African Oral Literature and Modern African Drama: Inseparable Nexus

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ABSTRACT
Every traditional culture presumptively has its own oral literature which is not only concerned with societies the western prejudice tagged uncivilized. Oral literature does not emphasize only the past events because oral forms are now modified to mirror modern age. Moreover, yearly festivals which mostly center on oral forms are still celebrated in many African cultures. Satirical songs, jokes and proverbs are still used in certain communities to attack and disparage those who flout the culture of the people. Prior to invention of print such oral forms were composed, circulated and transmitted orally. Nowadays electronic media such as television, radio and tape recorders are used to circulate and preserve the oral forms. Plays and scripts can be enacted on the stages before cameras for the benefits of a larger number of audiences. They can now be used for traditional wedding ceremonies. Less effort is used by African children to learn their society’s oral forms. And the study of literature cannot be separated from its society. Therefore, society has much to acquire from its oral forms. This essay propounds that modern African Drama is inseparable from various aspects of African oral literature. At this stage, we are no longer contending with the issue of true existence of African oral literature but to demonstrate its relevance to modern African drama and the latter’s indebtedness to oral forms. Among other issues, this paper analyses the ways some playwrights incorporated the oral forms in their dramatic works in order to preserve them and still serve as entertainers, moralists, educators, socialist, advisers, custodians and chroniclers of the people.

Keywords: Oral, literature, Drama, Nexus, Culture, Performance,

INTRODUCTION
African oral literature is commonly perceived as a concept rooted in the past because it comprises material many generations old. Moreover, it is also transmitted by word of mouth. But it still has relevance in the modern life and living even in the presence of and pressure induced by scientific and technological forces. If Africa still wants to be identified as a people, her oral forms as myths, tales, legends, proverbs, riddles and oral songs must be preserved and reserved. These oral forms still have relevance and significance for this age in spite of the technological setting. There is still connectivity between the oral forms and the present – there is still obvious relationship between tradition and modernity because healthy issues of moral and social are rooted in the past hence Igbo proverbs say: “Mgbe enu bu ani osa”. “Mgbe ezi di n’ ukwu ukwa” which means when there was a pathway under the breadfruit tree.

Oral literature for instance, the tale form still occupies the mainstream of our modern life via the modern artists. There is still symbolic representation of human beings using animals and abstract principles by our playwrights. And in virtually all societies there is at least one yearly festival celebrated and this calls for celebration of oral forms such as: African type of music, dance, and poetry and art exhibition. Even some of our dance troupes have travelled to places in the world.

Performers in form of bards and griots still exist, their sonorous voices still reel out fables, tales, myths and legends and other forms of lore’s to their audience. They are custodians of African cultures and tradition. And these are still reflected in modern African drama. Therefore, the playwrights and their actors are regarded as moralists, preservers of culture, entertainers, educators, socialists and advisers. With this, modern dramatists move their audience/readers in antiquity connecting them between the past and the present and provoke future. With its strong device drama becomes a nexus of the past and present and shapes the audience’s future.
Though their language may be Western, playwright principally reflect their oral tradition, ideals and accepted behavior. On this bond between oral forms and written forms, killiam (1973:3) remarks that:

Modern African writing has been concerned almost exclusively with the reality of African life and few African writers of English expression to date have sought their thematic material outside Africa. Unlike writers in some countries with similar colonial pasts, African writers have not turned their backs on their vultures; rather they have faced up to the problems, and sought solutions for them in imaginative form. Their fiction is a general echo of general cultural reality.

Killiam’s comment embraces all genres of literature; whether prose, poetry and drama.

The playwrights discussed below borrow extensively from their oral literatures in terms of content and technique. Their language style, imagery, form or structures have bonds with the cultures of the particular artist. That is why most critical works on Wole Soyinka, Ama Ata Aidoo, Efua Sutherland, Herbert Ogunde, Duro Lapido, Zulu Sofola reflect their oral literature indebtedness. It has been discovered through research that all societies have their own peculiar literature whether oral or written. Chronologically, oral literature takes precedence over the written form. Oral medium remains important in all societies since according to Okoh Nkem (2008:75-76); “in no society does writing predate or precede speech” … it is not worthy that even Western Societies that claim to be highly technologized had as their beginnings the phenomenon called oral literature’.

