

African Oral Traditions and the Art of Writing: Threads and Continuities

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Abstract

The writer of African literature can lead the way in African identity formations and reformations, drawing from its authentic cultural resources and determination of Africa's legacy to the world, driven by the visualized identity. Writers should take up the challenge and task of representing African aesthetic and cultural values in written fiction where they use their writing to capture, interrogate and propagate traditional African values, mostly by borrowing from and basing on the rich repertoire of its customs, folktales, songs, proverbs, riddles and word play. Writing as a tool, must not be disruptive of value systems but become vehicles of values. This paper explores the need for deliberate dialogic platforms between researchers of African oral traditions and writers of Africa in all genres. Our writers can also draw from the traditional folk granary the same ingredients but cook the art in contemporary recipes for contemporary consumption. Further, we must rethink the integration of oral traditions into our educational systems. Our writers, for educational relevance, must write culture in both indigenous and foreign languages and within contexts both past and present. To paraphrase William Jennings Bryan, 'The writer instead of displacing the oral artist, has given him a larger audience and enabled him to do a more extended work.'

Key Words: Literature, Continuities, African, Oral Traditions, Identity, Culture

Introduction

Nyandolo, nindo otere
 Nyandolo, nindo otere,
 Nindo man e wang' baba obi mana ka
 Nindo man e wang' mama obi mana ka
 Nyandolo, nindo otere
 Nyandolo, nindo otere

This is a lullaby from my community. For years it has effectively put to sleep generations of children. Just a month ago, I was woken up by a call from an Engineer friend who was in trouble. His seven year old daughter had been assigned to write a lullaby in their first language due to be handed in the next morning. My friend's problem was two-fold: 1. the local language was not spoken in their house, 2. He did not know any lullaby in the language.

As I typed the words of the song to send to my friend by WhatsApp, I wondered what else of his cultural traditions he had lost, the successful engineer he is today. I also wondered whether I was better off than him because I could sing a few traditional songs and tell a few narratives in my language. I also wondered what the child's homework, 'done by her father' would mean to her. What sense would her teacher help her to make out of this simple song from her historical cultural roots that she has lost touch with? Would the teacher get it right? Of what use is this lullaby to me now or to my children and their children? Must we sing it exactly in this manner for generations to come? In it and other African cultural oral traditions, do we see possible influence on an ideal present and future Africa? Of what help will writing be to it? These are the questions I share with all of us today.

I do not know what the word *Nyandolo* means, but I know that I like its soothing sound and that it rhymes with *nindo* the Luo word for sleep! The deliberate choice of diction and repetition of the lines produce the desired lulling effect. The message contained herein is that as the baby sleeps, the adults should be awake, hence the commanding of all the sleep from their eyes to come to the baby! This for me, speaks of the purpose to entertain, instruct and lull to sleep. This discredits Eurocentric conceptions of African oral arts like the one by Burton that 'Poetry there is none... There's no metre, no rhyme, nothing that interests or soothes the feelings, or arrests the passions.... (Burton 1865: xii qtd in Finnegan, 2012).

Today we are deliberating on the contribution of African literature and literary works to the sociocultural development of the continent. Probably, we may have been lulled to sleep in our continent's plight of playing catch up with a world that has defined it through the erroneous lens of cultural supremacy. As we awaken to the potential of the cultural African continent, there will be pertinent questions to ponder over during and even after this conference. I will highlight two of these as captured in the present theme.

Enhancing African identity: What do we recognize as an African identity? Postmodern labels like 'contamination, cultural hybridity, cultural mutt, conviviality, and most recently, Afropolitanism, have been proposed in the consideration of the post-colonial African identity (Eze, 2014:234). Africa is first a political then a cultural phenomenon characterized by cultural diversity and hybridity. How can this diversity be harnessed for the creation and perpetuation of an African consciousness political and economic mileage of Africa as a continent. Can this be a common phenomenon in all Africa? Can we have an African 'histo-cultural' identity for effective participation at the table of world cultures that Leopold Sedar Senghor talks of in his poem Prayer to Masks?

Shared values and Integration: As Africans, how do we exploit cultural similarities to foster the kind of integration that will empower Africa to move forward as an entity in the global space? America did it, Europe did it, Asia has done it, and can Africa do it? The former are all premised on solid mythologies adopted into mantras for re-invention of self and society. Can we replant the uprooted pumpkin from the old homestead into the new abode that is Africa? How does writing play a role in this? We need to explore shared values across our mythologies, oral traditions and customs, lifting from them pertinent truths that can be integrated into the African identity that will foster civil growth and development.

