

The Old Woman and Her Mushroom: A Historico-Literary Approach to the Ethnography and Ethos of the Bakor Group of People of Northern Cross River State

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ABSTRACT From an interdisciplinary perspective, the field of oral literature depends for its explication on sociology, anthropology, linguistics and even history. To understand the importance of an oral narrative, recourse has often been made to these various disciplines. Ironically, the anthropologists interested in cultures of the races of the world dominated studies of oral literature, from the late 19th century. The result was that narratives were often subjected to functional analysis for aesthetic content. The paper therefore, is a collaborative endeavor, which utilizes insights from literary, sociological or anthropological and historical perspectives to analyze oral narratives. This, it is hoped, will enhance a better understanding of the narratives, not only from their cultural background but also from their artistic and aesthetic background.

INTRODUCTION

It was exponents of functional ethnography, like Bronislaw Malinowski and Melville Herskovits who, working under the aegis of European anthropological forays into Africa and other parts of the world, first asserted that an analysis of the content of an oral narrative told in any community would reveal the culture of the said community. They also argued that the study could not be complete as a study of the culture content of that community unless the context of the narrative is also studied. Yet interest in the oral narrative, at this point, was placed more on the evidence that could be adduced in support of the presence of cultural traits, whether material or non-material in the narratives under consideration than on the context of performance of the narrative. Anthropological interest was tilted in favour of traditional social life and thought as displayed in the narratives than in the creative quality of art forms. Put differently, the emphasis of anthropologists in this type of study was more on the deduction that a community's life and thought system was made from the nature and content of its oral narratives, than [on] attempts to get to the essence of the narrative's aesthetic principles that govern the production of these artistic products.

Today, however, this lopsided view of the oral narrative has been largely corrected in favour of a more rounded and rewarding analysis of the narrative from the perspective of both its con-

text and its context. This is due to the intensive and extensive approach emphasized by scholars like Okpewho (1979), Biebuyck (1976), Lord (1960), Babalola (1966) and others. Furthermore, the usefulness of the oral narrative as a veritable source for historical reconstruction and cultural recording is also emphasized by scholars like Vansina (1966) and Bhabha (1994), who recognize the oral narrative as a good source for historical methodology.

Of course, the narrative's proper place as a literary product has never been in dispute except that in its analysis, different schools of thought emphasize its function. The anthropologists see it as a vehicle for the coding and transmission of culture from one generation to another; the historian, as a source for historical documentation; the linguist, as a tool for the study of various ways in which language can be manipulated; the missionary, as a record of the cosmic and religious world view of a particular community; the literary artist sees it as a conglomerate of all these and more, that is, as the totality of the aesthetic principle operative in a community where the narrative is produced as a reflection of the artistic ingenuity and creativity of the individual artist.

Therefore, the arguments put forward by scholars like Okpewho (1979), Albert (1992), Lord (1960), Malinowski (1960) and Dyer and Fredrich (2002) which are most relevant, have been that; given the multifaceted nature of the oral narrative. Scholars who are involved in its

study and analysis should be engaged more in collaborative studies than in unproductive attempts to arrogate to themselves the primacy of the oral narrative in their field of study. This will certainly be a much more rewarding venture to all the fields that stand to narrative (Okpewho 1979). Now, in recognizing the paramount position of the literariness of the oral narrative, one is inevitably emphasizing the beauty and the aesthetics of oral art over and above all other considerations (Ganyi 2014).

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

The Aesthetic Content of Oral Narratives

The artistry and creativity displayed by the artist in tale rendition become more important, that is, the context becomes more important than the content, which to a large extent, only depends on the context for its explication (Boje 2003; Briggs 1990). This explains why people seldom, if at all, watch a traditional dance performance primarily for the message it carries. It is instead, the beauty of the rendition which attracts an audience, which only later on perceives the message very much in keeping with the aesthetic principle, which advocates the courting of audience attention, retaining of audience attention, and then the transfer of cognitive experience. This is why Okpewho (1979) argues in favour of traditional African art that in it,

“...Beauty had survived as the ultimate irreducible; though we live forever with some form of religion, the urge to create beauty remains a basic impulse whatever the nature or the level of the experience we may be involved in.”

