

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Folklore as a Medium for Cultural Renaissance in a Deculturised Society: Oral Poetry as Praxis

Obaje, Alaba Anthony

Associate Professor, Department of English & Literary Studies,
Prince Abubarkar Audu University, Anyigba, Kogi State, Nigeria

Abstract:

Every group of people bound together by common interest and purpose, whether literate or not, rural or urban, possesses a body of tradition and culture called folklore. This study fundamentally treats folklore as a medium for a cultural renaissance in deculturised African society. It explores the dearth of the traditional forms of knowledge that shape and give meaning to people's lives. Also, the study, through the analyses of some traditional African poetry, explores the dynamics of folklore on cultural education of values, morals, and the aesthetics of the culture of the people. Finally, the choice of oral poetry for cultural reaffirmation and the exploration of performance as a significant technique in oral tradition is presented in the discourse.

Keywords: folklore, cultural renaissance, deculturised, praxis

1. Introduction

Oral literature as a branch is very wide. It is a commonwealth of another art, for example, music, drama, dances, chant, symbols, and images peculiar to a particular group of people. African oral literature is a broad term comprising the totality of myth, proverbs, stories, poems, songs, riddles, creation tales, folktales, and legend that embodies the African cultural existence and experience. It is referred to as any form of verbal art transmitted by word of mouth from one generation to another. The significant thing is that there is a great sense of orality and dramatic performance in this art. One can simply say that there is an overdose of dramatic oral performance in African literature embedded in traditional oral poetry. Thus, the choice of traditional oral poetry as a medium of cultural renaissance is hinged on the appraisal of oral performances and their aesthetics in traditional African poetry.

Most of the research on oral literature, particularly folktales, focus on the utilitarian or functional quality of orature. Moreover, this study also explores the core area of performance techniques in folklore. This is because it is a performance that forms the major aesthetics of oral literature in general. Thus, the researcher intends to demonstrate the literariness of oral literature in general and also sheds more light on the nature of oral literature as opposed to the pre-concerned notion (the view of evolutionists about African oral literature as being morality and pedagogic instead of aesthetic literature). Akporaboral, F.B.O (2016) makes it clear that:

The extensive recording of folktales, myths, and stories made by distinguished anthropologists and literary scholars like Claude Levy stress, Ruth Finnegan, Adeoye Babalola, etc. has directly or indirectly formed part of an important debate about the creative abilities of the so-called primitive people. The study of traditional oral literature of African preliterate society did not begin simply as an academic exercise (anonymous) (p.40).

Oral literature is performance-oriented. According to Bayo Ogunjimi (1991), it is probably a truism to say that the real nature (the true quality) of a piece of oral poetry can be realized in performance. Indeed there can hardly be an alternative to it' (p.97). African oral performances are often highly dramatic and picturesque in nature.

Oral poetry particularly 'involves creativity and response'. It is the case that every performance is unique as it exhibits unparalleled dynamism. This fluidity of performance makes oral art subject to a freshness that the audience can explore. Oral poetry, as well as panegyric concerned, emanate from the desire for interaction and resolution of communal conflict. Often, the folks meet at the arena, and the meeting provides an avenue for entertainment rendition of lineage praise and tales and delivery of judgment. Thus, the direct communication between the poet and his audience and the best realization and appreciation of literary events is through performance. The performance of panegyric poetry and other arts is so important that, without it, oral literature, including panegyric poetry, has no existence.

In line with the above, Ruth Finnegan (1970) says there is no mystery about the first and most basic characteristics of oral literature... this is the significance of actual performance (40). Thus, performance in oral arts serves the role of a heart in the human body. If it is removed, the whole part of the body will cease functioning.

Fundamentally, history is the basis of any society, and it can be revealed, reflected, and shaped by certain forces, of which folklore is one among many others. Folklore is broad, and in its oral tradition, it can be referred to as the nucleus of oral literature. Marj Okie Hogan (2008) refers to folklore as 'stories, legend, songs, proverbs, etc' (p.168). In a similar vein, Fred Akporobaro (2006), in his *Introduction to Oral Literature*, sees folklore as 'the heritage of imaginative verbal, creation

stories, folk beliefs, and songs for the preliterate society which have been evolved and passed on through spoken words from one generation to another' (32).

With a critical look at these definitions, one may conclude that folklore is a cultural way in which a group of people maintains and passes on a shared way of life. That is an oral tradition that is passed on from one generation to another to preserve the traditions and virtues of a people, especially the Yorubas.

2. Panegyric Poetry in Iyamoye

Among the Yorubas, panegyric is chanted by almost every normal person. At least, one must know how to chant some lines of his praise poem and his lineage panegyric. As a common feature among the *Yorubas*, it is the most deciding factor in assessing the competence of an artist. According to Oludare Olajubu (1981), 'panegyric poetry is the 'store house' of every verbal art of any oral poetry. In essence, every oral poet explores panegyric for his art'. (63)

One important thing to note about panegyric and its aesthetics in dramatic performance is that it does not give life to oral arts alone but to other forms of literature. It should be clear that without performance, oral literature has no existence. It exists in its transmission and perpetuation in performance.

