



ORAL POETRY AS A MIRROR AND INSTRUMENT OF SATIRE IN THE AFRICAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

The paper attempts to view and analyse the concept and scope of traditional Oral African Poetry and songs in some selected societies. It has also highlighted its potentials in regards to positive change and contributions of the African people towards societal civilization. Therefore, the aim of the paper is to prove that traditional African oral poetry in its original form can help to maintain its pride when compared to the conventional poems of the European world. The paper concludes by providing that oral poetry in African to a large extent can be used not only as an avenue for checking and evaluating the society's hopes and aspirations but also as an instrument for highlighting the various ills in the society with a view to bring about the desired changes, unity, sanity peace and love of one another in the society for an effective development.

Key words: An Oral Poetry of Yoruba hunters, Traditional Poetry of the Ewes in Ghana and Oral Poetry as an Instrument of Satire in Africa.

Introduction

Every society in the world has a tradition to mark its existence. In African, society there is no doubt that oral poetry if judiciously exploited could serve as a mirror through which the society can look at itself. Most African communities and societies are rural based; oral poetry has served as an avenue through which the people's beliefs, their innermost desires and aspirations are expressed. It is served as a potential tool for examining and evaluating the rural communities daily activities, their past history, heroes and as well project into their future.

It is good to point out that this paper will face a drawback in analyzing most of the oral poetry selected. That is, the imminent danger posed will be in the area of attempting to translate the original version in the various local languages into English language. Also most of the oral expressions are meant to be performed in a stage and the major disadvantage

and obstacle posed by translation is that it is difficult to find the linguistic equivalents to retain the spirit of the originality. Again since performance cannot be captured in print, much would be lost in the subsequent translations. Therefore, the poems which this paper will use to illustrate the various oral expressions from the various societies in Africa are not immune from this danger. The analysis of most oral expression from the various ethnic regions is therefore subject to this major handicap.

The Ijala Poetry: An Oral Poetry of Yoruba Hunters

Senanu and Vicent (1976) observed that Ijala, is one of the most popular sequences in Yoruba oral literature. They observed that apart from the specific addresses made to individual animals in the bush, that such chants also treat other situation that may not seem to have any direct relationship to the hunter and his profession. They believe that such chants could be employed by both hunters and non hunters alike for other specific festivals.

Ajuwon in Abalogu (1981) described Ijala as the Yoruba hunters poetry. He notes that it is chanted by the Yoruba hunters during the performance of final funeral ceremonies for their departed colleague.

He also noted that such poetry provides other social functions like entertainment at naming ceremonies, weddings, house warming parties etc. And that the poetry as well deals with many themes which treat an important aspect of other Yoruba culture. For example evaluating the themes and philosophies expanded by the Ijala chanters, Abalogu (1981) observed that Yoruba people believe that man is the only and main key of a society and to maintain the integrity and well being of the society, man has to be shaped with the ideal values to pursue such goals worthy of emulation by other people. He went on to observe that though the influence of the Ijala oral poetry has been over the years, it still serves as the mouth piece of the Yoruba communities to give their people new perspectives on human nature as well as to remind them of what is essential in human life.

Babalola (1964) in the same vein asserts that Ijala as a traditional poetry of the Yoruba hunters is chanted by talented men and women of the Yoruba community at religious and other social gatherings of the devotees of Ogun - the Yoruba god of war and iron implements. He went further to note that hunters and blacksmiths dominate the society and because of proximity and peculiarity of their profession as it relates to the use of iron implements, other professionals such as farmers and carvers as well as repairers are also involved. He went on to state that during such festivals sacrifices are offered to the god of war in the shrine. He went on to point out that there are other occasions when the Ijala is employed and such is during the period of hard work in a farm land by the farmers such as weeding and harvesting period. He asserts that such songs are produced by spontaneous effect as:

Overflow of powerful emotions – they are an expression of strong feelings from the depths of the poets personality, moreover, the euphony of the words of Ijala and the associated rhythm of the chant further qualify Ijala for citizenship in the realm of poetry ...

One of the Ijala songs translated into English illustrates its nature and it goes:

We salute a hunter who makes a kill of game animals we are not saluting
a person who trails behind hunters Iroko, offspring of Akinsinola

A fox who enters itosi forest
And dresses the bush back with clothes
It is already gone
I should like to catch game animals like Iroko
And make extensive farms like the hunters fieldmarshal
To combine hunting with farming which brings comfort.

The source of the above is Oral Poetry in Nigeria (p. 198).