Oral literature encapsulates the three main segments of literature as prose (spoken), poetry (song), and drama (acted). The prose genre contains riddles, proverbs, and tongue twisters under fixed phrase, tales, myths, legends, jokes and anecdotes fall under free phrase. Poetic genre contains work, birth, marriage, war and funeral songs. Drama genre contains masquerade displays, dances, festivals and rituals.

The origin of drama is difficult to trace and its development in human society in difficult to describe. The word drama – a Greek word which means to do’ or to act was said to be used the first time about 560 BC. Emeka Nwabueze (2011:11-12), testifies that a:

Sole actor impersonated and imitated the hero instead of singing about him, or chanting his praises, thereby turning a purely story-telling and praise-chant activity into dramatic form before the ecstatic spectators. The man who performed this historic act was Thespis, the Greek artist credited with discovery of drama, and who eventually became known as the first actor, as well as the first writer of tragedy.

The above quotation not only illuminated the origin of drama, it also proves that such oral forms as chanting of praises and story-telling have existed before Thespis turned the above oral forms to drama. Thespis achieved this when he enriched the religious singing and dancing by wearing a mask and expressed a part of the action in meaningful words and gestures. Right from that time drama becomes an art which represents human life experiences in the presence of audience. In furthermore, drama is undoubtedly developed from religious rites as in festivals which are also a form of oral literature. At an earlier stage it was difficult to demarcate ritual which developed as parts assigned to one or several actors, while the rest of the people watching become audience. For instance, the officiating chief priest represents and expresses the desires and emotion of the entire community.

Still referring to Nwabueze’s statement, story-telling which formed the bed rock of the choral group to which Thespis belonged is a performance in itself and also an essential part of oral literature. For instance, a narrator of old stories has his main point in the sung (Poetic) or spoken (Prose) performance. Drama itself is described from the light of oral literature which is most recently referred to as Orature. Holt, et al (1997:340) describe drama as literature in action”. Diyanni (2002:1161) says that “drama is a stage art”. Ogunbiyi, (1981:2) “traditional drama is the sum total of the doings of a people before written records were kept”.
The major contents of the above definitions hold that drama is acted which means performance. Performance in performing arts generally comprises an event in which a performer or group of performers behave in a particular way different from their personal behaviour for another group of people. Therefore, performance involves imitation, or re-enactment or impersonation. In oral literature, ritual acts such as masquerade which according to Okoye (2009:128) ‘mmuo’, ‘mmonwu’ as ‘mmanwu’ which literally means caster of spell capable of drying up whatever that is living... is sure way of saying that masquerade is stronger than man, or it is a spirit”. It goes to explains that whoever in the mask is imitating or impersonating the spirit of dead people who dwell in the chthonic realm.

Though modern drama is composed to be acted or to be read; basically, it is composed to be performed. It is this unique characteristic that brings both oral literature and modern drama to a common base. Therefore, a clear separation between oral literature and drama cannot be achieved. Precisely the genres of oral literature are at the same time drama in a way since performance is an essential aspect of this art; hence Finnegan (1970:2) emphasizes that, “oral literature is by definition dependant on a performance who formulates it in word on a specific occasion – there is no other way in which it can be realized as a history product”

The Nexus

From above explication it is now obvious that there is great connectivity between oral literature and Modern African Drama because both are performance based. The two disciplines depend absolutely on performance for their existence though modern African Drama can be read without going to theatre. But on the other hand, oral literature creation and its transmission cannot easily be disentangled; they are tied and interwoven and its actual presentation is most noticeable aspect of its nature. It is constantly inherent in performance, because it is always accompanied by action of verbal art. As in modern African drama, oral literature’s structure, content, and its ultimate quality depend on elements of performance such as dance, song, mime and gestures. Oral literature lacks tangibility in absence of performance hence Okoh (2008:87) reveals that:

> The intangibility of oral literature means that any given piece remains there, or somewhere, that is maintains its existence in that state until it is verbalized, actualized or performed. This point to rank performance appropriately, that is in relation to the other attributes of oral literature.

