

The Functional Perspective in African Oral Performance

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Introduction: The Historical Antecedent

Oral Literature is an important artistic expression that pre-dates literature in all societies of the world. If indeed literature is a portrayal in writing of human perceptions, experiences and sensibilities, it becomes obvious then that man did not wait for literacy to develop before the seeds of artistic perceptions and creativity were sown. Oral literature is one of the most effective means of expressing the intellectual, the physical and the spiritual experiences of man in its most natural form. Ime Ikiddeh describes it as “an expression of man’s innermost being in words, an articulation of the changing mores and modes of communities and times in memorable verbal composition” (Ikiddeh 1987: 134). The situation is the same the world over; in Egypt before the development of the Hieroglyphics, in Babylon before the cuneiform and, even, in ancient Greece and Rome with their world record of artistic innovation and pace setting in the performing arts. Some of the world’s most classic literary works like Homer’s “Iliad”, the Anglo-Saxon “Beowulf” and Chaucer’s “Tales” started from unwritten originals. Ruth Finnegan attests to the fact that millions of people abound in Europe, Africa and Asia who practice the art of literature successfully without having any knowledge of letters. According to her, writing is not essential to either the composition or the preservation of oral literature (Finnegan 1970: 15).

The current practice, especially, in the so-called hi-tech societies, is that as soon as literacy is developed, the oral art forms are abandoned in preference to the written forms, because oral literature is erroneously conceived as primitive. The fact, however, is that it is in these pristine forms of art that the seeds of standard art forms are sown and

nurtured to maturity. It is our aim in this paper to show that there is no function which modern-day literature performs which oral literature does not perform, perhaps better and more effectively. The relative lateness of literacy in getting to Africa has the advantage of making it possible for authentic traditional art forms to remain unobliterated and unadulterated in Africa, more than in other parts of the world. Africa has a long history of oral literature and a large ensemble of traditional arts that makes it possible for her to boast of one of the richest traditions of oral literature. It therefore stands to prove that before the "intrusion" of the white man into Africa, the continent had developed clearly designated traditional art forms that served all the requisite needs of the African society. Yai sees oral literature as "a verbal text, which has the capability of fulfilling an aesthetic function within a society" (Yai 1982: 6).

In articulating and projecting their tenets, African oral artists employ both the verbal and non-verbal means of communication. The latter relies on signs, gestures and symbols to complement verbal communication. In any typical performance therefore, communication, besides speech, is enhanced through such means as props, costume, gestures, mime, movement, dance patterns, music, types of drums used, drumming techniques and acting styles.

Performance Tradition in African Oral Literature

A most important artistic convention that permeates the entire African oral literature, and through which it attains its quintessence is performance. It is meant to be performed before a live audience. Indeed, virtually all oral forms possess dramatic elements, and are actualized only through performance before live audiences. Whether in secular art or in the more serious sacred art forms, dramatization, participation and or appreciation by a live audience are compulsory. Oral literature in Africa, like its written counterpart, has all the conventional literary genres of drama, poetry and prose. Besides the artificial distinction and, unlike its written counterpart, the generic forms in oral literature are performance-oriented. The forms flow into one another in a manner that almost obliterates the generic boundaries in some performances. For example, in a story-telling session (prose) there are song embellishments (poetry), demonstrations, gestures, mime and dancing (drama) all geared towards stimulating the interest of audience. Performance usually comes in-between the story, and may come intermittently from time to time, depending on the interest, skills and antics of the storyteller. In oral poetry, (also performance-oriented), besides the main focus on the beauty of words, much attention is given to theatricality.

