

**NEW INSIGHTS INTO ORAL LITERATURE: THE DAYS OF THE  
WEEK IN A FOLKTALE:  
CRISIS IN THE CALENDER OF THE IBIBIO OF NIGERIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

The Ibibio are an ethnic group in the South-East of Nigeria with a culture that is very ancient. The Ibibio weeks, one of seven days and another comprising eight days, regulate the life, the economy and the traditions of the people.

A drama between the two forms of the week is represented in a tale entitled "The days of the week". In this paper, the crisis which the tale narrates encounters and explains real life experiences among the Ibibio.

**RESUME** (*French*)

Cette communication discute et justifie le statut littéraire de la littérature orale, que jusqu' à une époque récente n'a pu être admise chez le phénomène digne de son étymologie, "littera". De nouvelles perceptions du sujet sont indiquées dans la distinction établie entre la littérature orale et d'autres composants de la grande famille qu'on appelle le folklore, ainsi que par la façon dont nous présentons les différents genres, surtout les mythes, les légendes, les contes et les fables.

Oral Literature exists in every culture and is almost as old as the language in which it is formulated. It has journeyed with history over thousands of years practically unaltered. On account of its oral nature and the corresponding dependence on human memory for its existence and actualization, one is tempted to associate its fortunes with fragility. Thus while it has remained vibrant in some societies, the exercise of the tradition has become faint or almost extinct in others.

The state of the participation of different communities in the phenomenon notwithstanding, new insights into the nature and functions of oral literature have in recent years generated tremendous interest in the subject. In this

paper, we shall try to apprehend the essence of oral literature with a view to justifying its status as that complex, profound reality called Literature.

#### THE ORAL AS LITERATURE

Until about the end of the last century, literature was recognized only in its written forms. This can be explained by reference to the root of the word, Literature. "Littera" in Latin means the letters of the alphabet. This etymology confines the meaning of literature to written and by extension, readable forms. Thus, "litteratura", which means writing or teaching of letters restricts the concept to manifestations coded in letters. Both in its specific usage as structured, creative, verbal entity, or its general application to whatever exists in "scripted" form, literature has been synonymous with the tradition of writing. Thus written works in varied disciplines - computer, medicine, mathematics etc - can be referred to as literature. This does not mean that writing in science and technology can be confused with literary works; it stresses the value of writing in all literatures.

In other words, until very recent times, the idea of literature being oral, to most cultural minds, sounded like an ambiguity. How can "littera" be oral? In the words of Ruth Finnegan: "The concept of Oral Literature is an unfamiliar one to most people brought up in cultures which, like those of contemporary Europe, lay stress on the idea of literacy and written traditions" (1976 1). However on close examination of the facts surrounding the issue, it becomes clear that oral literature has always existed.

The terminology, "Oral Literature" was invented in 1881 by Paul Sebillot for a book he edited entitled "Litterature orale de Basse-Normandie". Though the terminology is recent, Oral Literature is ancient. Historically, literature preceded writing because men were expressing themselves orally long before they invented writing. In ancient Greece, before the adoption of the Phoenician alphabet in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B. C all their literature was oral. Homer's Iliad and Odyssey circulated initially as oral literature before being put into written form. In Indian culture, the Oral composition of the Rig-Veda dates back to about 1,200 B.C whereas the written text came only about the 5<sup>th</sup> century B. C. Thus, with the emergence of oral literature, certain facts came to light about the perception of literature itself, namely that literature is not necessarily contemporaneous with writing, that there does exist literature outside the tradition of writing and that of the two literary dimensions, the oral is more ancient than the written.

#### ORAL LITERATURE AND FOLKLORE

Oral literature is an important aspect of folklore. The word folklore, comprising "folk" (people) and "lore" (science) suggests that it is the science of a people or race. The terminology was introduced by W. J. Thomas in a

letter he wrote to the Revue "Athenaeum", in August 1946, under the pseudonym of Ambrose Merton. The word came to designate the body of knowledge, the customs and arts of a people, but the precise frontiers of the concept have not been clearly defined. The result is that from one country to another and from one individual to another, folklore has assumed a variety of meanings and interpretations.