The identity of African literature will also come into focus. Kumar (2014), borrowing from Ezekiel Mphahlele defines this aptly as

One produced by writers who are culturally natives of Africa. The literature should take its models and inspirations, from the mythology, oral traditions, customs and traditions of Africa. The writer is primarily part of the social milieu and therefore he should commit himself to the upliftment and progression of his society. (189)

We need to explore shared values across our mythologies, oral traditions and customs, lifting from them pertinent truths that can be integrated into the African identity that will foster civil growth and development. We have all been exposed to various African cultures more through writing than through physical travel. Literary works play an inevitable and inalienable role in identity formations and reformations drawn from the artists' interpretation of their social, cultural, political and economic environments and the cultural and social resources they draw from.

African Oral Traditions: A Cultural Literary Heritage

African literature did not begin from contact with orthography. It has always been, as evidenced by the simple lullaby created by a person, unknown to us today, but known by name to their ancestors. Creativity is at the heart of any human community and Africa is no different. African creative oral productions are traditionally performed, hence attempts at renaming them as 'orature', by literary scholars to distinguish them from written forms. They are for communal consumption not individual access, active participation, not passive abstractions, for communal psyche and interpretations. As such, they address the individual through the community rather than the community through the individual as with written literature. An understanding of this is however, not for us to undervalue writing, but instead to revalue performance of customs and orality within writing.

From Oral Sources to Writing: The Role of the Writer

On the concept note is a quote from Chinua Achebe on the role of the African writer as a teacher. For Abiola Irele, the African writer is a social thinker, for Ngugi wa Thiong'o, he is a cultural mouthpiece of his people whereas for Lewis Nkosi, he is visionary. In these roles, they can lead the way first, in African identity formations and reformations, drawing from its traditional cultural resources, and then, determining Africa's legacy to the world. In the search for a black aesthetics, Aime' Cesaire gives the call for the then Europe trained African writers to write in their blackness, taking up the challenge and task of representing African aesthetic and cultural values in written fiction. The fulfillment of this call was given great impetus by traditional idioms, myths, folktales and other creative energies. Short stories, novellas, novels and plays towards the end colonial and immediate post-colonial Africa bear witness to the rampant use of African traditional proverbs, idioms, and customs in a re-awakening to these traditions.

Today, when Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* reminds us that proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten, we appreciate this fully in the old man's defense of Ikem in *Anthills of the Savannah*;

Going to meetings and weddings and naming ceremonies of one's people is good. But don't forget that our wise men have said also that a man who answers every summons by the town-crier will not plant corn in his fields. So my advice to you is this, Go on with your meetings and marriages and naming ceremonies because it is good to do so. But leave this young man alone to do what he is doing for Abazon and for the whole Kangan; the cock that crows in the morning belongs to one household but his voice is the property of the neighbourhood. (122)

The flavour of the proverbs call attention to their sharp sensibilities without giving offence, but evoke emotive response and which are immortalized in memory and which evoke emotive response. In the same text, Ikem's Hymn to the Sun with its direct address to the sun and traditional referents to it like 'Great Carrier of Sacrifice to the Almighty, 'Single Eye of God', 'Wide-eyed insomniac' and 'Great Messenger of the Creator' bring to our senses the deeper understanding of the sun, drawn from mythologies which have informed belief systems and impacted on relations with the sun.

In *So Long a Letter* by Mariam Ba, Fermatta's wisdom, drawn from her people's wise sayings tradition reminds us that 'You don't fell the tree whose shade protects you,' while Genga-Idowu in *My Heart on Trial*, just like Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *The River Between* use words in untranslated Dholuo and Kikuyu respectively to retain the cultural contexts of their narratives. Chinua Achebe's *Uncle Ben's Choice* and Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* base on the myth of Mami Wota, the Ibo fatal woman, whereas Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* powerfully brings to life the Abiku. Camara Laye juxtaposes traditional Malinke and alien French rites of passage. This fusion of mythologies and oral texts and traditions into the written text point to the materiality of culture within the texts to awaken a consciousness towards 'Africanness' by planting them into the psyche. From encounters with these written texts, the gaze is refocused on the inner, rather than the outer as with Eurocentric texts.