In other words, while written poetry is mostly read privately or before audiences, oral poetry in Africa is performed, not privately but before a live audience. The success of an oral poem depends on how well received it is, by the audience. In some cases, a sub-generic form of oral poetry, like the Yoruba hunters' chant, *Ijala* is usually interspersed with prose interjections by (an) accompanying poet (s), and therefore, attains its level of

quality and success from the performance skills and acting styles of the poet (s) before an audience. Satirical songs assume greater significance when real or imagined offences are dramatized during the course of singing. This presupposes a *dramatis persona* that indexicates the culprit(s), the offence(s) committed and the corrector(s) of the culprit's misdemeanor(s). The audience stands out, as the independent and "objective" judge in this magisterial court of a people's oral culture. Heroic chants including the Epic (poetry) are usually interlaced with performances of some of the great achievements of the celebrated hero. The Yoruba hunters chant (*Ijala*) for example, derives much of its strength and glamour from its dramatic spectacle: acrobatic dances, miming of the stalking and killing of animals in the bush, and the shooting of guns (into the air).

Audience Participation in Oral Literature

African oral literature is thus, a pot-pourri of literary genres and conventions, ingeniously blended to complement one another. The element of performance energizes the arts, making them stimulating, interesting and cinematic orchestrations of artistry and topicality. Even with repeated performances of the same story or ritual, the audience is seldom bored. It also facilitates participation in the action by the audience, by way of appreciation and general criticism, especially in the secular art forms. It is this characteristic participatory role of the audience that makes oral performance an organic artistic enterprise. The audience in African oral literature is a highly sensitive and critical one. Sometimes they participate in the dramatic action by singing the chorus to songs, supplying answers to questions raised by the performers, dancing to the music and sometimes supplying the music by clapping, stomping or hitting two sticks or other objects together to create fine percussive effects. Majority of oral performances deliberately make provision for the role of the audience. In some performances like the Yoruba *Ijala* there is the call-response system in which the actor calls on the audience to respond to a song or performance:

Egbe ode	[You members of the hunter's guild,
E ó gberin tàbí e ò gberin?	Will you join me in a song or not?]

The audience is expected to make a choral response:

A ó gberin	[We shall join you in the song]
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This usually comes at the point where the poet changes from mono- performance (chanting) to responsorial singing involving his audience. It is meant to alert the audience of its new role as chorus and gain its full concentration. Members of the audience have to pick/learn the lines with which they will respond to the song from the poet's own lines. It is also done to establish a psychological rapport, the right mood and a kind of

solidarity between the audience and the performer – a very important factor if he must make a success of his “outing”.

The audience is such that can stop a performance mid-stream and effect corrections, if the dramatic action is wrong or the information being disseminated by the artist is false or misleading. This is common in “*Ijálá*” and “*Wéré*” art forms. A member of the audience may stand, pause the performance, supply the correct or the missing data or demonstrate the correct movements. Since this oral “criticism” is an acceptable convention that is integral to the form of the art, it breeds no ill will. Rather, the artist acknowledges and thanks the ‘intruding’ member of the audience, and resumes his art. However, when the artist has cause to disagree with the criticism of a member of audience, the ball is left in the court of the elders present there. The elders are the arbiters in such disagreements. They use their wealth of experience to resolve such controversies. Having witnessed such performances several times, and as elder-custodians of the events or stories being enacted in the performance, the elders often find it quite easy resolving such matters.

This is why Amadou Hampate Ba (as quoted by Yai in *Ife Studies in African Literature No. 1*, edited by O. Ogunba) equates the death of an old African who dies with a library that is set ablaze. It is also the reason why performers always pay tribute to elders, predecessors and other influential people at the commencement of their performances. With the characteristic spontaneous criticism or appreciation, or complementary participation of the audience in the artistic performance (much akin to the Brechtian Epic theatre), the performer naturally gives a lot of consideration to the audience who may embarrass unserious performers by booing or walking out on them. Indeed the size, composition and quality of an audience determine the nature and quality of performance. Performances are normally adapted to suit the taste of the participating audience. This adaptability is possible because much of the performance in African oral literature is improvisational. When the audience is composed largely of women, it is customary to expunge eerie, blood-curdling scenes that may, possibly, scare or embarrass women from performances. When young adults form a large percentage of the audience, it is not uncommon to have performances imbued with fashion, sexual anecdotes and other things that are naturally of interest to the young generation. The fear of how an audience may react forces the performer to ensure high standards in performance.

