

FORMS AND SIGNIFICANCE OF ORAL NARRATIVES

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Abstract

This paper employs the qualitative method of study to examine orature in relation to oral narratives, and its specific objectives are directed towards conceptualizing orature; identifying its forms; locating oral narratives and discussing myths, legends, folktales, fables, proverbs, and riddles as oral narratives. The study also investigates the socio-economic, educational, cultural, and communal values of oral narratives within the Nigerian context. Thus the research concludes that orature, besides recording cultural matters, functions as a tool of entertainment, education and cultural cohesion.

Introduction

The assumption that civilization with sustainable development is a phenomenon which was introduced into Africa by the West through colonization is untrue because Africans were already civilized in their own way before the invasion of their territories and sustainable development had always been there in Africa. For the Western idea of development to be meaningful to and appreciated by Africans, there is the need to incorporate the African concept of development. What is meant by development, in African context, is contained and expressed in African philosophy, of which orature is a part (Ogundokun, 2015:184). What Ogundokun means, in essence, is that long before the coming of the European colonizers, Africa had and still has its own means of civilization embedded and expressed in its cultural expressions of which orature is one. Simply put, Africa had orature before the coming of the colonial masters. It is against this backdrop that this paper tends to look at the various concepts of orature and its forms, locate the oral narrative genres, discuss and trace their social, educational, and cultural imports.

The Concept of Orature

The term orature, according to literary critics, has been used variously since the Ugandan linguist Pio Zirimu coined it in the early seventies of the last century to counter the tendency to see the arts communicated orally and received aurally as an inferior or a lower rung in the linear development of literature (Wa Thiongo, 2007:4). Wa Thiongo further asserts that Zirimu was rejecting the term oral literature. But his brief definition of orature as the use of utterance as an aesthetic means of expression remains tantalizingly out there, pointing to an oral system of aesthetics that did not need validity from the literary. For Aliyu (1989) as cited in Liman (2010:133) orature is defined as the study of oral art forms with emphasis on “non-literary inclusiveness of folklore” and “the primacy of oral/performance characteristic” of the forms under study. In the same vein, Finnegan (2012:4) sees it as that which is dependent on a performer who formulates it in words on a specific occasion”. For her orature “no other way in which it can be realized as a literary product”.

Whatever the case, in a more clear and lucid manner, *National Open* (2009:17) conceptualizes orature as a “spoken imaginative communication that is not written but transmitted through the word of the mouth for entertainment and sometimes edification of the audience. Oral literature therefore means literature that is not written but presented orally, preserved and transmitted from one generation to the other in that form.”

The term however, according to Wa Thiongo (2007:4) has spread, and one reads variously of Hawaiian Orature, Namibian Orature, Ghanaian Orature and many others. Despite the widespread usage, very few have engaged with the term to tease out the various theoretical possibilities in the term. Pitika Ntuli of South Africa is one of the few who have attempted to take the term beyond its Zirimian usage. The necessary thing to do is to look at its forms.

Forms of Orature

According to Liman (2010:132) “Orature in Africa is diverse because of the wealth of its genres and sub-genres.” Thus Ogundokun (2015:181) lumps them as Proverbs, oral poetry, myths, legends, folktales, music, songs, chants and invocations which according to him, also form parts of daily life of the African people in which their culture is expressed. Similarly, Wa Thiongo (2007:6) identifies the major generic elements of orature as “riddle, proverb, story, song, poetry, drama and dance - are an imaginative attempt to explain the universe.” This is further supported by Liman (2010:132) who posits that “In narrative forms, for example, there are various types of tales, classes of proverbs, riddles, wise sayings and oratory skills.” This paper limits itself to the discussion of myths, legends, folktales, fables, proverbs and riddles.

Discussions

Before the advent of the novel, according to *National Open*, (2009:19-20), the novella and the written short story genres, there existed in many Nigerian cultures, stories that recorded the people’s cultural experiences. These stories serve as the repository of the people’s beliefs, social philosophies and observations about life. They also provide insightful information about their environments. In these stories, we find the people’s attitudes to natural phenomena and depict the way of life of a particular community. The stories are generally educative while they entertain the audience. They are also part of the socialization process, because through them, the community perpetuates its knowledge, values and experience. They attempt to explain the origin of existence, and also present the lives and contributions of great personages. In addition, they create a nexus between the past and the present. Sometimes this past dates back to the primordial or prehistoric era. Modern Nigerian written prose narrative evolved from the traditional oral narratives. They include myths, legends, folktales and fables.