One interpretation of folklore includes music, dances, customs, crafts, painting, sculpture, cookery etc. Another perception of folklore focuses on the oral and comprises tales, legends, myths, proverbs, fables, oral history. In this case, the emphasis is on language and tradition. A wider meaning of the terminology involves entertainment, arts, discourses and traditional practices and activities of a people.

From these attempts, it is obvious that a scientific and comprehensive definition of folklore is yet to be provided. However, the examples so far proposed have made it possible to group the elements of folklore into two broad categories, that is, verbal and non verbal folklore. Consequently, according to Simonsen, non verbal folklore includes beliefs, superstition, cults, rites, customs, festivals, games, dances, customs, musical instruments etc. While verbal folklore is concerned with genres that employ language such as fables, tales, legends, proverbs myths, songs, epic, ballads etc (1981 11). In other words, oral literature is the verbal component of the bulky corpus called folklore which more and more has attracted the attention of anthropologists, ethnologists, linguists, literary scholars etc.

#### THE GENRES THAT CONSTITUTE ORAL LITERATURE

Oral literature uses words in oral expression, that is, it is transmitted from mouth to ear. But human language as exercised in Oral literature is fashioned by the norms of the tradition into genres. An oral genre can be poetry or prose depending on the form and level of language adopted. Thus, the poetic genres include panegyric, elegy, epic, lullaby etc.

#### THE PANEGYRIC

One of the most widely used genres in oral poetry in Africa is the panegyric. It is a praise poem often associated with rulership, power, achievement and status. It is performed widely in Africa among different races: Hausa, Yoruba, Ibibio, Ibo, Nupe, the peoples of Eastern and Southern Africa etc.

The poems can be performed on different occasions and for varied reasons. They often proclaim a successful initiatic rite when an individual graduates from one status into another. The poem extols his qualities and achievements. It is recited at the conclusion of a fruitful expedition like hunting, or more importantly to celebrate military exploits. Such poems are also enacted to

publicize the accomplishment of an individual, a family or a clan or the dignity of an office.

Monarchy, royalty and the zones of power are the most popular figures in such praise poems. The poems intervene on formal occasions to consolidate the power and status of the ruler. They are also recited when someone is taking a title or during festive occasions to publicize the importance, power and person of the ruler.

A regular feature of the panegyric is the names given to the personage in the poem. Some of these names are those of inanimate objects like the rock, thunder or wind. Frequently too, names of animals or parts of the body of animals are used. An invincible wrestler can be addressed as “a cat whose back never touches the earth”, while beautiful physical traits can be qualified as “enyin unen”, that is, the eyes of chicken, among the Ibibio.

The mode of performance of praise poems is peculiar to each society. In this regard, Finnegan’s comments deserve to be quoted” “The style of recitation varies between the unaccompanied forms characteristic of the Southern Bantu praises, those with fairly minimal accompaniment on some stringed instrument (apparently typical of Eastern Bantu poetry and of some peoples in West Africa such as the Bambara), and that in which the accompaniment is stressed (usually percussion of wind). This last type is wide-spread in West Africa states and its precise form is sometimes a significant aspect of the attribution of status implied in the praise” (1976 117)

The composition of the poem is perceived, to a large extent, through the reciter’s delivery. The passage from one sentence or group of words to another is often marked by a slight pause. These small units of sentences and word groups build up into loosely knit stanzas such that the structure is a succession of these components without undue preoccupation with the internal cohesion of the facets, though rimes and repetition of elements are frequent. The following example from Mali translated from French by the writer of this paper, welcomes adolescents home after the initiation of circumcision in the bush where they lived for a long period, totally isolated from their family and underwent rites which equipped them to conquer pain and fear.

