



Oral Poetry as Channel for Communication

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Abstract

African village traditionally was a small unit where every inhabitant knew and was interested in the affair of his neighbor. This common heritage produces poems passed on by words of mouth from one generation to another. This paper discusses the transmission of African socio-cultural values from one generation to another through oral poetry. It explains its common heritage and modus operandi, which creates the desired atmosphere and evokes the appropriate emotions as demanded by the occasion. The paper also literarily exemplifies the significance of the communication between the living and the dead, the listeners (audience) and the mistrels, praise singers, and the traveling bards of the Ewe of Ghana, the Bantu of South Africa, the Yorubas and Hausas of Nigeria, the Berber of Algeria and the Gikuyu of Kenya. The modes of political poetry in every one of these oral groups and their quest for cultural rehabilitation are encapsulated in the discourse.

Key words: Poetry; African; Communication

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INTRODUCTION

African oral poetry is passed on by words of mouth

from one generation to another. It is also called African traditional poetry whose modus operandi is collective participation. It can be described as a collective experience that is initiated by an individual in a group and shared by the rest of the group; it is a common heritage shared by all and handed over from one generation to another. African oral poetry was not meant traditionally for a few or a particular group, but for the entirety of the community. It is the culture, heritage and pride of a particular African society where such oral poetry is created and performed. In other words it is not the property of a few bards, but the entire society. This is because, oral poetry is created and effectively used to create the desired atmosphere and evoke the appropriate emotion as conditioned by occasion (sad or happy). There is communal approach to oral poetry in African traditional society and this helps to reaffirm the cultural heritage of the people, for African societies have rich traditions of meaningful oral poetry that focuses on the reaffirmation of African cultural heritage and cultural rehabilitation. Oral poetry is composed extemporaneously to suite whatever occasion that warrants it. Traveling bards sang songs and recite poetry to the accompaniment of musical instruments, in the process, they told stories and anecdotes to satirise, correct, educate and inform the society at large on a particular issue. Thus, the essence of the creation and performance of oral poetry is to communicate thought. It is on this premise that the title of our discourse in this study; oral poetry as channel for communication is established. It has also been established that one of the major purpose of poetry is to communicate thought.

THE MODES OF AFRICAN ORAL POETRY

Oral poetry is rich in allusion and imagery. It is regional by nature because it embraces the life and environment of the people. It differs from one region to another because of the conglomerated nature of African ethnics, nationalities

and its individual language such as Ewe, Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Bantu, Berber, Luo, Gikuyu, Baganda, Masai etc. Despite the variations, African oral poetry have the following unique modes.

- Epic
- Protest
- Satire

The Epic mode of oral poetry speaks of war, heroism of different kinds etc while the oral poetry of protest speaks against oppression and domination of colonial rule and imposition of western culture. Oral poetry of satire, satirises the ills in the society created by an individual or group, most especially that of the king.

It is pertinent to remember that one of the major purposes of poetry is to communicate thought.¹ Thus, oral poetry serves as the medium of communication between an African and his ancestors and between his societies through cultural practices that are embedded in oral poetry. The composition and performance of oral poetry is base on the daily realities of his culture which depend on the cultural area that it operates. In the Ewe people of Ghana for example, oral poetry specifically celebrates the dead and the agonies of living. The poems are filled with emotions, with epic tone, pity and historical accounts; witty words are used to carry home the weight of the elegy they performed. Take for example the poem below:

A blade of grass in a stream, no more
I haven't come to drink
From mouth to mouth, pass down word
No need to flee at mere alarm
Mere noise devours no one
I am no more than a blade of grass
A-loving in a stream, not come to drink
(Akpianiano & Moritty, 1967, p. 10)

This is a song of exhortation by a war lord to his people in the face of threat of war by another village. It is a song of appeal to be steadfast and not be afraid, for the persona sees them as the green grass that always replenishes to stand any fiery anger so therefore they should stand and be firm. For the threat of their enemy cannot devour them.

The Hausa poetry is different from that of the Ewe people of Ghana. The Hausas are the northern people of Nigeria their oral poetry is divided into three groups. The first group consists of the praise singers to the Emirs, the second group consist of Muslims who sings the Mohammed faith, while the third class of poetry consist of poor or disabled persons who beg for alms through oral poetry, i. e., the blinds, the crippled etc. (The begging poetry). In the first group the singers praises the emir and denounces his enemies. Take for example the translated poem below:

Kai, what this atom bomb has done to the city of
Hiroshima it will do to the enemies of Daniyan, the
successor. He who submit to this judgment will never
suffer. But those, who think arrogant and superior will
beg at last, writhing under the tongues of fire from hell,

the atom bomb of Hiroshima Daniyan, the successor.
(Scarfe & Aliu, 1967, p. 34)

Politically in the Hausa land of the Northern part of Nigeria, Daniya ranks very high. This is because the Daniya is the apparent to the throne and for this he wields great and absolute authority. This power and authority is what is likened to the atomic bomb that destroyed Hiroshima in the poem above. Here, the poem advice Daniyan's subjects not to be his enemies, not to be arrogant to him. And whoever chooses to do otherwise, will be crushed at a blow by Daniya. For Daniya has a power like atomic bomb to destroy his enemies.