That is why a well-composed song, example, funeral song may be ruined by an unsteady and poor presentation. A dirge singer is expected to compose herself well with facial expression of sadness and gloom. Such is also expected of a drama artist if he should imitate such a gloomy situation.

Oral literature is expected to be closely watched and criticized by an audience. It is through its close accuracy and quality to dramatic correctness and morals that it can be functional to a social environment. Most oral literature is envisaged for a special audience as a result the dramatic immediacy and social relevance are reflected in both style and content. The performance is always tied to a particular ceremony or social activity. The same applies to modern African drama; it is rarely performed for arts for arts’ sake. Every production in modern African drama has something at the back of the mind of the playwright.

Moreover, African oral literature makes use of African places and names, local images and symbols from our flora and fauna, transliterated culture, idioms, proverbs, expression and ideas. In the same vein for modern African drama to maintain the nomenclature, it must apply the sensibilities of African people which are hidden in the oral literature. The conceived difference is that African oral literature because of its quality of tending to social activities projects communal or social values rather than enigmatic or iconoclastic eccentricism of contemporary Modern African Drama; but tends towards propagation of raw African values.

Another visualized disparity is in the area of ephemeral nature of African oral literature whose life and longevity is dependent on only performance if not preserved in written form. Again African oral literature may have complex and difficult oral forms, for instance in forms with extensive proverbalization and mantic (divination or prophetic) poetry, its hallmark is simplicity but modern African drama endures in complexity both in form, and spoken diction.
Oral literature the bedrock of Modern African Drama

Hubert Ogunde and Duro Lapido

Influence of African oral tradition operates in the works of Nigerian historical and mythological dramas of the Duro Lapido, through Hubert Ogunde’s and Kola Ogunmola’s plays. Their dramatic works are formation of complex cultures of the Yorubas. Hubert Ogunde synthesizes the forces of paganism and Christianity in his work. Obafemi Olu (2001:14) affirms that:

Chief Ogunde, the rightly acclaimed patron of Yoruba theatre, is, for example, an initiate of the cults of Osugbo and Egungu even though his father was a Baptist Clergyman. The two shaping forces of his work are thus the ‘pagan’ the ‘Christian’. These influences are reflected in the synthetic process of theatre. Ogunde freely mixes jazz, African rhumba and the Yoruba gangan (talking drum) in the same dramatic experience. Also, culture conflicts supply the themes of his operas in God and Africa. … The dominant influence is the traditional festival and other verbal and performed arts of the Yoruba.

He still points out that the three main constituents of oral performance are: poetry and folk tales, music and dance are interrelated. Poetry in its own peculiar way is realized in performance via songs, chants, and music and recitative forms. Worthy of mention is that the poetic form has both esoteric and popular forms. The esoteric comprises the ifa- this relates to oracle in prophetic and for-telling of the future. Its divination is sometimes ambiguous and hard to interpret usually associated with Omenmila, the Yoruba god of divination. Ofo is another oracular poetry used for making incantation for casting magical spells. Sango pipe praise song is used in eulogizing the Yoruba god of thunder, lightning and retributive justice. The above mentioned and host of other elements of oral performance form the bases of Nigerian drama. For instance, Duro Lapido’s *Oba Ko So* portrays a great sadness of unfolding of Sango’s reign and praises though the major concern of the play is not necessarily Oba Sango but mankind, human condition and nature. Obafemi Ola (2001:21) asserts that the play;

*Is in conformity with the nature of the Yoruba opera which strives to project community-sense and spirit, and psychological fulfillment. In fact, in the Yoruba cosmology which Lapido mirrors in his play, the stature and existence of the gods is determined by the people.*

Duro Lapido’s *Oba Ko So* is a reenactment of myth of origin of Oyo Kingdom performed in both languages of cultic and ordinary, exposing the Yoruba oral literature.