The analysis of the above poem, the poet uses special symbols to epitomize the significant nature of the Yoruba hunter, his culture and the dexterity of his professional skills and aspirations. According to Babalola (1964), the poem highlights the need to subsidize one's hunting, as he states:

Equally, it is good to achieve the figures of speech in the poem such as the use of similes, metaphor etc as well as the use of the first person technique, the beauty of the language, discipline of the farm work which places the Ijala poem on the same pedestal with the contemporary Western poems.

Ajuwan (1981) observed and explained the Ijala poem as follows:

They make a critical commentary on the life and achievements of the individuals, identifying his successes and failures using appropriate figures of speech, the individuals contributions for which he is admitted are emphasized on, his weaknesses for which he is disrespected well identified ...

Traditional Poetry of the Ewes in Ghana:

The Ewe people of Ghana live in Savanna belt of central and Northern Ghana. They have rich cultural heritage and are particularly significant because of their possession of an abundance of a distinguishable types of oral poetry. Like their other African rural settlers, their oral poems provide the avenue for an expression of philosophy of life and value of human beings.

Like other rural communities in African, the Ewe means of livelihood is agriculturally based. Their traditional poems and songs which are used in their remote farm settlements during clearing of the bush, harvesting or when engaged in other domestic chores to the accompaniment of appropriate drum bit and dances reflect their aspirations. A careful study of one of such poems will reveal the height of their achievement in the traditional poetry.

An English translation of one of such poem by Adali M. (1967) is as follows:

*Me thinks it's been a dream
But the dream has come to life
Atangba's son, Drofenu says,
Believe them not
A dream is a drem
No more*

*Truly, has dreams been real
Death, I'd have fathaned death*

The above poem summarized the real meaning of life and its ultimate end which is death. It exposes the passing of time and man's fear of its end which turns out to be real.

Adali (1964), therefore summarizes the philosophy of Ewe poem in these words:

To man and animal alike, there is a hunting uncertainty of the day to come, the fear of the future, the sudden disaster; the caprices of weather, the deep mystery of natural phenomenon . . . all these find an echo in the poem.

Though these type of songs and poems represent and recreate the aspiration and hope of man, it can only be sung on the appropriate occasion. In African society, such songs are sacrilegious. It is mourning song and unless a death actually occurred, it cannot be used. The aim is to arouse feelings.

Oral Poetry as an Instrument of Satire in Africa:

Satire is a literary composition, essentially employed as a criticism of folly of voice which holds up to ridicule or scorn. Its chief instruments being irony, sarcasm, invective, Wit and Humour-Schwarz (1993). The above definition of satire by Wit and Schwarz (1993) exposes one important fact which holds that satire uses different instruments mostly songs and poems to expose the folly or ills in a community with the view to bring sanitary and positive change to such behaviors in the society.

Hornby (2004) defined satire as a denunciation or ridicule of an institution or behavior in a person. The above definitions of concept of the meaning of satire imply that it involves a subtle use of humour or humourous situation to expose ills for a change in the society.

Nwoga (1981) observes that satire is the verbal equivalent of actions like tying a stolen item round the neck of a thief and parading him round the community. When this happens, the shame, scorn and amusement from people around would prevent his free movement in the society and this will possibly bring a change in him and prevent others from doing similar act for fear of judicial punishment.

Satire plays a role within the African setting. It can occur in the nature of jesting poem or singing about the individual who has committed a crime that the society frowns at such a person will be physically exposed. There are songs composed by our forefathers who are concerned with the deepest things in life. All around them were wealth of materials, ideas, love and concern for one another for a peaceful co-existence. The allusions and imagery of poems and songs drawn from their rich environment form the social background that goes with such physical exposure.

From the traditional African system, this paper will examines the role of oral poetry in two ethnic groups within Nigerian society. The groups are the Hausa Fulani in the North and the Igbos in the Eastern part of the country. The paper will attempt to use songs by Dan Maraya Jos, in the Northern Nigeria and Teenage satirical songs selected from some areas in the Igbo land to illustrate the use of oral poetry as an instrument of satire.

Dan Maraya Jos is a renowned musician. His songs have taken him to different

parts of Africa and across the globe. A brief analysis of some of his poems and songs will show to what extent he has employed his rhetoric as a means of x-raying the societal ills. He is a socialist who plays the “Kuntigi” as his musical instrument. He can best be described as a public and freelance poet who sings for brave men and women in the society, wealthy patron, the malami and spirit cult, Igwe, (2000).

