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Literature as a Purposeful Affair: A Study of Selected Igbo (Oral Poems) Songs

Michael Anyanwu · Friday, August 14th, 2020

ABSTRACT

Most African oral narratives never come unburdened. The crux of every oral artist's performance is not just the entertainment of the target audience, but also to have certain truths, values and ethics associated with their immediate society projected and communicated. These TRUTHS in the aspect of forms and aesthetics, is broached on in this study. The thrusting or application of western paradigms in the interpretation of African folklore studies has kept this area of African literary scholarship in its infancy. This has also hampered the growth of criticism of oral poetry and oral literature in Africa. This research harnesses its data from a field research and dovetails, in its analysis, into basic functions embedded in the oral forms with the aim of proving to a degree that oral poetry, in addition to having the qualities which make us think of art as aesthetic, also has a specific cultural function, is a viable site for literary forms.

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INTRODUCTION

In Africa, literature seems to subsist more in being a purposeful affair; it is not meant merely to satisfy some aesthetic craving or to engender intellectual appeal (Onyegbule, 1995). This is very peculiar in the traditional Igbo society. The purpose in most African oral forms (poetry) veers from ritual through demonstration of accepted values to simple moral or ethical education. For in the society the good and accepted norms of behavior are cherished, while social ills and vices are shunned.

The form known as poetry is not uncommon to the African terrains (Finnegan), even though scholarship has tended to sink the roots of poetic composition in the ancient Greek civilization. It could and should be taken that this universalist perspective is not all there is to it and therefore not true to an extent. Poetry has existed long before the Greek civilization, and evidences are found in traditional African Kingdoms. As Ronald Carter and John McRae posit that Literature is as old as human language, and as new as tomorrow's sunrise. The first literature in any culture is oral. The earliest version of the Bible were all communicated orally and passed on from generation to generation with variations, additions, omissions and embellishments until they were set down in written form in versions which have come down to us.

Hence, this study discusses the poetry of the Igbo society which expresses itself in oral forms such

as animal songs, incantations, and recitations. These forms mostly cover all that everyday speech does not express. Thus, it is in the art of poetry and its immense verbal variability that the individual talent flourishes. The songs are performance-oriented and are chanted on specific occasions. These occasions, which are contextual, form part of the most significant facts of the argument on functionality. The ultimate realization of the matter used lies in the occasion and atmosphere of its performance.

Songs, chants and recitations serve as outlets for sorrow and anxiety. These forms are at the heart of the African artistic imagination, image-making, creativity, inventiveness and social entertainment. Moreso, the appreciation of these forms depends on our knowledge of the particular art form used, its whole literary setting, the rhythm, phrasing and music of the line. A good knowledge of these literary devices employed makes the appreciation of the oral verses possible. The research takes this stance and critically analyses these oral forms portraying oral poetry as a viable ground for critical scholarship.

The research materials are collected through an observer participation approach and its analysis based on a qualitative study. These oral forms are collected in the south-west of Nigeria. Precisely in Nsukka, Enugu state.

<i>Text I</i>	<i>Translation</i>
Nzogbu Nzogbu	trample to death (2x)
Enyimba enyi	great land, great
Nzogbu nzogbu	trample to death (2x)
Enyimba enyi	great land, great
Nzogbu nwoke	trample to death the man
Eniyimba enyi	great land, great
Nzogbu nwannyi	trample to death the woman
Enyimbaenyi	great land, great

This text is rendered antiphonally, typical of any African political song. Functionally this pattern depicts the African sense of communality and brotherhood. The piece expresses a certain type of consolidation of a particular group of aggrieved individuals rallying to voice their opinions. The key interest is to fight against a common ill that doesn't favor the interest of the singer and the other people who serve as the chorus in the piece. Embedded in the lines of this piece is the tone of vehemence shared between individuals, united by a goal; to have their needs met.

‘... nzogbu nzogbu

Enyimba enyi’

Peculiar among the people of southwest Nigeria, the song is a chant known for its arousal of a

revolutionary interest, hence this song is usually sang for the achievement towards a common goal and the chant serves as a unifying force that binds these oppressed individuals. The song is a deeply emotional and symbolic song which describes the plight of the under-trodden in the society, who are clearly subjected to same form of oppression and exploitation.

To appreciate any oral text is to judge aesthetics embedded in the text. The artistry of the poem is usually determined by the artistic application of figures of speech, for the poetic composition depends on these effects which are rhythm, imagery and symbolism. The words in the oral text are simple and plain but the combative and unemotive impact is very permeating. The absence of complexities makes the identification of the images less difficult. However, this doesn't mean that most political songs and chants are unimaginative and shallow but the symbols are usually very vivid in the minds of the people.

The style as a whole is simple and short, for the refrain in the text '*enyimba enyi*' emphasizes its provocative nature to inspire change. In spite of its shortness as a poem, it holds an impression of highly charged words.