I salute you all! Can I enter!  
 I am the frame of your threshold  
 I am the pillar of your house  
 Beautiful women, my lioness, cast your dinghy  
 Roar, lioness! You who don’t resonate  
 Today is the day for mothers who have given birth to children  
 Just open the eyes; nothing more

Today my grand son entered the bush  
The entire bush was illuminated  
Peace to the bull from Mali  
The effort has edified the house, he entered as of right  
Night will come to unite us;  
The morning star at the beginning of morning  
The evening star towards evening is risen  
The mind of the thunderstorm has blown, the clouds have threatened  
Behind the home of the father of this child  
Today plans have hidden the sun (Kesteloot 10)

This poem contains most of the elements we have discussed so far that are usually found in the panegyric: explosion of joy, praises and praise names, proclamation and validation of a more than ordinary socio-political figure, a loose structure etc.

Praise poems are specialized art form which involves both composition and performance. In the execution of the panegyric, three categories of artists can be identified: the professionals, the roving specialists and the non professionals. The first category refers to professional performers usually attached to royal courts in the days of the kingdoms of several African states. Besides the praise poems, they also preserve and transmit the genealogies of the rulers and the history of the land. The roving professionals are highly skilled artists known as “griots” in Francophone West African countries. Like the court poets, they serve the courts and earn a living from their art. Yet they move from place to place. While they retain a repertory of “texts” of their tradition, they also compose on the spur of the moment as the occasion demands. The non specialists are those who do not engage themselves full-time in poetry. Some of them may be highly skilled in the art while others are much less so. They compose and perform in response to certain circumstances and as occasions demand.

In some respects, praise poems entertain a relationship with another genre, the elegy. One notable area of coincidence is in the praise itself. Many funeral dirges, though dominated by grief, are loaded with praises for the departed. Thus, despite the differences between the two, a major element of the panegyric is reflected in the elegy.

#### ELEGY

Sorrow and grief are powerful human sentiments. In other words, they are a major source of poetry. This explains why elegiac poetry, the poetry of lamentation, is so widespread. It occurs in all parts of Africa and is performed during funeral and memorial rites. Unlike the panegyric whose association with monarchy and political systems tends to shape them into specialized

forms practiced by professionals, elegiac poetry has no political affiliation and is generally perfumed by non specialists. Women are more active in elegy than men, perhaps because weeping and wailing are considered, in some societies, to be typical female tendencies.

The major occasions for elegy are during funeral rites or memorial ceremonies. The dirge may be sung while the corpse is being prepared for burial or around the location where the body is laid. It can be expressed through sobs, songs or weeping. In some cases, drumming and musical instruments accompany the poem which can be chanted by an individual or a group led by a soloist. Men occasionally present the elegy and in some cultures, like that of the Efik in Cross River State, professional mourners feature in the exercise.

Elegy contains praises; these may be expressed indirectly or through names, including the names of ancestors, thereby associating the deceased with their prestige and achievements. Reflections on death are also regular in elegies. Death may be perceived as a journey into very distant lands or as a change of abode where family life continues with the ancestors. Depending on the vision of death, the song may express “farewell” or formulate prayers or wishes for the ears of the departed relation. The singer’s attitude can be that of profound grief, of resignation to the inevitable or of bewilderment. Most of these elements are contained in the dirge of the Ibo warriors to their leader, Ojea who, at the moment of their victory, was giving up the ghost.

Ojea, noble Ojea, look round before you depart  
 Ojea, see, the fight is over;  
 Fire has consumed the square and then the home,  
 Ojea, see, the fight is over.  
 Ojea, Brother Ojea, ponder and look,  
 Ojea, see, the fight is over;  
 If rain soaks the body, will the clothes be dry?  
 Ojea, ah! The fight is over (Finnegan 149 – 150)

Since elegies are normally composed for a particular individual, in circumstances that are to a large extent unique, generalized use of a dirge is not rampant. In fact most of the elegiac poems are ephemeral. One therefore cannot speak of standardized forms for the genre. However, from Nketia’s collection and analysis of “Funeral dirges of the Akan people”, types of elegies have emerged. The scope of this paper does not permit us to develop this issue of the structure of elegies.

