

## EXPLORING AFRICA'S RICH FOLKLORE FOR LITERARY SYMBIOSIS

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### ABSTRACT

Over the years, Africa's rich folklore has been advertised negatively by European scholars carrying out studies and research in Africa. These unacceptable scholarly activities are caused by the following factors: one, Eurocentric and biased mindset against anything African. Two, most of the scholars were not literary scholars but anthropologists who were more interested in the cultural aspects of the folklores rather than the creativity and the literariness in them. It is against this backdrop that African writers of literature have in their writings elected to set the records straight and rewrite the wrongs written by foreigners by showing the literariness and creativity in our oral literature. In plays, novels, poems and short stories, African writers continuously show an interaction and marriage between oral literature and written literature which in this work is referred to as literary symbiosis. In literary symbiosis, African writers use folkloric materials as sources on which their written literature is based be it poetry, prose and drama. In this paper, examples of such written works which enjoy African folklore as foundation are presented.

**Keywords:** folklore, literary symbiosis, oral literature

### INTRODUCTION

Folklore is the umbrella term that also has oral literature as one of its constituent part. In fact, folklore is the father of all the oral traditions handed down from one generation to the other. But interestingly, the oral literature, in its different forms, in one way or the other, reflects the various forms of folklore. In other words, during the performance of the various forms of oral literature, the other non literary forms of oral tradition or folk lore are usually mentioned.

There are many forms of literature in the world, some of which can be traced back to centuries ago. Yet there are some that are more recent and have been introduced in the last few decades or so. Whatever the form, literature, that is basically any written or oral creative work, has played a vital role in preserving and promoting the values and norms of societies, religions, cultures, traditions' history etc. It is in fact because of literature that we know so much about our past and how people lived at that time. It is also because of literature that we know so much about other people even though they may be far away, separated by huge mountains, distances, oceans, and large plains in-between.

Moreover, there are also fictional forms of literature that are reflections of some real happenings or are merely a showcase of a situation, feeling or a lesson. Oral literature is a type of literature; it is oral in nature and over the years there has always been debate on what oral literature is, whether it is different from folklore, and whether folklore means the same thing as folk tale. This is the main focus of this paper as we shall try to discuss the differences between folklore and oral literature.

### WHAT IS FOLKLORE?

The term folklore is not an easy one to define because it means many things to many people. It is an umbrella that covers many other practices in a given community. For the Europeans and westerners, who as anthropologists and sociologists attempted a definition or a study of African folklore, Okoh accuses them of prejudices and bias because

they deliberately ignored the creative aspects under the big umbrella called folklore. For instance, Okoh says this about the Reverend J.L. Dohne who concludes on Zulu poetry:

...[he] took a hasty look at Zulu oral tradition and concluded that nothing like poetry existed. In 1906, a well-known European explorer introduced his collection of Ugandan and Central African narratives with the warning that many of the stories “were naturally of little value, having neither novelty nor originality”(8).

The above position or held view by Europeans is not difficult to understand because of the obvious prejudice, bias and disdain they usually express toward anything African. And again, their jaundiced view is due largely to the fact that most of them were not after the literariness but the fact that it was ancient and therefore a primitive practice handed down from generation to generation and therefore being repeated. Because the scholars had the belief that Africans were not capable of creative literature, they therefore did not look too well to identify the individual creativity brought to bear by the performers of African oral literature. Their studies most times were a product of their preconceived prejudice and bias.

Folk means people and lore means knowledge or wisdom of local traditions, customs, ways of life, distinctive identity of a people and oral literature handed down from one generation to the other. Folklore is an umbrella term for a body of traditional relics that are found in a given community. These relics can be a product of the distant past or not so distant past. We have festivals, dress patterns or dress codes, language, staple food, farm pattern, building pattern, settlement pattern, speech pattern, gestures, mannerisms, marriage procedures, naming ceremony, burial rites, thinking pattern, proverbs, folk tales, myths, legends, songs, chants, riddles, jokes, anecdotes, tongue twisters, etc. For example, in Claire Farrer’s *Women and Folklore: Images and Genres*, we are exposed to a form of folklore which has a lot to do with beliefs, opinions, views handed over by women, especially grandmothers, mothers and aunts to their little granddaughters, daughters and nieces.