Control Measures to Enhance Artistic Quintessence

African oral literature emphasizes perfection. In every society it is only the most skilful people that belong to the guild of artists. To attain appreciable level of quintessence in arts, there is recognition of natural talent and ability, nurtured and refined from an early age when natural talents are identified. Similarly, long years of apprenticeship and training also guarantee a high quality of artistic performance. Before an oral artist could attain the level at which he could operate independently in society, he must have undergone a long period of training under the tutelage of a master. The length depends on the type

of art, the different levels of training required, and the degree of commitment of the apprentice. Yoruba professional drummers and other performing artists spend periods ranging from five to fifteen years. The *Ifa* literary artist may spend up to nine years or more. An *Ijala* chanter may spend up to twelve years in training. We gathered this information at various field projects carried out in different parts of Nigeria.

Restriction of arts to special guilds is another traditional measure taken to ensure artistic excellence. Some oral art forms are restricted to particular guilds, outside which an artist cannot perform. This restriction is especially peculiar to the sacred or religious art forms. The objective is often to protect the sacredness of the art against misuse, unseriousness and profanity. The masquerade cult in every African society is an example of this. It is the guilds' responsibility to regulate the arts and conduct of their members through often-rigid rules and regulations. They ensure that their art is not adulterated and that the interest of the public is protected at all times. Although some masquerades perform profane rituals and dances to entertain audiences, they nonetheless still belong to strict professional guilds. Other guilds include Hunters' guild, Guild of oracular/divination poets and Guild of Drummers.

Closely related to the above is the concentration of specific art forms in some families on account of professionalism, religious roles, etc. Some artistic functions that manifest in sacred rituals are often made the exclusive preserve of certain families in society. Such families are saddled with the responsibility of organizing festivals involving such rituals. Even when the entire society is involved in such festivals, these families serve as the pivot around which the entire festival revolves. In the traditional society for example, there is a family directly in charge of each of the gods in the society's pantheon. It is from such families that the chief priest emerges.

The related art forms and their performances are also centered on the same family. Similarly, another Yoruba example - the drumming profession - is the exclusive preserve of the *Ayàn*, while the family that is traditionally entrusted with the masquerade arts is the *Òjè*. These families have the responsibility of preserving the related art forms and ensuring their perpetuation through the ages. The traditional measures are for purposes of ensuring, among others, that oral literature does not encourage half-skills but that it insists on artistic excellence. In all its generic forms, there is close attention to intricate patterns and the minutest details of aesthetics. Visual effects utilized include painting, drawings, carvings, costumes, etc., which are used to embellish and heighten the aesthetic experience in oral performances.

Functionality of African Oral Performances

Oral literature in Africa is used for definite purposes in the society. It serves similar functions as written literature. Apart from the aesthetic function of satisfying the emotional needs of man for the beautiful, it is used to educate, inform, promote unity and solidarity,

entertain, propagate ideas, norms and values, and to correct anomalies in society. Some oral art forms are also used as psychotherapeutic agents to solve human problems and crisis in society. We shall therefore briefly examine some of these roles.

Oral performances are in most cases embellished with music and dance. There are displays of talent in drumming and dancing. African dance involves graceful movements to rhythm. The songs encompass a harmonious blending of voices in rhythmic sound patterns. These are, sometimes supplemented with acrobatic displays, wise sayings and pun. The bulk of profane performances found particularly in satirical songs are targeted towards entertainment. Even in the most sacred performances, there are always elements of entertainment. Entertainment is seen as very essential to human development as a kind of recreation after a hard day's work, to remove boredom, to alleviate stress and sorrow and as a time-filler.