Iyamoye people are Yoruba by tribe. They speak the Yoruba language. They are located at the border between Kogi and Ekiti State. They are from the Ijumu Local Government Area of Kogi State, one of the Local governments of the Yoruba-speaking part of Kogi State. Yoruba, as a highly tonal language, positively influences the panegyric poet. The tone is exploited by the artist and used as a structural expression, which enhances the rhythmic movement and musicality of panegyric poetry.

Olajubu (1981), in one of his panegyric poetry to *Ogun*, described *Ogun* as a stone that is thrown at:

Igburugbursu forest which goes to *Igburugbunu* forest to kill a red baked bird (18)

The word *Igburugbunu* has only a tonal variant in the second line simply to give musicality to the praise of 'gun' and to emphasize how far a gun can shoot.

Fundamentally, every *Iyamoye* native can perform his panegyric poetry to some extent. Apart from knowing one's personal praise poem, many people know their lineage and friend's praise poem. Oral poets in the town are the best people in the art of praising people, be it their relatives or not. They can perform someone's praise poem immediately after they encounter him. For instance, the fame and prosperity of an '*Ijala*' chanter depend partly on his ability to praise members of his audience, *Ogun*, the god of hunters, and some popular animals in the bush.

Poetry, as the foundation of panegyric, uses different kinds of African heritage and traditions to narrate its nature. The Heritage of African poetry portrays Sango (god of thunder) worshippers praising their god and relatives during the celebration of *the sango* festival.

Oriki is one of the greatest and largest storehouses of verbal materials for composing *Iyamoye* oral poetry. However, there are some special bands of panegyric poetry in *Iyamoye*. Among these are the drummers and the freelance chanters. In this part of Africa, a good drummer is assessed by his ability to praise people with the drum.

3. Important Contents of Panegyric Poetry in Iyamoye

3.1. Sinew in Military Might

'*Ogun*' earns the most elaborate panegyric poem that portrays military might. *Iyamoye* people believed that to be successful in war, one needs the support of *Ogun* (The god of war). Failure in war, therefore, indicates that *Ogun* does not turn his good eyes to the vanquished. On this note, *Ogun* has to be appeased by the sacrifice of a dog or a cock with praise to *Ogun* before embarking on another war. Among the *Yorubas*, the magical and physical ability to fight the war is still significant. Therefore, great emphasis is laid upon them in the panegyric poetry of their past heroes. '*Ihahu*' was the son of a heroic god that defeated the almighty metaphysical *Nupe* people whom everyone dreaded so much. This heroic military feat was greatly rewarded and acknowledged by the society.

Omo are a ekun maji do - offspring of who see leopard and never shiver

Omo onise mogun – offspring of who dine with *Ogun*.

Omo ogun elodi – offspring of *Ogun* that has no money.

Omo abi hoyi de oni ebipa – He who vomited in *oyi* river for less privileged persons.

O ni su akale duro bee – He who farms big and long tuber of yam that keeps a man on a stand to peel.

Omo aso onigberaya di oni rele - Offspring of who humbles the proud

Omo atero gbade – one who stretches hand forward to receive the crown.

Omo oye – Offspring of '*oye*'.

Oye, in *Iyamoye*, is a royal name. The position of this street in town is metaphorically compared to a leopard among animals. To show their royal status, more '*Ihahu*' people are praised as owners of numerous beads and receivers of the crown with their hands. The mere mention of beads and crowns is enough to identify people from a royal family in all Yoruba tones.

There are praise poem singers in the king's court. They praise the king every day and summon the royal meeting whenever there is a need for it. The quality of performance suggests material gain for the artist. The person being praised gives the artist the gift of money or kola-nut. He flaps or mops the artist's face with money as a mark of appreciation and joy. According to Ruth Finnegan (1970), the quality of the performance of an artist is very important on every occasion. She says:

In the process of performance, a good artist creates according to the occasion and audience. For instance, a freelance performance is exposed to various facilities to create new panegyric (p.16).

To buttress this, in an occasion such as marriage or naming, the composition of the audience usually varies, from short to tall people, light-skinned to black people, small to big people, and titled to non-titled people. For the artist to be able to make a profit and uphold his fame, the artist must be able to vary his verbal materials and communal accessible pools to suit the various members of the audience. For instance, Adegbite O. (1981) opines that 'in *'oriki'*, a yellow member of the audience could be praised thus- He who is red as palm oil, while a black person could be praised as –Black and Shiny – *Adummadan* (p.39).

No matter the colour, the praise singer must aesthetically and literarily create grandeur out of it to make the listener happy and earn something as a reward for such literary work from the man he is praising.

3.2. Prayer

Most of all, panegyric poems could accommodate short prayers. This is more common in panegyric poetry, especially in the aspect of divinity or when an ancestor is being praised. For instance, in the praise poem *'Esu'*, the personae end the exercise with prayers: *'Esu masemi, omo elomin ni ose – Esu do not torment me. It is another man's son you should torment'*. Also, in the praise poem *'The earth'*, the personae begged the earth not to kill her:

'Eleni ate maseka – The owner of a mat that cannot be folded.

