs, praise names, folktales, jokes and songs among others in expressing social approval of people who conform to social norms. They also employ it against individuals who attempt to deviate deliberately from social conventions with which they are familiar. Therefore, when this happens, a proverb, a folktale, a song of allusion, or a riddle may be used to express disapproval and to express social approval. Praise names or praise songs are specifically used for this purpose. Because they express the morals or ethnics of a people, oral literature is a convenient tool used by people in the communities.

Politics and Representation

Political representation is the activity of making citizens "present" in public policy-making processes when political actors act in the best interest of citizens according to Hanna Pitkin's concept of representation (1967). It is also the activity of making citizens' voices, opinions and perspectives present in public policy-making processes. "The concept of representation": this classic discussion is one of the most influential but often misunderstood concepts. For Pitkin, disagreement about representation can be partially reconciled by clarifying which view of representation is being involved. He identifies four different views of representation: formalistic representation, descriptive representation, symbolic representation, and substantive representation. The formalistic representation is the concern of this paper. It is institutional arrangements that precede and initiate representation. Formal representation has two dimensions: authorisation and accountability.

Oral Literature and Politics

We see a point of connection between literature and politics, including storytellers and members of parliament. Novels, poems and stories are all said to represent reality or ideas or feelings. Politicians, advisers and bureaucrats represent the voters or the common interest or the nation state. It is not that writers escape reality while politicians embrace it, for both fields are joined by laws and money and

social relations. For instance, it is that the oral artists and politicians represent themselves, and each other in different ways. Representation is important in both politics and literature to us on how we build a sense of the public; about working together through creative literary expression and imaginative policy to make our world better.

Oral literature uses storytelling to inspire social cohesion and improve understanding of diverse communities. According to Robert Wood:

> By setting new types of people involved in our work, we expanded our idea of a public, which then changed what we thought was possible as creative practice. This because a virtuous feedback loop that changed people's idea of who they are, what is good life and community, and why that changes our world. (78).

Through the process of representation in oral literature, we have seen domestic violence survivors' change. We have youth from communities change. For instance, we had seen cases of people who re-orient themselves around a narrative of survival and success as a parent, adult and youth, rather than as a victim of violence. In a true life situation, we have seen people become truer representative of themselves, their communities and their art, simply by listening and viewing oral performances. Some turn good personalities by listening to paregoric/satirical songs which condemn vices and their perpetrators in oral representation are always in flux and flow. Literature is a way for public policy and the creative industries to connect and learn from each other. More than anything, oral literatures and stories by people about people and for people, are all geared towards educating people, all with the idea of enhancing a public we make together.

Oral literature plays a crucial role in the politics of representation by offering a platform for marginalised voices to renegotiate their identities and challenge stereotypes. Oral literature as a fictional literature promotes peace, cultural engagement, and citizen advocacy beyond state rhetoric. In the academia, the intersectional approach to teaching political representation, focusing on diverse perspectives enhances understanding of marginalised identities. Politics of

representation refers to the struggle in society over the meaning of images and definitions in a specific culture.

Conclusion

It is the limitation of "literature" as a term which does not effectively reflect the oral "creative expression" of a people's cultural main stream that led to the advancement of oral literature.

According to Nkem Okoh, "that led Mr. Pio Zirimu to coin the word orature. Still, it is difficult to see that the term "orature" circumvents the etymological problem associated with literature" (62). It is also regarded as verbal art, oral art and folk literature respectively. But these appellations remain inaccurate and unsatisfactory because rather denoting any phenomenon that may rightly be labelled literary; it suggests such other arts of a people as their incantations, curses, rhetoric, chanting, singing, or oratory. In all ramifications, oral literature is an important point in the evolution of literature and the beginning of literary tradition in all cultures. Nkem Okoh further remarks: "we emphasise that in virtually every African society, oral literature or the oral medium is far more than a residue" (78).

Therefore, this paper attempts to engage the attention of everyone interested in African cultures and ways of life, to embrace the study of African literature as it is a whole engagement in the holistic portrayal of the traditions, customs and ways of behaviour of the traditional society. Oral literature may rightly be considered a relatively new humanistic field compared to say, philosophy or language still it is interspersed with other genres that explain the traditional, non-institutional and unofficial part of a people's culture, encompassing all knowledge, understanding, values, attitudes, feelings and beliefs transmitted in traditional forms through words of mouth. As a means of communication, people interact with one another in politics, representation with some challenges. Though modern technology poses a challenge to the transmission of oral literature, almost risking their extinction, it maintains universal cultural connections and aids in character development and creates mutual understanding in societies.

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