Furthermore, in every traditional society in Africa, education is made an integral part of oral literature. It is the responsibility of the oral artist to teach the norms and values of society to the younger generation, and remind the older generation about its social and political responsibilities, among other things. The oral artist is a relentless chronicler who mentally documents historical events in his society. He is the custodian and repository of tradition and wisdom. He narrates tales to teach traditional mores and virtue, and show reasons why the youths must shun vice. He finds the folktale, especially the fable, most useful in the teaching of morals to children. The fable tradition heightens the children's curiosity, stimulates their interest, and through mental images, orchestrates the action that is being described, making them always remember it vividly. Epics, legends and heroic chants are also used to celebrate and ultimately propagate uniqueness and virtues of forebears, which the society wants its members to emulate. The Djeli (griot) of Western Sudan used to follow the king to the war-front to spur him through heroic chants into heroic action, and to record the event for posterity. In many African cultures traditional performers of oral art are retained in the courts of eminent traditional rulers. Such court performers include the Yoruba *Akigbe* in Oba's palaces, the griot among the Mandika, the Umusizi of Rwanda, the Zulu Imbongi and the kwadwumfo of the Ashanti kings in Ghana.

Closely related to these are the social poets who comment on events in society, pointing out the right values and warning against vices. Such poets perform their art before live audiences, sometimes using improvisational methods. Their works usually contain useful advice, suggestions and visionary warnings about the consequences of a continual perpetration of vices. Here the oral performer represents the modern day press – watchdog of the people, and custodian of the truth and the ideal. The Yoruba *Akewi*, the Izubongo performer of the Zulu, the Malinke praise singer and the Gikuyu Gicaandi player are few examples of this class of oral performers. Ngugi wa Thiong'o vividly illustrates this role in *Devil on the Cross* (1988):

And then Wariinga's mother came to me when dawn was breaking and in tears she beseeched me: Gicaandi player reveal all that is hidden...

Gicaandi player, Prophet of Justice, reveal what now lies concealed by darkness... This story is an account of what I, Prophet of Justice, saw with these eyes and heard with these ears when I was borne to the rooftop of the house... (7)

The "rooftop" symbolizes the high pedestal on which the oral performing artist is elevated, by virtue of his conscientious sensibilities; the height from where he is able to see all and judge all. The oral performer thus becomes a molder of public opinion and the conscience of the society.

Similarly, some of the oral performances in Africa are used for political purposes of consolidating the political order of the society. Some are used to pay homage and allegiance to reigning monarchs, and to ensure social and political stability. These are often manifested in dramatic rituals and festivals revolving around the personality of the king and his subjects. Such festivals afford opportunities for the reigning monarch to know what his subject feels about him or her. The esteem with which such festivals are held and the attendant pomp and pageantry attest to the popularity or otherwise of the ruler. Examples of such hegemonic festivals (Ogunba 1982) can be found in some Yoruba towns. They include the Obanta festival of Ijebu-Ode and the Odun Oba festival of Ondo. A prominent feature of each of these two festivals is the paying of homage to the king by the traditional chieftains. In a way, the festival is a way of assuring the monarch that he is still in political and social control of the community. Conventionally, traditional festivals in Africa are replete with elements of performance.

A very important sociological function of oral performance in Africa is its enhancement of economic productivity. In every society, there are oral performances and work songs, which are designed to encourage people to work hard. Such songs and performances teach the dignity of labor, the importance and reward of hard work, and the disadvantages of laziness. There are also work songs that are used either individually or during communal labor to ease apparent tension and make labor easy to accomplish. At communal works involving large sections of society, the oral performers have roles to play. Their contribution to the labor is the music they supply to make the work progress. Camara Laye (1959) registered this important role in the communal harvesting of rice at Tindican:

When the signal had been given, the reapers used to set out, and I would fall into step with them, marching to the rhythm of the tom-tom. The young men used to toss their glittering sickles high in the air and catch them as they fell, shouting aloud for the simple pleasure of hearing their own strong young voices, and sketching a dance step or two on the heels of the tom-tom players. (Laye 1959: 46)