In other words, folklore generally depicts cultures and traditions in the best of manners. Under folklore we have music, legends, jokes, proverbs, oral history, stories, fairy tales, tall tales, popular beliefs as well as customs that are part of the traditions of a cultural group, subcultural group or any group for that matter. Moreover, it also includes the practices or media through which these genres are expressed or shared. The people who study folklore are known as folklorists and the study of folklore is known as folkloristics. The word folklore was first introduced by William Thomas in 1846. The study of folklore can be divided into:

1. Artefacts such as voodoo dolls, masks, masquerade regalia, carvings representing ancestors and gods, etc. Under artefacts we also have walking stick or staff, the people’s unique stool, bracelet, king’s crown, symbol of authority like “ofor” amongst the Igbo and “isablekwu” amongst the Idoma people of Benue.
2. Entities which are transmissible and describable such as oral literature forms. Under oral literature we have the tales (folk tale, myths, legend), poetry (war songs, work songs, panegyric, marriage songs, court poems, elegies, dirges, etc), drama (new yam festival, masquerade dance, traditional marriages, etc).
3. Culture, and behaviour, which includes rituals. These divisions are not mutually exclusive as it is possible that a particular element or item fits in more than one of these.

## **NATURE AND FUNCTION OF FOLKLORE**

Folklore has had many functions in our societies of years ago and today. To a very large extent, folklore functions as an identity marker for various communities. In other words, the unique identity of a particular community is due largely the body of its folklore. The functions of folklore are many, and also vary with certain cultures and traditions. Entertainment is one of the most common functions of folklore today. People make up stories; folk tales,

myths, legends and urban legends simply just to get peoples' attention or to even get a laugh. Here, the moon-light tales come to mind. Also, every community has its own body of songs which is referred to as oral poetry. The same is the case with dramatic performances such as masquerade dance, festivals, rituals, etc. All these are aspects of folklore meant for entertainment. This point is very important in the sense that, more than the educational and informative functions of literature, the basic function of literature is entertainment.

Another function of folklore is to frighten people or caution people with stories and mostly urban legends. There are stories about ghosts, killers, and things you are not supposed to do because of the oncoming consequences. Tales of bush babies, fire-spitting monsters, fire balls, flying witches, evil birds coming to take away stubborn children and death himself calling names of people in the night are examples of stories told to scare people away from certain behaviour. All these play very important functions in the society or community.

Proverbs are another example of folklore which has been very popular for as long as any of us can remember. Their primary function is to teach a lesson about anything, but they are usually lessons about life and daily living. Folklore is didactic, which means morally instructive or inclined to teach, and they are also entertaining. Proverbs vary from community to community. In fact some community takes proverbs more serious than others. The Igbo of Nigeria for instance refer to proverbs as the palm oil of speech because it embodies the wisdom and philosophy of their ancestors (See *Palm Oil of Speech* by Umeasiegbu, 1986).

Cultures around the world, also based on their traditions, put more emphasis on some subjects of folklore more than others, but all are unique and all are handed down from generation to generation. For instance, the Idoma of Nigeria so venerate their ancestors that they specially resurrect them to come and live physically with the people. Every culture in Nigeria has something to do with the kola nut but for the Igbo, it is a sacred piece of lobe which joins humans and their gods.

### **WHAT IS ORAL LITERATURE?**

Oral literature is a part of folklore. It is also called folk literature. The term oral literature has sparked intellectual controversies over the years. This is because many scholars who were involved in one way or the other in the definition looked at it from their own perspectives which were either accepted or rejected. Whether it is oral literature or folk literature, the literature that exists in oral form has many dimensions to it which will be discussed later.