Myths

Scholarly studies carried out on myth provide divergent views regarding the subject. In a very broad sense, myth is referred to as any traditional history. Martins (2012:160) observes that the main characters in myths are usually gods, deities or supernatural heroes whose stories were usually sacred. These stories form part and parcel of their history as well as their existence. Akporobaro (2006:48) as cited in *National Open*, (2009:21), postulates that myth is “a kind of story or rudimentary narrative sequence,

normally traditional and anonymous, through which a given culture ratifies its social customs or accounts for the origin of human and natural phenomena, usually in supernatural or boldly imaginative terms". People tend to regard myths as being false or unreliable, but its literary quality is assured. For Ogundokun (2015:182) myths deal with people's way of life and the basic structures on which their sustenance is built. They can be linked to religious attachments which are taken to be sacrilege.

The Hutchinson Encyclopedia (2003) defines myths as: "a genre of traditional stories symbolically underlying a given culture. These stories describe gods and other supernatural beings with which humans may have relations and are often intended to explain the workings of the universe, nature, or human history." In the same vein, Bascom (1984 p. 45) sees myths as prose narratives which are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past. Myths account for the origin of the world, of mankind, of death or for the characteristics of birds, animals, geographical features and phenomena of nature. They may recount for the activities of the deities, their victories and defeats. They may purport to explain details of ceremonial paraphernalia or rituals. For example, the poetry of Christopher Okigbo such as *Labyrinths* showcases an experience of a long mythic journey.

Myths essentially fuse the physical with the metaphysical and the natural with the supernatural. Hence, they cannot be meaningfully subjected to the rules of logic, rationalism and empiricism. An example of myth is the creation story of Yoruba people of Western Nigeria that traces the origin of the people to a myth which states that Olodumare sent Orunmila to the earth but the whole place was flooded. Orunmila then sent the dove which perched on top of the water and deposited the sand it clutched in its two legs. The sand that was deposited started expanding on top of the water thereby gaining more solid lands. The act of spreading which in Yoruba means *Ife*, is where *Ife* got its name *Ife* and the town is regarded as the origin of the Yoruba race. (*National Open*, 2009:20). Myths are entertaining, educative and informative as well as dialectic in nature. They are usually prose narratives. (Ogundokun, 2015:182).

Legends

Legend is set in the past but deals with heroes/heroines in a known past. The link between myth and legend is that both are set in the past. However, they differ in nature. Unlike myth, legend has some measure of claim to history in an unknown past. Legend refers to a story that is passed down orally from one generation to another and has its foundation in history. They are fragments of history that help to teach morals, encourage and inspire members of the community. They are close to life and some of them are authentic. They tell stories of people who actually lived and the things that really happened. However, most of them are embellished to enhance the aesthetic perspectives of the stories and make them more fascinating, and entertaining. Legends present personalities and events that are believed to have existed in the history of a particular community, whereas myth draws its subject from gods, superhuman entities and natural phenomenon. Thus, the deeds of great warriors, kings and leaders of a community are woven into legends. Legends have provided inspiration for the modern Nigerian novelist and short story writers. (*National Open*, 2009:22).

Legends are relatively true stories which have connection with the culture of the people which they represent. Legends are closer to life because they talk about past accounts of people or events. Ogundokun (2015:182) aver that one of the major criticisms against legends is that most legends are exaggerated. This form of exaggeration is exemplified in the story of “*Bayajida*”. Factually known to the Hausa people of Northern Nigeria, the Bayajida legendary story chronicles the origin of the whole Hausa race. According to Hallam (1966: 47), the story “relates how a stranger arrived in the future Hausaland, married into an existing ruling family, and fathered the rulers of the seven city states which were to make up that elastic but successful confederation known as the Hausa Bakwai”.

Folktales

Folktales have a distinguishing feature and can include a combination of music, voice, drama and dancing. In a bid to define the term, Baldick (2004) cited in Nnyagu (2018: 94) conceives the folktale as “a story passed on by word of mouth rather than by writing, and thus, partly modified by successive retelling before being written down or recorded. The category includes legends, fables, jokes, tall stories and fairy tales or Marchen. Many folktales involve mythical creations and magical transformations.” Lending Baldick’s voice, Nnyagu concludes that Baldick’s opinion buttresses the fact that “oral literature can be written.” Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, Tutuola’s *the Palmwine Drinkard* and *Fagunmwa’s Forest of a Thousand Demons* embodies some of the aforesaid elements of the folktale. The stories are made up of inexhaustible exploits of the trickster, either as tortoise, hare, or fox usually narrated to children by adults at night in many cultures.