He further asserts and very importantly so that *“those who look for religion or worldview behind all traditional art have often ignored the basic play interest of the artist”*. This, indeed, is the province of the literary scholar whose primary interest in the narrative is the artistry and aesthetics inherent in the tale and only secondarily in the content or worldview as displayed in the tale. It explores the narrative and creative capability of the oral artist particularly within the context of performance, which with its attendant influences, offers the narrator or artist ample opportunity to recreate the tale or lay emphasis on different aspects of it, thus varying its meaning (Dyer 2002; Herskovits 1958; Bauman 1984). It is this manipulation by the art-

ist, which could lead to possible variability of the content of the tale that Okpewho observes when he further states:

“...In some of the more notable African tales that (may) have anything to do with ritual or religion, the religious element is frequently superseded by the play interest of the narrator, especially in the fervid context of the open performance.”

This is precisely why Albert Lord (1960) asserts, “an oral poem is not composed ‘for’ but ‘in’ performance”. The artist, in performance, often has the liberty to record the tale elements in a recognizable manner in an attempt to explain cosmic or abstract concepts, which otherwise would remain inexplicable to the minds of the ordinary person in the community. He becomes the voice of the people, the interpreter of their worldview or cosmic belief. The perceptive artist is, thus described by Okpewho as:

“...The imaginative leader or the guiding sensibility of his community (who) continually leads the way in recreating the progressive forms of the communal myth.”

Here, the techniques open to the artist to build his narrative often times are those of embellishment and internal expansion through addition of details that enhance elaborateness of the narrative. As a result, the artist’s perception of society is really what the audience sees in a performance, because it is his creative and manipulative skill that revitalizes and gives life to the narrative, thus bringing it alive in the eyes of the audience. The perceptive artist relies not so much on the static tale, which his society’s narrative repertoire has bequeathed to him, but on his own dynamic and creative energy to enliven performance to the admiration of his receptive audience; it is difficult for anyone to argue for the static nature of the oral narrative (Bauman and Briggs 1990) This is so because each performance is, in fact, a potential occasion for the creation of another tale by the artist. This creative potential of the artist enhances his relevance in society as Okpewho again observes:

“...In a society where the means of disseminating ideas are rather limited, the artist is usually responsible for giving a firm foundation to new cultural influences that might otherwise have been treated as passing fancies and have been allowed to die.”

Fortunately, the artist is always available to achieve a balance between old and new cultural

influences through the play of his individual talent and fancy. The example of military regimes in Nigeria is very apt. In the Bakor Community of Northern Cross River State in Nigeria, each successive military regime inspires the traditional singers' compositional skills, such that it ultimately leads to the composition of several lyrical renditions about incumbent military heads of state. This serves to legitimize military rather than political leadership among the people.

The Cultural Content of Oral Narratives

It is on the basis of the foregoing that this paper looks at the rendition of a Bakor oral narrative, primarily from a literary point of view with the aim of analyzing its beauty, that is, the aesthetics of presentation, detailed descriptions of scenery, the vivid portrayal of characters as well as the extent to which characters approximate to the ideals of the society within which they are created and in which they operate for a rounded view of the narrative. The paper also looks at how much of the worldview and cosmic beliefs of the Bakor, especially Ekajuk history, is revealed in the narrative in terms of the people's occupation, genealogy, inheritance practices and other such institutions.

The researchers hasten to add here that they have fallen far short of the lively rendition that is the product of intense and active audience participation. Moreover, for the purposes of a paper of this nature it is practically impossible to render the tale with all the questions and repetitions as the artist presents the old woman in her journey through the myriad of occupational representatives in the Ekajuk community. All the researchers have tried to do for this purpose is to pick one strand of the narrative from the beginning to the end as representing the several repetitions that the artist displays as he performs the narrative. This, admittedly, hardly does justice to the liveliness that is the narrative, but has simply enabled the researchers to look from the context to the content of the narrative.

The tale itself is fairly common among the Ekajuk people in particular, and the Bakor in general of whom the Ekajuk are part and parcel. The Bakor, according to Sandy Onoh, are also an Ejagham subgroup. As is often the case with the Bakor oral narrative repertoire, every member of the audience knows tale items and so interest does not lie in the content of the narrative (al-

ready known) but in its performance with its attendant histrionics.

Most, if not all, Bakor oral narratives are performed not recited. Performance places a burden on the artist or performers whose place it is to enliven the performance through contemporary references as well as journeying back into the past to achieve a balance in the rendition. The artist's rendition is, therefore, judged, not primarily on how many tales he knows and weaves into his rendition but how well he renders them, that is, the extent of dramatization, improvisation and gestures, upon which depend the beauty of rendition and subsequently the interest of the audience. To the Bakor artist, therefore, the circumstances of delivery matter much more than the tale itself or the words he uses. Members of the audience even go to the extent of taunting the artist in an attempt to derail him from the rendition and so pass him out as a bad artist. What they are interested in is not narration but drama and dance, gesture or mimicry as the artist effectively employs it (Ganyi 2014).