EPIC, LULLABY AND OTHER FORMS OF ORAL POETRY

The panegyric and the elegy derive from contexts that may be referred to as special, whereas oral poetry in Africa overflows this restrictive or limited occurrence as it accompanies almost every aspect of our tradition. In this respect, two factors should be borne in mind. The first of these is rhythm. In the worlds of Jean Mazel: Africa is first and foremost rhythm (1975:266) rhythm permeates all aspects of life in Africa; its pulsations find expression in songs, drumming and dancing. These three are almost spontaneous activities in Africa. The songs may be popular, familiar forms or pieces invented for a particular occasion. Thus, one witnesses widespread and innovative occurrences of oral poetry in varied circumstances; the pounding of millet by two Hausa women, to the rhythm of their songs, the chant of men whose melody regulates the cadence of their paddles as they row across a river their canoe, the chant and clapping of Ibibio spectators as they urge on two contestants in a wrestling match. In these and numerous other songs which accompany different types of physical activities, rhythm is prominent.

Another factor that engenders poetry is the rite of passage. Even the rite of puberty which comes early in life entails, in many cultures in Africa, much secrecy, seclusion in a forest, elaborate teachings, religious ceremonies and spiritual exercises. Following the rite of puberty all important phases of human existence are marked by other rites of passage. Important elements in all these rites are songs, incantations, chants and the exercise of certain verbal formulae. Thus initiatic rites are fertile in oral poetry. Different rites, arranged in degrees according to their importance, sanction initiation into the major professions like hunting, smiting, farming, fishing etc.

Among the Ibibio, for example, hunting expeditions carried out during daytime by a team of hunters is an occasion for the use of oral poetry. "Akwa lkot Ewa", the leader or the group does not carry a gun but directs the operation through loud chants that transmit incantations and instructions. When they are eating for the first time in the season a new farm product, members of an Ibibio family will recite.

Nkit k'isua  
Mbom k'isua  
Asua me adia akpa  
Ami ndia ndu

The literal translation of this poem is:

I see it once a year (seasonally)  
I encounter it once a year  
My enemy eats it and dies  
I eat it and live

The different rites of passage, by initiating into the use of specially structured verbal forms, employable in special but varied situations in life, accounts for much of the oral poetry in African cultures.

Rhythm and initiatic rites, the one by inspiring the choice of words and the tempo of verbal expressions, the other by the proliferation of liturgical use of language in traditional societies, have brought into existence, many different forms of oral poetry. Most of these are ephemeral, created for a specific occasion without being adopted for application elsewhere, while a different destiny assigns the others to generalized and permanent use.

One of the most popular genres in Western literary tradition is the epic. But, curiously, this genre, according to some sources, does not feature in the African experience. In the words of Ruth Finnegan: "Epic is often assumed to be the typical poetic form of non-literate peoples, or at least of non-literate peoples at a certain stage. Surprisingly, however, this does not seem to be borne out by the African experience. At least in the more obvious sense of a relative long narrative poem, epic hardly seems to occur in sub-saharan Africa apart from forms like the (written) Swahili *utenzi* which are directly attributable to Arabic literary influence" (1976 108).

Some definitions, though they retain the regular elements of the epic – birth and exploits of the hero, birth of his people, death of the hero – have discarded the criterion of "poetry" as essential to the existence of the genre. This tendency can be seen in the numerous published works on the epic in black Africa.