It suffices therefore, to state that folktales are mainly didactic and most of the moral principles that a child received in the traditional society used to come from folktales. The Predominantly didactic or moralistic nature of folktales combined with entertainment make them the most popular form of oral narratives. Folktales make no claim to historical antecedent or factual background. The ultimate end is to entertain and teach moral principles. Folktales feature in the moonlight night story-telling sessions of different ethnic groups in the country and are not identified with any individual author. They are handed down from one generation to another. (*National Open*, 2009: 22-23). Additionally, Ogundokun (2015:182) avouches that folktales do not only teach morals but also entertains.

Fables

Fables are animal stories that try to teach people how to behave. They are a particular type of narrative in which animals, plants, or similar characters are anthropomorphized or made to seem as if they were human (Kachele, 2019: 5). Fables draw their subjects essentially from the animal world. Adults use fables also to teach morals to the young generations to whom they are primarily, composed for. As the animal characters speak and act, they remind us of the human world and its load of vices, intrigues, virtues and moral principles. As such, fables derive their significance from the imitation of, and relevance to the concrete realities of human existence. (*National Open*, 2009:23). Hence in the narratives of orature, humans, birds, animals and plants interact freely, they often assume each other’s forms, including language (Wa Thiongo, 2007:5).

Proverbs

Proverbs identify and dignify a culture. They express the collective wisdom of the people, reflecting their thinking, values and behaviours (Malunga and Banda, 2004). As a matter of fact, proverbs, in a traditional African setting, unlock wisdom, clarify vision and unify different perceptions. They add humour and reduce tension on perceived sensitive issues. Proverbs are often used to confront issues as well as to build institutions and relationships. They create strong mental pictures which can motivate people to action. No one ever dares to dispute the message a proverb contains because it is a proven conclusion of a sort (Ogundokun, 2007:182). Definitively, Jegede (2008:182) identifies “proverbs as a dynamic mode of discourse with unique identity...” he further adds that proverbs form a pool of linguistic and thematic resources from which speakers and writers in rhetoric, politics, economics, jurisprudence, philosophy, history, religion, technology, etc, draw inspiration (2011:35). Aesthetically speaking, a proverb may be used to show joy, to mourn, to praise, to indicate failure or to warn.

Proverbs deal with all aspects of life. They are used to emphasize the words of the wise and are the stock in trade of old people, who use them to convey precise moral lessons, warnings and advice since they make a greater impact on the mind than ordinary discourse. The judicious use of proverbs is usually regarded as a sign of wit. Proverbs are often “marked by terseness of expression, by a form different from that of ordinary speech and by a figurative mode of expression abounding in metaphor” (Finnegan, 2012:399). They are picturesque, figurative and at the same time poetic in nature and these qualities differentiate them from the normal everyday speech or discourse.

In Nigeria, Omoera and Inegbeboh (2013:18) posit that:

Proverbs are influenced, to a large extent, by the linguistic and socio-geographical experiences and orientations of the diverse peoples that make up the country. The imagery in proverbs, their form and context of use as well as aesthetics reflect the peculiar natural environment of the users, whether from the Northern or southern regions of Nigeria where hundreds of languages are spoken

A few examples of Nigerian proverbs from various tribes, which are translated into English, are given below:

1. Urhobo: Oro diwame oriene ogbuko phia ere.

English Translation: He that dives into water does not remember or know that his back is exposed.

2. Benin: A i mu ada dien egbee.

English Translation: One does not carry a scepter and claim supremacy over one's family.

3. Yoruba: Ti ebi ba kuroninu ise, ise buse.

English Translation: If hunger is out of poverty, poverty is finished.

4. Igbo: Nwanyi kuru nu zo agba egwunwe onye nakuru ya egu n'ohia.

English Translation: A young woman who stands on the road to dance has a drummer in the bush.

5. Hausa: Ba don 'rigan domin' ba, da mutum ya mutu matsyaci.

English Translation: If it were not because of someone else's influence, a man would die poor.

The examples given above are inexhaustibly illustrated as there are many other proverbs which cannot be stated here. Based on the foregoing, proverb occupies “a commanding position in the rhetorical arsenal of African cultures.... Proverbs constitute a dominant device, whether in everyday conversation or more serious, formal talk” (Finnegan 2012:39). Finnegan’s assertion is foregrounded in Achebe’s famous description of the Proverb in his *Things Fall Apart* as “the palm-oil with which words are eaten” among the Igbo is important in all cultures. A proverb, a codification of wisdom, has the three parts of the cognitive process: data of the sensory experience being the basis of a story, and the story being the basis of a universal, a generalized pithy statement applicable in similar situations (Wa Thiongo, 2007:7).