Evaluating his role in the society as a poet, Ahmed-Dabi (1981) opines that:

... Dan Maraya plays many significant roles within the society. He introduces and discusses various social values in his songs. He is like other Hausa oral singers, the custodian of the society's tradition and culture ... He discusses social problems of the society as a whole and suggests solutions ...

In one of his poems, Dan Maraya Jos chastises people against drug intake; he went on to point out its dangers thus:

*Do not take drugs
It is not good
Give me your attention
Drugs should not be taken*

In his next poem, the poet is concerned about the high rate of divorce in the society. He believes that either of the couple could save their marriage if he or she could resolve the conflict among them.

House master
If you quarrel,
For the sake of Allah, do not leave the house
If the case is to be followed carefully,
Hypocrites are to be found in the house
Whatever the husband does
Is narrated to the wife
And she believes without investigation
Whatever the wife does
Is also taken to him
And he believes without enquiring
You see, within seven days
Enmity will rise up
And divorce occurs

One good thing in Dan Maraya Jos is that he employs the use of simple language in his poems. Also he uses his songs to critically evaluate the society and goes on to point out its weaknesses and goes on to give advice. In one of his interviews recently, the poet revealed some issues as he said:

In most of my songs, I give more attention to common problems. I also advice wicked people to change their attitudes and encourage kind people to keep it up. Most of my songs are for

enlightenment and advising the public on good deeds . . .

From the foregoing, it could be seen that African traditional poetry can be used as a veritable instrument to x-ray the society, expose its weakness with a common view to reforming it.

In Igbo land, Teenage satirical songs are used for the sole purpose of exposing weakness and ills among people. As Nwoga (1981) observed, satirical songs by the youths deal with a number of themes. The most prominent theme is moral laxity especially sexual immorality among the youths which has adverse effect on the girls in particular. For illustration, let us take a look at this song:

*Opening the waist is not the problem, our children
Those about whom we are talking know themselves
A bottom once bitten by an ant gets wiser
Opening the waist is not the problem, our children
The blood that splashed in the childbirth room
Opening the waist is not the problem, our children
The screams from the Daughter of Mary in the children birth room . . .
Take me in a car to Abor hospital
Opening the waist is not the problem, young girls and boys.
(Source: Oral poetry in Nigeria pg. 236).*

The wording of this poem shows that young girls who are involved in promiscuity are reminded that it is not having pre mature sex that matters but what follows after words. In the poem too, young girls are reminded that they must be prepared to endure the pains of childbirth and its odd.

The next poem advises the young girls for immodest dressing.
We know what you are doing
Young girls from college
We know what you are doing
Daughters of Mary who show us films in the market
We know what you are doing.
The girls left their cloths, left their dresses
Come nude to the market place
To come and show us films in the market
Take things easy
If a prostitute becomes pregnant, her magic is ruined
This makes us angry
Those we are taking about know themselves.

The above poem is addressed to young girls who wear cloth but dress indecently exposing their bodies. They were described as showing pornographic films in the open places. The poet went on to advice that if eventually like the prostitutes the girls become pregnant, then the sole aim for their reckless dressing and pride is defeated.

It is in the composition of such songs, dances and poems that the Igbos broadcast their opinions on the youths and advice them not to do anything that will lead them to have

illegal sex so as to prevent them from having unwanted pregnant.

The avenue for the use of such satire is mostly during moon light plays, festivals, public dances, and masquerade dances.

Sexual immorality is not the only social ill advertised in the Igbo land. Other social ill condemned through the use of satire include: Failure to follow the practice of life style in a community especially with regards to moral code that will immediately invite satire. Also there are satires against men and women, young and old for various offences like promiscuity, stealing, selfishness, laziness, lying etc. For a man who fails to take care of his wife especially when she has given birth to children, men beating their wives, women eating in hotels and open places, wickedness in men and women politicians, public office holders and so on. All these attract satirical songs – advocating for a change of habit.

From the fore going, it can be seen to what extent the African traditional poetry can be exploited not only to ridicule the society of its ills but also to bring about sanity meaningful and positive changes in the society.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to evaluate the scope and nature of traditional oral poetry in most African societies Nigeria and Ghana to be precise. It has shown that in as much as African society has no written tradition of its past rich cultural heritage, this cannot be interpreted to mean that Africa lacks tradition especially in the art of poetry. The paper has also to a large extent demonstrated that the rich traditional songs and poetry in African society serve not only as a means to x-ray the hopes and aspirations of people but also an avenue for checking the society weaknesses with the view to bring about sanity, meaningful reforms and positive changes within the society and among the people.

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