Okoh blames some of these controversies on "...a general western prejudice concerning some other cultures."(8). These western scholars believe that a thing cannot be oral and literature at the same time. They also nurtured the belief that Africans and Asians lack the literary capability and creativity and therefore what is referred to as literature isn't literature but ancient and primitive traditions being replicated or practiced. Finnegan, in her seminal work on Africa's oral literature makes it clear that "The concept of an oral literature is an unfamiliar to most people..."(1) especially Europeans coming from a culture that stresses the written tradition over the oral tradition. Finnegan goes ahead to say that "Oral literature is by definition dependent on a performer who formulates it in words on specific occasion—there is no other way in which it can be realized as a literary product"(2). In other words, those who have not seen the literariness in Africa's oral literature have not studied it properly; they have failed to realize that it is performance based unlike the written literature.

Oral literature suffered lack of proper definition because those who first studied it were anthropologists, missionaries, sociologists and colonial officers who had no literary background and were therefore interested in studying it as primitive practice that had survived from the past. The idea was that these anthropologists, folklorists, colonial officers and missionaries were interested in the subjects of African oral literature and not the literariness of the unwritten literature.

As its name suggests, it is in the sphere of the spoken word unlike other forms of literature that are written. Akparobaro looks at oral literature as “...the heritage of imaginative verbal creations, stories, folk-beliefs and songs of pre-literate societies which have been evolved and passed on through the spoken word from one generation to another” (33). To debunk the Eurocentric views about African oral literature, Akparobaro went ahead to state that “Literature need not be what is written only, but all verbal creations written or spoken which are artistically projected...” (35). Oral literature can be looked at like this: (a) What is spoken—the prose. This has forms like folk tales, myths, legends, contemporary legends, ghost stories, riddles, tongue twisters, proverbs, etc (b) What is acted—drama. This has forms like festival, dance drama, masquerade performance, traditional marriage, etc. (c) What is sung—poetry. This has forms like lyric, panegyric, dirges, elegy, lullabies, etc.

It is pertinent to state here that oral literature is also called orature by many scholars. The word orature was first used by Pio Zirimu because of his unwillingness to refer to African oral traditions as literature. As a result of this, many African scholars reject the term orature vehemently. Orature is nothing, does not say or mean anything useful and therefore cannot be used to describe oral literature. Many African scholars also reject racist terms such as primitive literature, folk literature. Oral literature may have its root in the past but the creativity, newness, imagination, freshness and ingenuity of the modern performer must be acknowledged. What the modern performer or better still the performer does is not just a repetition of an ancient tradition but a recreation of an ancient literature. In other words, the performer, while performing, makes the tale, for instance, his tale by his capacity and experience in tale telling. This is why it is possible for the audience to listen to a particular tale again and again without getting bored. Also, the newness and fresh creativity injected into the tale is the reason why the audience may enjoy the performance of a particular story teller more than another story teller even though they both performed the same tale.

## **THE NATURE OF ORAL LITERATURE**

Above, we have defined and validated the existence of oral literature. We have also certified that it is not a contradiction whatsoever to refer to it as oral literature because literature is first conceived in the mind before it is written down. It is not in writing it down that it becomes literature but the literariness of the expressions be it oral or written. After all, poems like “The Iliad”, “Odyssey” and “Beowulf” which are celebrated in world literature were originally oral epics handed down from generation to generation. The literariness such as the stylistics, structural, linguistic properties in the poems did not miraculously appear because they were written down, but they had been there in the poems all along.

### **Orality**

Oral literature exists orally unlike the written counterpart. Despite its oral nature, oral literature possesses the full complement of literature because it has the linguistics, structural and stylistics properties of literature. All the sub-genres of oral literature such as folk tales, dirges, elegies, lullabies, songs, myths, legends are all handed to from one generation to another by word of mouth. Orality is therefore a form of preserving oral literature just as writing is another form of preserving literature. Orality in oral literature is sustained by the fact that the performer has some formula available to him during performance. The formula allows him to continue recreating, renewing and refreshing old songs, old stories, etc.

### **No Performance No Oral Literature**

The priority of performance in oral literature is central to the nature of oral literature. Unlike the written literature that does not need the presence of the writer, oral literature requires the presence of the performer for it to be realised. Once the earlier European scholars of African oral literature failed to focus on performance, they missed the point completely. Be it a tale, a song or a piece of dramatic performance, the presence of the performer is key. The performance in turn depends largely on the personality of the performer, the memory of the performer, his

ability to improvise, the performers artistic literary qualities and the kind of audience he is performing for or before. This is because a performer may find an audience encouraging or discouraging.