It is to be noted that "*Soundjata*" ou l'*épopée*" mandingue was translated (Niane 1966) from the tradition of the "griots" who are musicians and poets, and that versification is not the allness of poetry. According to I. M. G. Le Clézio in his preface to "*Chaka; une épopée bantoue*" (1981:7) a poet is one who makes us see the fabulous spectacle and hear the legend of the birth of a people, one who still speaks the language of the gods. Finnegan's assertion that "All in all, epic poetry does not seem to be a typical African form" (1976 110) cannot be sustained.

Another form of popular poetry is the lullaby. Generally, a lullaby translates the natural intimacy and tenderness of a mother to her child, expressed through a song or some form of recitation. In most cases, it is intended to lull the baby to sleep, which cannot be achieved indiscriminately with any type of poetry. The structure of lullabies is therefore designed to produce a soothing effect; it is characterized by repetition of sounds, a rhythm that prompts the rocking of a child, soft vowel sound and sometimes, onomatopoeia. But the care of the body is not always in the hands of the mother. Grandmothers,



aunts, hired servants, diverse categories of relations are often entrusted with the care of the child. Their lullaby is very likely to betray their attitude towards both or either of the parents of the child. One may therefore find in the lullabies from this class of artists, elements of criticism.

The children themselves, depending on their age, participate in the creation of oral poetry. This may be regular children's songs that accompany dancing or verses used in their games. It may also feature as riddles where the forms of the question and answers are fixed. One popular form of children's poetry is the rhymes which enhance the development of language competence. Language skill is also exercised in short poems made of words that closely resemble one another. An example from Ibibio is:

Afia ofon afon a – afion

It's literal meaning is: white clothe is the best cloth for moonlight. The emphasis here is not so much on the sense, but on pronouncing correctly and ensuring the fine distinction in the articulation of words that are phonetically similar.

Thus oral poetry comprises varied genres and evokes many different realities of human existence. Created by men, women and children, it confirms in non-literature societies, the authenticity of literature outside the tradition of writing. This is also true of prose forms in pre-literate cultures.

#### PROSE

In oral literature, prose forms are more widely used than verses. In terms both of performers and occasions, they are less regulated by professionalism and restrictions than the forms in verse. Even proverbs, though associated with age and considered to be "masculine", have often been declared by children and women. Nor is the narration of folktales the prerogative of "kids" and "old wives". In African cultures, prose forms are often interspersed with songs which summon clapping of hands, drumming and dancing. However, prose forms are distinct categories in their structure and execution. They include riddles, genealogies, oral history, proverbs, fables, folktales, myths and legends. Each of these genres is found in nearly every culture in the world and is defined by certain universal traits which distinguish one from others not only in its literary status but also in the frequency of its enactment within the social group.

#### RIDDLES

Riddles are commonly exercised by children and involve the ability to discover the veiled analogy between two realities. But older people also use riddles in diverse occasions. In fact most of the riddles children employ are

invented by adults. The emphasis on “calculation” to bring out an answer tends to rob riddles of much of their artistic luster. But riddles entertain close affinity with other literary genres. Like proverbs, they are concise and brief; they relate with poetry in their expressivity through rhythm and sound.

Riddles are a discourse composed of two segments: a question and an answer. One form of the interrogation may be a statement in a language that veils the identity of the object that constitutes the answer. An example of this was that of a nursery school teacher who told his pupils of somebody standing with a hat over his head. The response was the small letter *i*. More frequent than this type is the question-answer riddle. For example: What is it that without hands and legs fetches enough water to fill a pot? The answer is: the coconut. A third type of riddles is one where the entire discourse consists of two words – a one word question and a one word answer. From Ruth Finnegan, we cite two examples of this. “Invisible! – The Wind”, “Imnumerable-Grass” (1976 427)

Differences between African and Western riddles have also been indicated by Finnegan. “The popular European or American picture of a riddle is of an explicit question to which a respondent must try to puzzle out the correct answer. African riddles are not altogether like this. The “question” is usually a statement; the listeners are not directly asked to guess but are merely faced with an allusive sentence referring analogously to something else which they must then try to identify. The point, furthermore, is normally in some play of images visual, acoustic, or situation, rather than as in many English riddles, in puns or plays on words” (Finnegan 427)