The artist must simulate the movement and characters he creates very effectively in order to carry his audience along. Members of the audience, on their part, are at liberty to accept, through applause, or reject through booing any performance, which they consider to be below standard or amateurish in presentation. As a result, in the Bakor folktale rendition, verbal exactitude is sacrificed on the altar of performance histrionics. The identification of the audience with the presentation of the artist is, thus, dictated by the narrative aesthetics employed by the artist to vividly bring out the full-intended meaning or import of his performance.

In 'The Old Woman and her Mushroom', the narrative rendition is predominantly poetic rather than prosaic, which is usually the folktale method. The poetic language is sustained through the use of ideophonic and onomatopoeic words like, '*Nshakare*' '*anyangiri*' and '*akpake mban*', all sounds representative of dry leaves, pieces of broken clay pot and kernel shells respectively while '*agbakame*' also denotes blows from the knuckles. Short, taut sentences afford the rendition a son-like status, while the profuse of repetitions and antithetical statements reinforce the main ideas in the rendition, for example,

*May Day approach that I may go to
The undertaker who buries the dead*

*With plantain leaves
The undertaker who buries the dead
With plantain leaves
Took my little torn mat
My little torn mat was from
The one who wraps her body in
"moi moi" leaves
The one who wraps her body in
"moi moi" leaves
Took my old torn blanket
The old torn blanket was from... etc.*

The antithesis rests on the fact that none of the characters is ever seen doing the right thing until the old woman comes along. They practice the opposite of what is the general norm in organized society until they are corrected by the old woman who exacts a prize she takes to another deviant character. Very notable in the entire rendition is the active or dynamic audience participation, which is enhanced by the song-like nature of the rendition. This and the fact that the entire rendition thrives on mime, voice modulations and gesticulations as the narrator stimulates the actions of his character enlivens the narrators and brings home both the beauty of the artistic device employed as well as the intended message.

Perhaps the most outstanding and interesting aspect of the narrative is the humor, which pervades the entire framework of the tale as the old woman moves from one occupational representative to another. The humor is sustained by the mockery and contempt, which the old woman treats each character with each of his or her misplaced occupational tool. She supplies the right tool only to wish for dawn so that she can go back to recover her implement, which must have been used up or destroyed. This necessitates a situation for repayment, which in turn solicits an argument since she never informs her clients that the tools are on loan. This framework affords the artist ample opportunity for dramatization and audience reaction, which enhances the beauty of rendition. With this, the creative capacity of the artist is unlimited as he runs comments on all the characters including the old woman herself.

Another aspect of the tale that is worthy of note is that it is rendered in the tradition of the quest form as the old woman undertakes a self-imposed journey through the gamut of all the occupations practiced in Bakor community, she educates them on the right implements to use.

This represents a sort of movement from ancient to modern values as the old woman not only supplies modern tools for agriculture but also new ideas, for example, feeding a child yam instead of sandy dust from anthills, and using camwood as a skin smoothener instead of ashes. The quest is therefore, for an ideal Bakor Community fulfilled ideologically and physically and is borne out more in the narrator's side comments on the characters as the old woman makes contact with them. To the undertaker he exclaims, "*oh what an ancient way to bury, with plantain leaves. To the beautician who uses ashes she asks, "Have you never been in contact with civilization?"*" These comments make for embellishment and internal reordering of tale items, which could differ depending on the narrator's skill and perception or what he or she wishes to emphasize. This is achieved because the tale, like all oral tales, only exists in the consciousness of the artist who actualizes it and gives it form in performance, utilizing images in his immediate environment and relying on an active audience to relive their communal experiences.

From the historical perspective history, in the traditional context, is vaguely conceived of as what has actually happened and what is fabled to have happened. To the traditional mind, myths and legends are equally potent sources of history. This is because there is really a very thin line of distinction between fact and fiction in traditional society. Myths and legends, because they are told very often, assume immediate potency of truthful occurrences and this is what the artist relies on to authenticate his narrative.