The Yoruba tribe occupies the western part of Nigeria. Its oral poetry is in form of "Ewi", "Ijala", "ofo" or "ogede" (magical words employed to gain supernatural assistance). This is made possible because of the special features in the language. Tonality enriches its daily expression through, idioms, metaphor and proverbs which are often indirectional. As can be observed in the epic poem below:

"SALUTE TO THE ONIKOYI LINEAGE"

Olugbon Agbe, man of war resorting to theft on the left hand side,
Offspring of a titled woman in the society of circumcisers.
The elephant grass does not grow in the forest but in the farm
clearings. Man of war carrying sheaves of arrows.
Gunyandemi, an elderly man tilling his farms.
Rokademi, offspring of Eruuku
Who ever fought a war for the Eso in their absence?
Man of war carrying large numbers of arrows.
Plenty of agony-inflicting power.....
Olukoyi will not cease to wonder about warring.... (Babalola,
1966, p. 124)

Onikoyi in the poem above is the legendary field marshal of the Alafin of Oyo. He is presented in the poem as a war-monger who carries sheaves of arms and has plenty agony-inflicting power who is even compared to the wild elephant grass. He is seen as a restless warrior in the last line of the poem. The lineage and descendants of the Onikoyi are blessed with these features and this will remain their praise singing for life. Many generations yet unborn will be informed about their praise singing.

The Bantu-speaking people of South Africa oral poetry is similar to the above. Here is a praise poem sang in praise of Shaka, the Zulu king.

He is Shaka the unshakable,
Thunder while sitting, son of Menzi;
He is the bird that preys on other birds,
The battle-axe that excels other battle axes;
He is a great hubub like the rock of Nkandle,
Where the elephants take shelter,
When the heaven frown,
Tis he whose spears resound causing wailings,
Thus old women shall stay in abandoned homes,
And old men shall drop by the wayside. (Jordan. 1973, p. 25)

The poem explores the political image of Zulu the warrior and king. For in those days, political power and authority came from military adventures and conquests.

Shaka was a brave and capable soldier. As history will have it, because of his escapades, he was called Napoleon of Africa, Shaka the unshakable etc symbolically, he was also compared with thunder, a destructive force of nature. As manifested in oral poetry of other regions, South African oral poetry consist of fiery language, hyperbole, simile, symbols and other local imageries as evidence in the poem above. The fact is constant in African oral poetry that the nature of traditional praise poetry calls for extensive use of the hyperbole.

In addition to Epic poetry, there are satire and protest mode of oral poetry. They are songs composed on topical issues of the moment, such as comment on social misconduct, false accusations. Satires expose man's vices, follies and absurdities of a society as a whole. Thus, satire entertains on one hand and on the other serves as a social sanction against anti-social behavior since there was neither press nor news media to serve as the channel of communication or information. The poem below is an example of social satire.

Awolowo, Olayinka's father
 You are the one to blame.
 When you held the knife in your hand;
 And you refused to kill the cock
 Merely out of kindness
 The cock is bird for dinner; remember!
 Ah! Awolowo, you are the one to blame
 If the bird escape out of mercy. (Olafoye, 1984, p. 13)

Chief Awolowo was a leader of one of the three major political parties in Nigeria in the 1960s. His own party was the Action Group whose symbol was the palm tree-an economic tree. But his chief rival for leadership of the country was Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe, the leader of the NCNC-National Council of Nigerian Citizens. The symbol for his party was the cock. The cock crows as a symbol of consciousness and the reawakening. The analogy here is that Chief Awolowo has the vote ("Knife") with which to crush Dr. Azikwe and his party (cock) at the polls. Chief Awolowo was urged to do everything to bring victory to his party so that he could become the Prime Minister and his party; the ruling party in power. But if the chief was derelict out of mercy, the NCNC could win at the polls and come to power. He would be the one to blame for his party's misfortune.

Around 1870, the Xhosa's bards of South Africa, protested against the Dutch appropriation of African land. Extemporaneously the bards composed and performed the poem below:

He has made the fingos defiant
 Depriving us of land and power
 See how they stretch from
 Cwecweni to Ngquthu
 How they turn Phalo's land
 Upside down. (Olafoye, 1984, p. 13)

The poem is for a war against dispossession the Xhosas are fighting against the Dutch. Who order the fingos (Black African Police) against the African counterparts?