#### GENEALOGY

Another important genre in oral literature is the genealogy whose concern is the lineage of which it perpetuates the pedigree. Each member of the family is expected to be acquainted with his line of ancestors. Considering the elasticity of African families, mastery of the entire chain cannot be expected of all the descendants. While procrastination, frailty of the human memory and negligence are not without effect on each one’s acquaintance with the lines of descent, there are usually members in a family that are highly versed in their genealogy. While the “groits” are the professionals, the most learned in genealogies are usually the elders, the eldest son or some other leader in the family.

Genealogies are important by reason of their role in African traditional religion. Since they are concerned with ancestry and in a society where commerce with the ancestors is widely believed in, genealogies are not confined to the domain of memory or to the silence of pages. Thus, prayers and invocations are often addressed to relations already in their graves.

The literary value of genealogies is striking in traditional societies where the names are often recited. The verbal orchestration and phonic texture of the common names as well as the figurative or symbolic charge they usually carry make of the rendering of genealogies a representation akin to oral poetry. Occasions for the release of genealogies are not lacking in traditional societies. The pouring of libation rarely fails to call to some of the ancestors to assist or intervene in the affairs of the living. Memorial services, in honour of the dead or the celebration of a grand achievement by an individual often bring in the genealogy.

#### ORAL HISTORY

More extensive than genealogy is the oral history of a people. According to Vansina, "Oral traditions are historical sources of a special nature. Their special nature derives from the fact that they are "unwritten" sources couched in a form suitable for oral transmission, and their preservation depends on the powers of memory of successive generations of human beings... oral tradition is not necessarily untrust-worthy as a historical source but on the contrary, merits a certain amount of credence within certain limits" (1971 1). The reliability of oral history is due to the nature of the genre which is a mixture of myths, legends and historical facts.

All episode in Yoruba oral history traces the origin of tribes, nations and languages to an event that took place in Ife long ago. "In the beginning, when Obatala created the human race, it was only Ife that was inhabited. Life was good for the people. Whatever they needed was provided by Olorun the sky God or by Orisha Orunmila... No person had less than enough, and no one had more than any other person in Ife. All shared equally in the things provided to them by Olorun and the other Orishas" (Gourlander 43). But soon the people found this equality and harmony monotonous; dissatisfied, quarreling, they complained to Olorun and clamoured variety and distinction as "most of the people of Ife became infected with the idea that to be equal with others was to be deprived of something" (Gourlander 44).

Olorun obliged them. "To all the things they had demanded, Olorun added something. He gave them different languages. Whereas in the beginning everyone had spoken the same language, the language of Ife, some now began to speak Ibo or Hausa, or Fon, or Arabic. The people had difficulty in understanding one another. They began to separate... They settled in different places, and built new cities. This is how different tribes and nations came into being (Gourlander 45).

Oral history assigns a prominent role to the gods. It involves communities larger than the family: tribes, nations, the human race. It explains how certain natural phenomena, like fire, came into use, recounts the origin of occurrences and situations in real life and recounts the friendship, then the confrontation between the gods and men, the earth and the sky, the ocean and the sun.

#### PROVERBS

Proverbs are a popular genre in oral literature, especially in African countries. They are generally associated with non-literature societies, though there are no traces of proverbs among the American Indians, the Australian aborigines, the people of Papua in Guinea Bisau and the Bushmen of Southern Africa. Proverbs cannot therefore be said to be the peculiarity of unlettered people. King Solomon, for instance, uttered three thousand proverbs of which five hundred and sixty have survived in the Bible. Thus not only learned and wise men but also royalty are involved in the culture of proverbs.