The tom-tom, which had been following us as we advanced into the field, kept time with our singing. We sang like a choir, often very high, with great bursts of melody,

and sometimes very low, that we could hardly be heard. And our weariness would disappear, the heat growing less. (Laye 1959: 50)

The economic import of the oral performance in Africa could also be ascertained when one realizes that a lot of oral performers have their art as their sole means of livelihood. Some of them have become very wealthy and famous as a result of their art. It is instructive also to note that some oral performances are used to enforce law and order in society, thereby complementing the system of justice in traditional societies. Although such enforcements are non-formal, they are usually more effective than the formal traditional judicial structures. This is achieved through the use of satirical songs as checks and balances against misdemeanor in society. Satirical songs are particularly effective in punishing those who escape formal punishments because they were not caught red-handed in their crime. These are criminals against whom society has no concrete or circumstantial proof of crime, although the traditional community is convinced that they committed the crime. It is also effective against those offences that are considered too minor for public prosecution; for example a husband that is in the habit of secretly taking meat from his wife's pot of soup at night, making the wife to suspect the children and house rats. According to Donatus Nwoga (1981), while major crimes against society are penalized seriously with judicial execution, being ostracized or being sold into slavery, minor conflicts and crimes are often left unpunished. Satirical songs therefore take up the challenge of completing the judicial responsibility of taking care of such offences. Donatus Nwoga in an article titled "The Igbo Poet and Satire", contained in Abalogu et al (Eds) *Oral Poetry in Nigeria* attests to this fact.

The masquerade arts, a dramatic form that is common in most traditional African societies also upholds the system of justice in some traditional societies. In the masquerade arts, human beings disguise their identity by wearing masks and special costumes that cover their faces and some other parts of their bodies. To make their anonymity effective, some masquerades speak in guttural voices that make it impossible for even their closest relations to recognize who's the voices are. This is the conventionally accepted speech pattern of the ancestral spirits, which masquerades represent in virtually all societies in Africa. Although it is common knowledge that human beings occupy the masks, it is believed that the spirits of the ancestors already possess them.

In many African societies, masquerades sing satirical songs to check the excesses of very important people in society. The satirical butts include tyrannical monarchs, wealthy or influential people, or powerful or dreaded herbalists. The "visiting" spirits of the ancestors (masquerades) are placed on a pedestal that is higher than any mortal's, the king inclusive and are therefore, treated with utmost reverence. As "visiting ancestors", the masquerades cannot be censored, blamed, banned or challenged by any mortal, irrespective of the status of such mortal. They therefore hide under the façade and the anonymity, which masquerades enjoy to pass judgments, and in using biting invectives

on powerful individuals whom no member of the community could confront. There are however provisions among the masquerades guild to censure any masquerade that misuses this privilege.

In traditional Igbo societies, in Nigeria, masquerades constitute the judges in the highest court of the land. They arbitrate on account of very knotty issues and cases – where mortal judges have failed. This is graphically represented in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in the court of Evil forest and his jury of eight “egwugwus” or masquerades (Achebe 1958: 64-66). Their decisions are always final. Beside these roles, the masquerade in Africa is an epitome of theatricality. He is the principal actor in a total theatre: the spectators become his audience and his antics the dramatic action. His costume, props, dance, music and acting are usually so stimulating that he always has large followers and admirers.

The effectiveness of satirical songs could be seen in the fact that satirical butts or victims were, and still are, known to have been so disgraced as to ingloriously go into self-exile. Society ostracizes some of them and others live in disgrace for a long time after being so ridiculed. However, there are other agents of satirical chants like the youths and young women during such festivals as “Okeibadan” in Ibadan or “Udje” in Urhobo land. In essence, satirical songs put a check on people with criminal tendencies in society.