### **The Importance of Audience in Oral Literature**

We earlier said that there can be no oral literature without a performer. The same way, the performer does not perform for himself. There must be an audience for the performer to do his job. The audience is a very important part of the performance. In folk tales the audience readily becomes the chorus during the musical interlude. The chorus role of the audience brings the performance to life. Apart from becoming the chorus of the performance, the audience also take up roles in the tales if the performer deems it fit, or if the tale permits. In songs the audience also play the role of chorus if there is need. Even if there is no need, the audience usually join the singing, and as well dance while the performer performs.

### **Improvisation and Variability/Stability**

Any of the forms passed down from generation to generation can be varied, adapted, recreated, transposed and refreshed to suit the occasion of the performance. During the performance, the performer can improvise and mimic the voice of a goat, cow, and cock or even behave like the animals in his tales. All the other forms such as the tales, songs and drama can be varied exception of the proverb sub-genre. The proverb is fixed and often times, if changed, the meaning may be lost.

### **FUNCTIONS OF ORAL LITERATURE**

Oral literature is the repository of the entertainment, critical knowledge, philosophy, and wisdom for non-literate societies. Oral literature provides a portrait of the meaning of life as experienced by the society at a particular time and place with its unique existential challenges. For instance, a close study of Umeasiegbu's *The Palm Oil of Speech* will reveal Igbo life, as it is, from the ancient time to this moment. The same way, in dirges, for instance, one can get to learn about the thinking of a particular community about death. Also, in their songs of war, work, marriage and birth everyday life is revealed.

Oral literature encapsulates the traditional knowledge, beliefs and values about the environment and the nature of the society itself. It arises in response to the universal aesthetic impulse to provide narratives that explains the nature of life and describes human responses to challenges. This literature portrays how one is to live a moral life and explains the nature of one's relationships to divinity. In other words, the lives the animals live in the tales are actually a metaphor for the way the human beings lived in the past and are living now.

Oral literature retains the society's knowledge to be passed on to succeeding generations. It contains the history of the society and its experiences. In various forms, oral literature portrays the society's belief systems that make sense of life. It provides a guide to human behaviour and how to live one's life. A careful study of myths and legends will show a body of instructions on how to live and how not to live. Oral literature is also a form of entertainment and fosters feelings of solidarity with others who have had similar experiences. In summary, oral literature may encompass many genres of linguistic expression and may perform many different functions for the society.

### **WHAT IS LITERARY SYMBIOSIS?**

The idea of literary symbiosis is not a new one. Literary symbiosis has been as old as literary activity in itself. What this paper seeks to achieve is to throw more light on it, view it from a fresh perspective and charge emerging scholars to delve more into it. At the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) gathering in Owerri, Imo state, an elderly man of wisdom stood up, and as his own reading for that day, recited ten beautiful proverbs which he had

written on a paper, photocopied and shared to members. No sooner did he finish reading it did a young man stand up and attacked the elder for engaging in non-literary activity by reading out proverbs instead of the usual short stories, novels, poems and plays. Attempts to make the young man realize, that, as Africans, we should have a place for our oral literature in our written literature, did not make much sense to him. He argued that proverb is not literature. At this point the argument came to an abrupt end.

The presence of that elderly man and his activities of always reading out rich Igbo proverbs during ANA Readings in Imo state chapter are priceless. His activities amount to a constant reminder especially to the upcoming writers and scholars to look to their roots where the true literary wealth and greatness can be found. It is in the symbiotic relationship between written literature and folklore, especially oral literature, that one can truly say one is an African writer of African writings.