Riddles

Riddle is also part of the rhetorical form of oral literature. Riddles are quizzes or enigmatic questions or descriptions wrapped up in a figurative language. Riddles consist of a complete system of verbal expression which encompasses the major rhetorical expression used in the language of a particular people. Riddles are puzzled descriptive statements or direct questions demanding the answerer to provide the association or connotation. The answerers are not directly asked to guess but are faced with an allusive sentence referring analogously to something else, which they must then try to identify (Oral Literature in Africa).

In the traditional society, riddles involve two contestants either as individuals or groups. The first group poses the question and the other gives the answer. In Igbo land, it starts with gwam gwam gwam – tell me, tell me, tell me. This is followed by tell me what... In this way, participation in riddles enables the child and or adult to increase his/her personal repertoire of traditional rhetorical devices. The materials of riddles are drawn for every area of reality in the world like the natural environment, aspects of the culture and practically from every realm of human life/experience. In this way, they help to expose the child to his environment by presenting various facts of experience in striking and memorable images. They help in the process of initiating the child into the culture of his own society. Some examples of riddles randomly selected are provided below:

1. Kilba: jawa: Ndaur malam nyangna hirr ku lewa. Wuma: Shikadi
Proposed: A mad man in the bush with his teeth outside. Answer: Thorns (Sharndama & Magaji, 2014:11)
2. Jawa: Mbel nda am’a tsakati hihii. Wuma: Owada haba
Proposed: push the mother and collect the eggs. Answer: Banbara nuts plant (Sharndama & Magaji, 2014:11)
3. Tiv: Wantor tem ichegher kper nan. Answer: Asan
English Translation: the princess breaks or peels melon and the following day, no one sees the melon peels. Answer: Stars (Dankaro & Agoom, 2015:108)
4. Tiv: Ankon mende ken toho gba mule ken gbenda. Answer: Ambi
English Translation: A tree grows in the bush and casts its shed by the road side. Answer: Faeces (Dankaro & Agoom, 2015:108).

The riddle as an image reflects the riddle of a universe, which is one in many. In the Agikuyu riddle, *I have a house without a door*, whose answer is egg; or *I have a*

companion who never tells me rest, whose answer is road or shadow, the solutions to the riddles are aesthetically satisfying. (Wa Thiongo, 2007:7). Riddles contain rich repertoire of critical thinking and knowledge.

Significance of Oral Narratives

Oral narratives help to affirm and validate spiritual realities and experiences. Stories in various forms stand out as a means by which early man handled serious experiences such as untimely death and diseases as well as other problems of natural disasters. Many folktales, myths, legends and proverbs use characters that are spiritual beings who also behave like human beings with great powers and influences. For instance, *Obàtálá, Ògún, Sàngó, Òsun, Oya* in Yoruba land and *Amadioha, Chi* or *Chukwu* in Igbo land. Most of these oral narratives, no matter how they are perceived in these modern days, have created a world view, which appeals to the artistic moral and psychological being of the primitive African man. And, of course the basic functions of these oral genres of literature are still there and will continue to be there.

Again, oral narratives can build social binding and develop the sense of community. In every human society, stories are told to enhance the development of human relationships whether in a form of friendship, sense of collective responsibility for the general well-being of the community or social binding. There is notwithstanding an economic aspect of people's involvement in oral narratives. It is a source of earning a living. Survivalism cannot be ruled out among the functions performed by oral literary creations. A sum or material is collected for the performance of different oral narratives.

A good and talented story-teller or praise singer in a community can earn himself a status or a title which confirms that he is recognized for his artistic contribution as an entertainer apart from collecting money for his work. As tale and fictive imaginative which contains some fundamental elements of reality, folklore entertains and teaches moral lessons. It is commonly considered as false because it is not an actual record of history or social experience. Folklore is an artistic communication of a group which concerns the relationship of the individual creativity to the collective order of the people. These aspects of the people's life are dynamic and effective, and cannot go undocumented (Ben-Amos, 1977).

Conclusion

The paper in its bid to explore oral narratives equally debunked the assumption that colonization introduced civilization into Africa. This is because Africa, from time immemorial, has its civilization in its culture manifested in festivals, music, and other art forms including orature. Thus, the study conceptualized the term orature; traced its forms (the spoken form, the sung form, and performance); and located the oral narrative (myths, legends, folktales, fables, proverbs and riddles) within the spoken form of orature. The research also identified the social, educational, economic, cultural, and communal benefits of oral narratives. In conclusion, the paper argued that orature, in the form of oral narratives, is a platform for recording cultural heritage and it functions as a vehicle of entertainment, education, information, indoctrination and encouragement.

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