Importantly too, the use of these cultural traditions, beliefs and arts serve as identity markers for the African, answering to the question: who is an African? What does he feel? Think? What is his worldview? Years before I read Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eyes*, I already felt ugly. Growing up alongside Goldilocks, Snow White and Cinderella, I could not match their flawless white skin, soft, long and red or blonde hair or blue eyes. These anatomical peculiarities, chances of nature put me at psychological crossroads with my African orientation. Fortunately, at the University, I met Grace Ogot, Mariama Ba, Buchi Emecheta, Micere Mugo, Flora Nwapa, Chinua Achebe, Ngugu wa Thiong'o, Wole Soyinka, and a host of other African writers, who from use of African characters, mythologies, ideologies and sensibilities recast my view of self as an African. My encounter with African oral aesthetics catalyzed my consciousness towards 'blackness'. From the folktales and songs in these texts, images of a proud and unique heritage emerged. A rebirth happened. There is hope for this to still happen to our young people if the transcription of these values will be in forms that will endear them to their cultural uniqueness and potential, and awaken it them the desire to identify with the same in the process of self-apprehension.

Threads and Continuities: Developing Literary Traditions and Cultures

As our writers draw from oral sources, they must recast the same in usable forms for contemporary Africa. It is only by cultivating a sense of relevance will we draw adequate attention to the rich African traditional cultures and their potential for a revitalized Africa.

There is need for deeper dialogue between researchers of African oral traditions and writers of Africa in all genres. The former have reservoirs of oral material and experience in unearthing the rich African traditional heritage obscured by layers of disuse, and those that have been repackaged for contemporary use, while the latter have narrative dispositions and presentation skills to communicate desired emotions to their audiences. The irony of excellent centers of African studies being situated in America, Europe and now even in Asia while we do not seem to appreciate the value of our own literary cultures is too loud! We have come a long way from Janheinz Jahn's lament on the treatment of African oral literature to liberating studies that now treat them as texts and embrace their authenticity, ingenuity, aesthetics and pragmatics. W. F. Hanks (1989:95) quoted in Barber (2005) defines text as 'any configuration of signs that is coherently interpretable by some community of users....' definition, oral material are now appreciated as texts; with structure, meaning, aesthetic and value. This means we can consume and study creative oral material as texts and also have them enter into written texts as texts themselves for rich aesthetic and cultural experiences.

Secondly, the contribution of African women writers has been lauded for voicing issues of marriage, family and community. According to Monica Bungaro, women's writing has opened up 'areas of life such as sexual relations, marriage, children, and domestic violence, previously regarded as purely personal in import....' (2015:95). Treatment of these support cohesive communities and effective interrogation of the same can be done on the non-threatening platform of literature. In *So long a Letter*, Fermatta asks whether anyone 'has seen a stranger untie a goat in the house' when criticizing Ibrahim for impregnating Assisatou while she is still in her mother's house while Ramatoulaye concludes, in the same letter after bad experiences in marriage that 'I remain persuaded of the inevitable and necessary complementarity of man and woman,' implicit of the wisdom of her people. Trail blazers like Grace Ogot, Buchi Emecheta, Micere Mugo, Mariama Ba, Flora Nwapa, and Efua Sutherland just to mention a few have used their writing to capture, interrogate and propagate traditional African values, mostly by borrowing from and basing on the rich repertoire of its customs, folktales, songs, proverbs, riddles and word play. Writing as a tool, as exhibited by these writers, is not disruptive of value systems but can become a space for the presentation, interrogation and revision of values even within changing contexts. Our contemporary and upcoming women writers can do the same.

Thirdly, must I sing the lullaby in the same manner as my grandmother? Can the creative granaries of our grandmothers and great grandmothers run dry? Not due to retrieval but due to changing contexts that will make its content irrelevant for me today and for my grandchildren? Can I meet this lullaby in a different yet recognizable form that will appeal to my passions and identity in a written text? 'From Oral Sources to writing' denote drawing from one form into another of the oral text. Compositions and performances of oral folk traditions can be woven into contemporary narratives in all

the literary genres by borrowing from them, basing on them, or expanding them through counter narratives and re-contextualization.