THE RELEVANCE OF COMMUNICATION BETWEEN THE AUDIENCE AND THE MISTREL

Oral poetry is an integral part of African traditional life. It permeates all aspects of the cycle of human life, practical ideas of life and its necessities, birth traditional marriages, death and the cultural identity of a people. Cultural identity is a social ingredient of a peoples' integrity. As earlier mentioned, African societies have rich tradition of meaningful oral poetry which mostly belong to religious cults. These are Dirge, incantation, praise songs, heroic recitations and chants. These types of poetry serve as a link between the living and the dead, the spirit and man or man and his ancestors.

In the African pyramidal structure, man is next to his ancestors, before the gods. And traditionally, in Africa, man needs to communicate with his ancestors (deity). In the process, the griots and custodians of such deities compose and perform some songs, incantation or chants (Oral tradition poetry) as the occasion demands, to communicate with the ancestors/gods on behalf of the person in question. This may require sacrifices or appeasement. It all depends on the request of the individual and the demand of the gods from the individual.

Also occupational poetry eases and hastens the working process of a particular occupation. For example, it is African belief that every occupation has its deity (gods). Anything that has to do with iron is believed to be associated with Ogun (The god of iron). And for one to be favoured or prosper in such occupation, you need to communicate with Ogun either before or during the working process so as to ask for what he wants for his blessing in return on the job. Example Black Smith, Iron bender, gold smith, etc. This kind of poetry is called chants or ijala in Yoruba land. Such clears evil from the way for the hunters and also give them good game to kill. For the gold smith, it eases and save him of any danger of fire or hurt during forging. This is applicable to every occupation in traditional African society, that traditional poetry is the medium of communications. The farmers (Agrarian farmers) know that they must appease the god of the land in order to get a bountiful harvest every season. When there is drought, immediately, they consult their oracle to enquire from their ancestors on what they must do for the ancestors to give the people rain for their crops to grow well and for them to have a bountiful harvest. The priest communicates between the two parties through chants and incantations.

This process helps to illustrate the cultural background of a particular poetry. Take for instance the Berber culture of Algeria which consists of Cup us oral tradition of poetry and songs. Here, the bard is referred to as superior knowledge defender of tribal honour because he knows how to communicate with the gods or ancestors to get their farmers and their wish for the society to move

forward. In the pre-Islamic society of Algeria, the bards are seen as the presence of culture because their songs/poetry herald important events that become the voice of the common place since the poetry is for all and from one generation to another.

CONCLUSION

The collectiveness and oneness in the production and performance of African oral poetry fortifies and unifies the various societies in Africa from one generation to another. What moral obligation can be more than this? Kingships for example carry the power of life and death because the king was placed on the pinnacle of power and death. This mode of kinship system in Africa makes everyone culturally related to one another, so that when a minstrel composes his poetry, it is for the general upliftment of the community. The communal life (we feeling and collective responsibilities), family-ties, extended family, kingship and material among people make them form a formidable and corporate body which further establishes and solidifies African communicating system with her ancestors as a cultural practice. African kingship traditions are similar especially in praise poetry of the monarch. That is, the Ewe and Akan of Ashanti from Ghana, the Yoruba and Hausa from Nigeria, the Bantu speaking people from South Africa and the Berber from Algeria. Although, some areas of culture in Africa no longer hold the central influence they once had over the people. This gives room for communication gap between them and their ancestors. The presence of western institutions makes them less effective. For example, out of about 52 countries in Africa, only Swaziland and Morocco remained the only monarchies in Africa today where rulers exercise absolute power. This means that African cultural patterns have been changing or giving way to new ones because society is becoming complex and cosmopolitan as a result of African contact with the outside world. But the fact remains that, despite this changes kingship remains a subject of traditional poetry in African communities.

Finally, the essence of oral traditional poetry is to communicate thoughts through various means from the gods to the ancestors, from the ancestors to man or from man to the ancestors, or to the individual in the society. Even despite the presence of mass media and modern information technology, oral poetry is still very relevant in communicating to the people. Although, the heroic recitation is no longer recited at market places or king's palaces but is now used as a vehicle of protest and of social consciousness in modern Africa writings.

This paper has examined oral traditional poetry as channel of communication between the audience and the minstrels in the various regions of Africa. It has also established the significance of oral poetry as a medium of communication between the living and the dead in Africa, between man and his ancestors, among various age groups and occupations, and the entire Africa society. It has also examined the various modes of African oral poetry and how they communicate perfectly to their respective designations. Finally, the paper submitted that, though oral poetry may seem moribund, but it is alive and is used as a vehicle of protest and social consciousness in Africa modern writings.

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