Many of the oral performances in Africa are psychotherapeutic and capable of obliterating stress and tension, averting boredom, and, on a more serious note, ensuring feelings of solidarity between man and his environment, and between him and the conceived hierarchy of the transcendental order. While secular performances are usually for purposes of entertainment and social interaction, the sacred ritual performances take care of the spiritual needs of man in society. Much of the therapeutic uses of oral performance could be found in oracular or divination poetry. This is used to cure real and imagined ailments, especially psychosomatic ailments.

The oral performance is also used to energize, by way of encouragement, warriors at battlefronts. Among the Bantu and Zulu, a military formation is incomplete without oral performers who inspire the soldiers to epical feats or heroic exploits. Among the Yoruba of South Western Nigeria, the propaganda of warfare is handled by groups of oral performers and led by talking drummers. Aside boosting the morale of the soldiers at war, the drummers instill fear in the enemy who may choose to surrender out of fear. This act is akin to modern psychological warfare in which dud shells/artillery (the type used for ceremonials) are fired on enemy territories to create panic, and force the enemy to surrender.

The oral performance is sometimes used in the civil society to attain psychological relief from the tension of rigid rules and regulations. Like a comic relief, some oral performances are designed to make man break the law occasionally, with impunity and within socially accepted limits. It is conceived that by nature it is certainly impossible for man to always uphold laws and regulations, due to man's bestial instinct (Freud 1971:18-32). It could be argued that it is when there are some occasional allowances for

breaking such laws that the laws would be firm and effective. Perhaps, it is the necessity to release bottled emotions and frustrations resulting from imposed restrictions that informed such oral performances as the Okeibadan festival in Ibadan (Festival of the hill), the Udje of the Urhobo people and the Edi festival in Ile-Ife. These three festivals, which primarily are for the spiritual cleansing of their societies against all evil (sickness, disease, war, natural disasters, premature death etc.) so that progress and prosperity might prevail, also feature sexual scatologies. In the case of the Okeibadan festival, it also involves legalized looting of the wares of traders, who instead of taking part in the festival, display such wares for sale. The festivals involve the singing of vulgar songs, participation in obscene dances, and wanton displays of rascality. The festivals involve everybody in society, both the old and the young. The male and female sex organs become objects of ridicule in well-orchestrated songs and dances. This is, however, for the period the festivals are on. Immediately after the festivals, having achieved the desired cathartic or comic relief, the very rigid codes of conduct are reverted to.

Some forms of oral performances are designed to achieve both physical and mental fitness in the performers. Such arts often involve acrobatic displays and rigorous body movements and contortions, all to the rhythm of music. The *Atilogwu* dancers of the Igbo people in Nigeria are frontliners in this art. Others include, among the Yoruba, the *Ajangila* dancers from Oyo, the *Alagbe* from Kwara State and *Bata* drummers and dancers from various parts of Yoruba land. Research has shown that artists that are engaged in these arts usually have radiant health, very sharp reflexes and long life, as a result of the perpetual state of mental and physical alertness that their art imposes on them. This conclusion was reached after various visits and observation of oral performers whose art involves acrobatic displays. An example is Chief Ojeyemi Olota, a 93-year old *Bata* dancer and head of the masquerade cult in Ikirun, Osun State of Nigeria. At Ile-Oluji, a town in Ondo State during Owe festival in September 1994, an 85-year old man ran a race as part of the rituals. The old man sprinted at an incredible speed that few adolescents could achieve. Although many observers attributed the performance to use of charms, it is our belief that physical health and training has a hand in it too.

Conclusion

So far, it could be seen that the oral performance in Africa is dynamic and geared towards serving specific functional purposes including social, economic, religious, political, and psychological, in the day-to-day existence of the traditional African society. It is of more relevance to the African society than any of the western-conceived literary genres can ever be. It is in these oral performances that the true spirit and pulse of traditional Africa can be found. It is obvious that these oral art forms (orature) perform in traditional African societies all those functions performed by Literature in western societies. It is indeed a rare privilege that, rather than allow Literature to supplant orature (Oral Literature) in Africa, the two exist side by side with their abundant advantages.

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