The poetic rhythm is further marked by the musical features of an agitation song. Although, there is a fascinating use of a rhyme pattern in this piece, this helps the song to achieve a musical effect. For instance;

“nzogbu

Enyimba enyi

Nzogbu

Enyimba enyi”

The rhythm suggests a thumping sound that makes the call and response “enymiba enyi” rhythmical. Though this might not be clearly seen when it is transcribed.

Most chant songs are usually known for its rich employ of simile and metaphors. Metaphor is the ascription of human traits, thought and emotions to animals. This is evidently seen in the poem. For the singer alludes to the elephant which is known for its fierce rage whenever provoked to anger; for it is known that most elephants are peace loving animals, but when provoked to anger it could mean an inevitable catastrophe just as an old African proverb states: “When two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers most.” The oral artist uses this charged emotion to direct the crowd which he controls to march on, evidently seen in the poem’s refrain, “Enyimba Enyi.”

Almost all oral poems have a rich use of imagery and symbols, for this is the essential elements by which the oral text expresses its thematic preoccupation and aesthetic effect. Images help to clarify this themes and make the reader or audience feel the oral artist’s grasp of the object or situation he is dealing with, which is quite peculiar with most recitations and chant songs. This image which is sustained by simile, metaphor and personification evokes the right image in the mind of the audience. For instance

Solo: nzogbu nwoke

Chorus: *enyimba enyi*

Solo: nzogbu nwanyi

Chorus: eniyimba enyi

Translation

Solo: March men

Chorus: March and march like the elephant

Solo: March women

Chorus: March and March like an elephant

Thus, we could see that the soloist doesn't obey any form of stratification in gender. The first image portrays the men to move out in solidarity and this marching is not in some insouciant manner, but he shouts out an order to march like an elephant, whether of the male or female gender. The alliterative flow of the song and plosives in the original text combine with some assonance to give the song a military rhythm.

More so, the singer employs an animal image found in their local physical environment, and try to use disguising actions of these animals to find an explanation for the solidarity march. This type of image depicts the common bond of the relationship of the chorus.

Repetition is the most common device found in oral texts. The oral artist employs this, to register some vital points in the minds of the audience. The repetition enforces, emphasizes and clarifies the soloist's narration. This repetition is found as a single phrase at the end of the soloist call.

The use of literary devices by the creative narrator is to achieve an artistic end at the same time bring a sense of commitment into its orality. The application of these devices is what qualifies the oral narrative as literature. Hence, these literary devices share a lot of peculiarities with written literature.

TEXT 2

Onyemuru nwa nebe akwa

Translation

who gave birth to the crying baby

Egbe muru nwa nebe akwa

kite(bird) gave birth to the crying baby

Wete uziza nwete ose

bring uziza and pepper

Nwete amarara di na ofe

bring amarara from the soup

Ka nwa nnunnu racha aka
hand

so that the little bird will lick their

From times past, songs chanted, intoned or sung have played healing roles in the life of mankind (Iwoketok). Hence, the role of healing is peculiar to most lullabies apart from the soothing trait of most lullabies, it is also used to communicate social values and condemn vices where they are found in any traditional African community; the importance has been to protect the society.

This piece which is a lullaby song and is often performed by a babysitter, popular with most Nsukka babysitters and also peculiar not just for its soothing lines but also reveals a distinct African story.

The song explains the state of a crying baby, which refuses to keep quiet, even when the baby has been given all manner of goodies to do so. Although the mention of the ‘bird’ is to depict that the song is to lull a little child for the child is described as a little bird. The use of the food items such as ‘amarara, uziza and pepper’ which comes from a soup delicacy is to soothe the child to sleep.

Alluding to an environmental predator, the kite is peculiar for its hunt for rodents and it preys on its victims by hovering before snatching on them. This allusion is to cajole the crying child to sleep, “for the fear of these kinds of creatures evokes a mental image of fear in the child and frightens the child to sleep” (Enonbong, 45).

The structure of the poem contains words with soft sounds which invariably produces soft notes. Echoes of these sounds are ‘nwete amarara di na ofe, ka nwa nnunu racha aka.’ This line portrays promises that the babysitter or mother tries to make to soothe the child, this also contributes to the rhythm of the poetic piece. Pertinently, it should be understood that the combination of words and sound patterns in the poem adds to the richness and helps the poem gain a sedative effect on the child.

CONCLUSION

Mathew Arnold avers that literature is a product of man in the environment that he lives; hence, the narratives we take in are simply what defines our existence. Validity of this lies in the fact, that African narratives produced are simply what make up our identity as Africans. It might have been said that most African oral forms lack what Finnegan refers to as forms with no ‘linguistic content’. Perhaps, this form of judgement could have been passed out in the light that due to the mode of production of most oral poetry which portray a ‘qualitatively low grade’ of poetry. Nevertheless, it should be taken into cognizance that most oral forms are didactic or simply committed in nature and might not obey the Aristotelian notion of ‘art for art sake’.

Hence, this fieldwork research paper documents about two recitational verses, and makes an analysis of its poetic forms, and the analysis portrays the various literary forms embedded in these various oral forms, and portrays these oral forms not just as ancient oral poems or songs but depicts these forms as a viable committed form of literature.

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