The term proverb, is derived from “proverbium”, a combination of two Latin words, “pro” meaning “for and “verbium” meaning “word”. A proverb is therefore a word that serves other words, a sentence that enhances the value of other statements. From this literal definition of proverbs, we have made three observations. “First of all, proverbs are made of words. These words, constituted into a system called sentences, create a universe and a vision of their own such that proverbs are often considered a literary category. The second remark is that though a proverb can be cited solitarily, without reference to a particular situation or text, the significance of the proverb depends to a large extent on the situation or verbal context where it features. Thirdly, proverbs though they tend to be integrated into the different genres, are distinct from the verbal variety whose message they advocate, illustrate or ameliorate (Noah 2-3).

The peculiarity of its form, function and significance, has made of the proverb a complex genre, difficult to define. We have however defined the proverb as “a laconic declaration, generally invariable in its structure, whose intervention in a context or in a verbal representation condenses and radiates experiences, ideas and admonitions through its terse, pithy truism (Noah 8).

Proverbs have much in common with poetry. They are concise and brief”, many Ibibio proverbs contain only three words. One of these, “Eyo ikimme inua”, means: Nightfall does not affect the mouth. Another element of poetry in proverbs is the balance between the two segments of the sentence. This can be seen in an Ibo proverb made popular by Chinua Achebe: “Since men have learnt to shoot without missing, birds have learnt to fly without perching”. In addition to the rhythmic correspondence between the two phases of the declaration, there is the repetition of words that is an important aspects of

poetry. Perhaps the curious thing about proverbs is that so much philosophy can be compressed into such brief statements.

#### FABLES

Fables are different from proverbs being fully developed narratives, though the length may vary from one paragraph to several pages. Fables are also different from folktales though essential differences between the two do not seem to be well known. Hence many collections of stories with animal characters often have “Tales” a their title, even though some or most of the narratives are fables. Obviously, a study which is deficient in awareness of the distinction between the two genres cannot be meaningful.

Fables are defined by two basic characteristics, and these traits set them apart from folktales and the other narrative genres. The first of these is that fables always evoke the encounter between two conflicting forces: good an evil. The main actors in the stories incarnate these forces. The second element is that there is no evolution in the character of the actors. Whereas characters evolve in folktales myths and legends, those in fables remain static. These elements can be seen in popular fables, such as the story of the ant and the grasshopper. Many trickster stories in the African repertory are fables.

In the conflict between positive and negative qualities incarnated by the animal characters, evil often triumphs over good. This is understandable in a genre which does not represent a modification of human nature. Esop and the French La Fontaine are well known writers of fables. There are fables in Birago Diop’s collections though the titles of the three volumes – “Les Contes d’Amadou Koumba” and “Contes et Lavanés” – mention only “contes”, that is folktales, in the titles.

#### FOLKTALES

In oral literature folktales are the best known and the most widely used of the genre. Several reasons account for this popularity. One of these is the fact that even though they are sometimes enunciated by professionals and that some performers are better than others, folktales do not need specialists for their propagation. Men, women and children are regular actors in the manifestation of the genre. Secondly, folktales often accommodate some of the other genres. Poems, songs and proverbs are introduced at will into the narration of tales. In this “public relations” aspect, the folktales familiarize with the other genres while these in turn promote the tales. Also, though more “secular” than myths and legends, folktales do not neglect the world of the supernatural. The gods, ghosts and ancestors are active in tales. The presence of these fantastic beings, coupled with the curious role of animals, caresses the imagination and makes of tales of a delight, a verbal feast that people seek after.

What is the origin of folktales? We shall refer here to J.R.R Tolkien because in raising the question and in the answer he provided, he was articulating the mind of most people on the subject. According to Tolkien, folktales are born of the projection of human fantasy on objects (1974 51). Like psychoanalysts, Tolkien believes that tales are a creation of human imagination, often seen in this respect as morbid. This position is incapable of explaining the similarity of structure, characters and themes in tales of different cultures from all over the world. Human imagination cannot account for this similitude which surprised even Propp.