The artist appeals for willing suspension of disbelief and he asserts the truthfulness of his narrative even when the audience knows very well that it is imagined or fictional. Therefore, what makes the narrative live history is not the mythic or legendary import of it, but the fact that contemporary issues and events are sometimes woven into the narrative fabric to enhance its acceptability and relevance; their common knowledge and for application makes them relevant as history. This means that even though the oral artist may wish to maintain the antique nature of his material, the eagerness to be relevant to present times often forces him to adulterate the antiquity of the narrative to achieve aesthetic appeal and enhance contemporaneity of rendition. This necessity is often dictated by

the performance occasion or context as Okpe-who again asserts:

"...To him (that is, the epic artist) history is truth eternally recreated with the power of song, not as a dry record of the past, but as a vital memory of the past as exhortation to present action (75)."

This, indeed, is the import of literature generally and drama in particular, so that the interest of the bard or artist is not and never is on history per se but in what history yields, that is the values and ideals in society that transcend particular ages.

In the narrative of "The Old Woman and her Mushroom", the old woman and the other characters are representative of ancient Bakor society in transition. They portray such values and ideals like steadfastness, hard work, truthfulness and susceptibility to imbibing new ideas. They also serve as a means of commenting on such institutions as burial, and concepts like ownership of property and inheritance. The old woman insists on getting back her implements for keeps and accepts to give to her inheritors. This, in itself, is a comment on the Bakor system of inheritance, which is matrilineal, where the rights of inheritance accrue only from the matrilineage and not from the patrilineage.

The old woman prepares her property for posterity. Values of hard work and care are emphasized as the old woman, through the narrator, pleads for good utilization of the occupational implements so as to bring about a good yield and ultimately progress in society. History thus makes the rounds in the characters and their actions as the narrator uses the tale items to ingeniously comment on society and its ideals both past and present.

Another aspect of "The Old Woman and her Mushroom" that is worth looking at is its culture content or the extent to which Bakor, *nay Ekajuk*, ethnography is revealed in the story. The entire narrative rests on the occupations practiced and on culture items prevalent the Bakor community. A cursory look at the narrative reveals such indulgences as dancing, hunting, divination, and yam farming. A mention is also made of such material items as clay pot, wooden clubs, blankets (a new introduction), elephant tusks, palm kernel, "camwood", yams and hoes. Elephant tusks and cow-tail or hawk-tail swishes are chieftaincy regalia, spears and wooden clubs are hunting regalia, while kernel

shells and chunks of met, as well as divining coral, are paraphernalia for priests priestesses of local deities, camwood and grinding stones are commonly found with housewives. All these items also serve as a comment on the Bakor worldview and ideology and belief in life after death is shown in divinations. In fact, Bakor ideology is best manifested in the character responses to the old woman. Respect for age is shown in the way they receive her rather than shown her approach and the way they readily compensate her in case of loss or destruction of her property. To conclude, therefore the researchers simply assert that the potency of the oral narrative as a veritable source from history and culture is indisputable. However, the ability to decipher this history or culture depends largely on the effectiveness of the narrative rendition by the artist in whose consciousness it exists and on whose expertise it depends. The perception of history, sociology or even literature in an oral tale is impossible without the actualization of the tale in a performance context. This is what underlies the need for collaboration between the different fields involved in the study of the oral narrative to enhance its proper perception and analysis.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the advocacy here is for scholars and those involved in the analysis of oral narratives to adopt a collaborative approach to their study. Such an approach will surely yield better results and deemphasize the parochial or lopsided analysis of narratives, which was the bane of early anthropological analysis. In making this assertion, one recognizes that each discipline would inevitably lay more emphasis on their peculiar interests in narratives but this should not be to the exclusion of the merits of another perspective to the study of oral narratives. It is for this reason that this study adopts a historico-literary approach to the ethnography of the Bakor people. The achievement here is that this interdisciplinary approach brings to the limelight the current emphasis on ethno-aesthetical, ethno-historical and sociolinguistic influences on the study of oral literature. It also shows that literature, whether oral or written, is not studied in a vacuum but within a socio-cultural milieu, which moderates literary production. Such approaches if adopted for the study

of oral narratives will yield a better understanding of narratives in their context of production and perhaps dispel the views that oral literature is a fossil, created in the past and handed down in word fixed form. On the contrary oral narratives are vibrant and dynamic contemporary forms of literary expression.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the above, it is recommended that consistent studies and analysis of oral narratives should not exclude ethnographic studies of the societies under study. Ethno-aesthetic methods are particularly recommended to make for a more in-depth study of narratives within their contextual environment of production. This it is hoped will yield better and more rewarding results than lopsided views of narratives.

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