In Plato's *The Republic* for instance, mention is made of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, two very significant poems which have their roots from the oral tradition. Another great poem to have its root from the ancient oral tradition is *Beowulf*. This clearly shows that true greatness in literature lies in ability to harness, utilize and appropriately engage folklore in literary activities. What Plato was worried about, to a very large extent, was improper representation of literary materials with their attendant effects of misleading and corrupting impressionable minds of the youths who he considered as the future leaders. Plato called for:

...censorship of the writers of fiction, and let the censors receive any *tale* of fiction which is good and reject the bad; and we will desire mothers and nurses to tell their children the authorized ones [tales] only (qtd in Dukore, 13) emphasis mine.

What Plato is prescribing above is literary symbiosis in the manner in which the society and humanity as a whole will benefit. The most important point here is that Plato recognized the place of folklore in the written literature. This is why, as he talked about censorship, at the same time, he talked about tales told by nurses and mothers to their children. He was very much aware that those oral tales are to very large extent sourced into written literature, hence his examples of *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

Nwahunanya defines literary symbiosis as:

...the interaction of, and interdependence between traditional and modern literature, to the extent that one accepts the other's tenets, adopts and absorbs its forms, resulting in both surviving mutually in the same literary culture (45).

Written African literature should bifurcate more and more into the traditional relics of folklore for enrichment and mutual survival the same way the oral artist brings in contemporary tenets into his or her performances. The relationship is not one sided as many people think. The relationship is mutual, interdependent, co-existential and inter-reliant. While the written genre depends on the traditional genre, the traditional genre also depends on the modern genre.

It is not surprising therefore that as far back as 1973, J. O. Oyelese was listed by Donald E. Herdeck in an anthology of African authors titled: *African Authors: A Companion to Black African Writing*. He qualifies to be listed because of what Herdeck describes as he being "one of the earliest African scholars to publish his work on folk literature (Yoruba proverbs)" (334). Listing collectors of African proverbs amongst writers of creative literature is in recognition of the importance of traditional African literature in modern African literature.

Writers like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Amos Tutuola, Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Rems Umeasiegbu, ABC Duruaku, Niyi Osundare, Ola Rotimi, Gabriel Oche Ukah, Adah Ugah, D. O. Fagunwa, Cyprian Ekwensi, Christopher Okigbo, Peter Abrahams, Ama Ata Aidoo, Kofi Awoonor, Ayi Kwei Armah, John Pepper Clark, Birago Diop, David Diop, John Munonye, to mention but these very few draw copiously from the oral tradition of their people. Beyond their individual outstanding ability in literary creativity, T. S. Eliot's caution must be taken very seriously as it relates to literary symbiosis:

our tendency to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else....but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously (qtd in Lindfors, 23).

T. S. Eliot is drawing attention to the rich traditional heritage which the modern writer- unconsciously and consciously- may have sourced his or her material from. The rich folklore writers source their material from includes proverbs, folk tales, myths, legends, lullabies, work songs, war songs, traditional marriage rites, festivals, masquerade performances, dirges, elegies, court poetry, settlement pattern, dress codes, farm pattern, speech pattern, cultural and traditional practices and so on.

## CONCLUSION

Literary symbiosis is a marriage between traditional literary forms and the modern literary forms. Literary symbiosis ensures the survival of both the ancient and the modern forms by making them co-exist in one form. By this marriage, the richness of the ancient enriches the modern while the ancient enjoys contemporariness when modernity is fused into it. Folklore or simply lore is the umbrella term for every piece of tradition handed down from one generation to the other. Oral literature on the other hand is a minute but very significant part of folklore. Therefore, when we talk about the constituents of folklore we shall include oral literature. Folklore can then be said to include the following: cultural artefacts, traditions, taboos, burial procedures, child naming procedures, oral history, beliefs held about pregnancy and childbearing, gender roles, narratives such as folk tales, myths, legends, anecdotes, jokes, proverbs, stories, fairy tales, tall tales, popular beliefs, ghost stories, contemporary legends and many other forms. Oral literature is in the sphere of the spoken word unlike other constituents of folklore that are not a structural, creative and stylistic use of the spoken word. Every community has its own folklore which is unique and reflects the people's identity, norms and beliefs. While we praise the artistry of the modern writer, we must not forget TS Eliot's admonition that his or her greatness may actually be in the greatness of his or her ancestor's artistry.

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