Whereas my grandmother's hare ran around naked and barefoot, my son's hare has on jeans and sneakers. Does this make him any less of a trickster? Now that we no longer have pots and gourds at home, have we stopped drinking? Wole Soyinka's concept of continuity is displayed when he presents the Yoruba pantheon of gods with newly acquired responsibilities in the new world order. In one of his interviews, he notes that

Tradition is not static. Culture is not static. It's very dynamic. Tradition can become an entry point into contemporary experience. This is manifested by the very nature of Yoruba deities, as in Shango, God of lightning. What happens when the Yoruba encounter electricity? Shango becomes a symbol of electricity and electric appliances and the various sources of electricity in contemporary society. (34)

Just as Shango acquires new responsibilities in the form of electricity now added to lightning, so can the re-contextualization of oral customs and performances be adopted to new realities in writing. Soyinka has demonstrated this in his plays like *A Dance of the Forest*, *Kongi's Harvest* and *The Road* where from inclusion of the deity 'Ogun' to use of the mask-idiom, the traditional dirges and the festival in the narrative, we are drawn into Yoruba culture in a contemporary world. Ogumba (1971) describes it thus:

But this is an Egungun festival with a difference, because the spirits of health and the illustrious ancestors expected are forestalled and their place is taken by malevolent gods and evil spirits. It is as if on the National day of a country, when everything is set for a great and triumphant celebration, foreign troops suddenly break the border, take over control, offering destruction and death to the population. (106)

In *Goatsmell* by Nevanji Madanhire, Musiiwa's concern over the modern practice of a ritual dance is an example of the need for re-contextualization:

Yes, the dances had been taken out of context with grievous consequences. ... First the Chihoda dance by...women. Just how obscene it looked. Women in order of seniority; the oldest probably in her late fifties and the youngest just about five, danced around a male drummer, gyrating their waists leaving the impression that they were making love. There were upward of twenty thousand people watching! Applauding like juveniles watching a porno film...The dance by those women ...was disgustingly obscene, to say the least. That is not a public dance. ...it is ritualistic and ... was designed for initiates after a circumcision rite in some mountains miles from humanity. (12)

Our writers can draw from the traditional folk granary the same ingredients, keeping the spirit of Africa alive, but cook the art in contemporary recipes for contemporary consumption in the dynamism that characterize culture growth, not discard them. Ngugi (1993) notes that 'cultures that change to reflect the ever-changing dynamics of internal relations are the ones that are healthy.' (xvi) In this context, the internal relations are those that occur within the notions of 'African' and 'modernity'. The literary artists have the capacity to interrogate and explore the present in relation to the past in a

manner that the latter will be both informative and instructive to contemporary pragmatics of culture, and communicate these emotively to us, thus arousing our passions and engaging our minds. Harold Scheub (1998) contends that;

It is the task of the storyteller, in both oral and written traditions of Africa to forge the fantasy images of the past into masks of the realistic images of the present, enabling the performer to pitch the present within a context of and therefore in terms of the past. (1)

Contemporary African authors must write with the performativity of the oral text in mind and with the purpose, not only of archiving, but also of expanding, and rewriting these texts. This makes the written text, not only a medium of culture, but an aesthetic conveyor of the past into the present.

Lastly, we should continue to locate within indigenous oral cultures, indigenous knowledge for humane and sustainable social, political, cultural, economic and environmental practices that can be patented as African and used as working models for the contemporary cultural economy. From the home to the academy- songs, poetry, proverbs and tales drawn from indigenous cultures can influence attitudes on the African sociocultural and environmental setting. Writers of literature should help their African publics understand how through traditional African songs, narratives, proverbs, beliefs and customs, they are connected to the land, the rivers, the lakes, the mountains, the skies, the spirits and gods; and the people around them.

Conclusion

As I sang and sing and will sing the lullaby, it may infect my software engineered mind son with its soothing power and I hope he will develop a computer programme to lull the children to sleep, it may influence my artistically inclined daughter to write a children's book or my yet to be born grandson to just want to know more about his grandmother who sang this lullaby and her values to keep the culture alive.

So, African writers, must continue to weave into the written fabric of their work, the threads of throbbing passions of their customs, proverbs, songs, idioms, riddles, and folktales. It is who they are as Africa and from this resource Africa can discard, retain or improve. Although now we must read more than we listen, can we still hear *hundhwe*, the bird singing to us, singing the comfort of fathers and mothers returning home, the antics of the *Kaka Sungura* the hare or *Ananse* the spider manipulating technology and business acumen to win without harming others, save for their own stupidity! Can we hear caution on ogres of corruption, tribalism, nepotism and marginalization, the wise counsel within the principles of Ubuntu as tortoise presides over conflict with culturally flavoured proverbs and riddles, the lamentations that cut to the heart of the ever hungry earth as it swallows sons and daughters through disease, famine and war, or the celebratory ululations of the marriage songs through what we read? Yes, we can. Why? Because, to paraphrase William Jennings Bryan, 'The writer instead of displacing the oral artist, has given him a larger audience and enabled him to do a more extended work.

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