Mo be o ma pami – I beseech thee, do not kill me.

Nko da o – for I do not betray you.

Also, in *'Iroko'* praise poem, the personae end it with prayer:

Alala funfun - He who covers with a white cloth.

Ala tiwon nbo – Owner of 'Ala' that people worship.

Oyadita – ojadiran.

Omo afeyin loja – One that goes to market backward.

Won fun iroko laja – when iroko is given a dog.

Oriro nbinu – Oriro becomes annoyed.

Otete iran baba iroko ni njaja – Whereas, it is Iroko's father that eats dogs.

Dabo o, je kin lowo lomo – I pray, let me be rich and fruitful.

Among the *Iyamoye* people, the *iroko* tree is believed to be possessed a spirit. To date, some people worship the tree as their deity among the Yoruba people. People end their praise poems with prayers because they believe these gods and ancestors still interfere in their affairs.

3.3. Possession

Wealth or possession is another background on which a panegyric poem is woven. Wealth could be valued in terms of money, land, food, cloth, and the number of children. In this light, one can be praised for his wealth, either inherited or otherwise. For instance, *Ajayi's* wealth is exalted in the poem below:

Ajayi ogidi olu - Ajayi Ogidi the Lord.

Ekun baba ode – Leopard head of hunters.

Oni kanga aji pon – Owner of well that people drew at dawn.

Obomi osuru weda – One who washes his sword in blood.

Ekun a pa koro kiri – Leopard that sneaks about.

Eni Ajayi gba gbagba tikole ghatan – Whoever, Ajayi could not deliver

Gunugun ni yio gba oluware – It is vulture that will deliver the person

Okunrin jeje, a buya kj anka – The gentleman whose fighting is dangerous.

A rowo sola – he who has many to adore himself.

In the above lines, *Ajayi's* wealth and possession exalted his prowess in hunting, bravery, skillfulness, and generosity. This shows that in all ramifications in the society, *Ajayi* is not a pushover person; he is a man to reckon with.

4. Conclusion

It is obvious that folklore is significant not only to *Iyamoye* or the Yoruba race alone but to the entire African continent and beyond. The various resources that enhance the performance of panegyric and its contents, as revealed, are peculiar and germane. Unfortunately, this aspect of literature is always overlooked by some armchair critics who do not share the same opinion with the likes of Jack Mapanje, Aporobaro, Okot P'Bitek's idea of literature as an expression of the human mind in words. Little wonder then why less attention is directed by those critics of oral poetry or oral literature against the written form that attracts greater attention.

Beyond this, Africans no longer give much attention to folklore, which is oral in nature, because of the advent of western education and modern technology. The presence of the written aspect of education no doubt has endangered the expectation and relevance of the oral or traditional aspect of it in Africa. Folklore was the vehicle used for the transmission of traditional knowledge, morals, and values initially. This has been neglected because of the temperament of a dynamic African society, especially via electronic media. People have been encouraged and prefer watching cartoons and animal movies on the television to listening to folktales and other forms of folklore.

Thus, technology has beclouded our sense of values in all aspects of our societal life. The contents of panegyric poetry will help a great deal if revived for our societal use. Especially, the vigilantes in our respective societies today are

selected from community hunters. Therefore, the virtues attached to the chants for military might, if evoked and revived by this group, will help them to perform their duties with dignity, commitment, and pride. Also, the privileged or affluent in the society who value the praise poems of possession will lend a helping hand to the poor and needy in the society. This will end or at least reduce suicide terrorism, banditry, or criminality among the poor members of the society.

Finally, this study has attempted to revive the almost dying African traditions by projecting the appraisal of folklore as a medium for a cultural renaissance in African society. Folklore serves as a vehicle for conveying and preserving the cultural beliefs and values of a people. It serves as a check on the sustainability of a culture. It also serves as a tool for molding character and behavior among the people in the society against adultery, fornication, stealing, murder, laziness, etc. It is a means of entertainment after a hard day's work. It has a therapeutic effect on the people (audience) as it transports them from the real world that is full of worries into a world of fantasy. These laudable attributes should not be jettisoned or allowed into extinction.

5. References

- i. Adegbite, O. *Oriki (1981): A Study of Yoruba Music and Social Perception*. USA: University Micro Films International.
- ii. Akporobaro, F.B. O. (2006) *Introduction to African Oral Literature*. Lagos, Princeton Publishing Co. Nigeria.
- iii. Akporobaro, F.B. O - - -
- iv. Finnegan, Ruth. (1970) *Oral Literature in Africa*. Nairobi: Oxford University Press.
- v. Finnegan, Ruth - - -
- vi. Marj, Orié Hogan (2008). *Academics Dictionary of Sociology*. Nigeria: EPP Books Services Limited.
- vii. Ogunjimi, B and Na' Allah, A (1990). *An Introduction to African Oral Literature 1 (Prose)*. Ilorin: University Press.
- viii. Olajubu, Abalogun, et al. (1981). *Oral Poetry in Nigeria* (ed). Lagos: Nigerian Magazine.