As we have stated elsewhere, a major area of similarity between folktales, legends and myths is the structure of the genre. Long or short and whatever the adventure narrated, the “texts” always represent three distinguishable phases marking successively the departure of the hero, his adventures and his return. In all cases, the hero departs from his family or milieu, then he confronts dangers, grapples with challenges and is finally victorious (Noah 150).

Glorified he returns to his community. This sequence (departure, initiation, return) is revealing. According to Van Gennep, initiatic rites are ceremonies which accompany changes of place, status, condition, age etc. and regulate man’s existence from birth to death. They always comprise three stages: separation, trials, integration. (24) In other words, folktales, legends and myths descended directly from ancient rites of passage.

The origin of folktales is not human imagination but ancient initiatic rites. This perception of the origin explains the nature of tales and provides the basis for a scientific study of the genre as the different elements in a tale can only be understood by direct reference to the ancient rite it reflects.

#### MYTHS, LEGENDS

The difficulty many scholars experience in trying to define myths comes from non recognition of the common origin of myths and tales. Most definitions emphasize the role of the gods in myths as if these are not present in folktales.

What then is the difference between myths and tales? In ancient religious ceremonies, myths were the official “texts” that accompanied the rites of passage. As the societies became more secular, the rites declined in their importance and practice. The degradation of myths due to the secularization of society resulted in folktales which are nothing other than a skeletal form of the myths that survived, outside their religious contexts, in peoples’ memory. This disintegration of myths into tales is illustrated in Propp’s voluminous

book on the historical roots of folktales (Propp 1983). This explains why myths are more ample and more detailed than tales.

Legends like myths and folktales, descended from the rites of passage. But the distinctive feature of legends is that they focus on the personage that underwent the initiatic rites.

#### FUNCTIONS OF ORAL LITERATURE

Oral literature comports many functions. In addition to the general functions, of the phenomenon, each genre also has certain specific functions. Thus, riddles contain some functions that are not the same as those of proverbs. The scope of this short write-up does not permit us to consider all the functions of the different genres that constitute oral literature. We shall therefore limit ourselves to the more general and most important ones.

One major function of oral literature is its role as the archive of the traditions, customs and history of a people. Each of the genres records and preserves for transmission a certain facet of the culture and civilization of its people. Another important function of oral literature is that of entertainment. This can assume several forms: humour, the content of the “texts” such as action, characters and some scenes, the manner of narrating the events (facial expressions, imitation of sounds and gestures, jokes introduced) the participation of the audience especially in singing, clapping of hands, drumming and dancing – all these make of oral literature a channel of entertainment in traditional societies.

For some, the didactic role of oral literature remains its most vital function. It teaches in diverse manners: philosophy through the proverbs, and morals through the lessons drawn from fables and folktales. It explains the how, why, when and what of nature through the myths and legends. It provides information on various aspects of creation such as animals, on hunting techniques, on relations with parents, family members and the social order, on herbs and traditional medicine. During initiation it provides practical secret oral instructions on magic, witchcraft, death, ancestors etc.

Oral literature is a mirror of the soul of traditional societies. It paints human life, the culture and the beliefs of the community it projects. It manipulates word and symbols to create verbal categories more noble than the ordinary language of communication. These categories, almost as old as language itself have confirmed oral literature as having been in existence long before the tradition of writing.

#### CONCLUSION

The literary status of indigenous literature having thus been recognized and the blurred perception by some Europeans of traditional societies that created oral literature having been corrected, it can no longer be said as did R. F. Burton in 1865: “The savage custom of going naked... has denuded the mind, and destroyed all decorum in the language. Poetry there is none... There is no metre, no rhyme, nothing that interests or soothes the feelings, or arrests the passions” (xii). The undeniable prestige of African oral literature, like that of every traditional society, attests the grandeur and dignity of the indigenous cultures that gave it existence.



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