In African world-view, the essence of time is crucial. It operates in Lapido (1978:4) ‘Oba Ko So’. At the beginning of the drama people rejoice because according to them Sango’s time is good and also characterized by success. Happily they sing

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\begin{align*}
\text{Igba oba wa dara funwa} & \quad \text{Our king’s time suits us} \\
\text{Igba oba wa sunwon fun wa} & \quad \text{Our king’s time is good for us} \\
\text{Ija kosi o te kosi} & \quad \text{There is no rows, there are no intrigues} \\
\text{Igboro ma dun gbongbon fi en wa} & \quad \text{There is jollity, there is merriment.}
\end{align*}
\]

Duro Lapido’s other plays: *Oba Waja, Oba Moro, Moremi* and Eda are all rooted in oral literary forms such as history, myth and legends; combination of verbal arts: dance, music and oral poetry. *Oba Waja* is a prototypical of a historical event during the colonial period in Oyo precisely. In the play Ojurongbe unknowingly shatters the custom by not dying with the king as custom demands. This single act leaves the kingdom in terror for he refuses to accompany the king to the underworld. He leaves the King’s spirit wandering in the spirit world. Ojurongbe has danced round the Oyo Kingdom which would have followed his death but he refuses to die. Instead his son Dawudu who is back from Ghana dies through the ritual death. Through his ritual death Dawudu restores peace especially between the physical and metaphysical realms. This history is recreated by Wole Soyinka (1975:56) in his *Death and King’s Horseman*. In association of this authorship another author imitates the characteristics of Soyinka’s *Death and King’s Horseman*. Esiaba comments: “In the exploration of local resources of performances and in the evocation of the tragic spirit,
Nwokedi shares these attributes of Soyinka’s Death and the King’s Horseman. Layiwola (2008:224) quoting Turner describing ritual, said:

*Ritual is most typical cross-cultural express, a synchronization of many performance genres, and often ordered by dramatic structure, a plot, frequently involving sacrifice or self-sacrifice, which energizes and gives emotional colouring to the interdependent communicative codes which express in manifold ways meaning inherent in dramatic Leitmotiv.*

As aforementioned Ogunde has unusual origin. The contrastive origin of being the son of a clergyman and maternal grandson of a Babalawo (Ife diviner). These two extremes struggle for influence in his works. Ogunde (1976:241) reports:

*Here I was, a youth versed, as I could to be then, in juju music and used to the altar of the ifa priest. I had eaten fowls and sheep slaughtered in pagan festivals and enjoyed them full. Then I was in a church, singing songs of praise to God denouncing the juju man and his ways ... I began to see that I could blend charms and splendor of the church house and the colorful solemnity of the altar and use them to good advantage.*

Ogunde uses his *Strike and Hunger* to repudiate the foreign domination in the governance of this country which led to the 1945 workers strike. He makes use of his role as a custodian of the society which depicts his heritage from Alarinjo Masque drama. His play is greatly influenced by traditional traveling theatre. It has the opening merriment visual, verbal elements of music and dance mostly replayed during Yoruba festivals. Ogunda is always at the forefront of Nigerian politics always committed to truth which earned him forbiddance from acting at one given time.

Ogunde’s play *Strike and Hunger* centers on Past World War II in Nigeria of 1946. The play is allegorically presented. King Yejide is the allegorically represented colonial ruler. The colonial administrators became hostile to Ogunde and group and didn’t waste time to arrest him and bar his plays. His opening music, minstrelsy is most provocative:

*Araige ewa kewa parapo kajo jija ebi
Come people of the world, rally round to fight hunger
Angeli ebo Angeli ebo wa waiye
(Descend oh Angels, grant us audience)
Angeli ebo wa wora enie
(Angels behold the people of the world)
Tinse alaimi ehun ewa wole aiye
(Deprived of good things of the world)
(translated by Obafemi 2001:41).*

Ogunde’s opening entertainment stands for Yoruba native rite at the beginning of their festivals. But instead of paying homage to a Yoruba god, it is paid to the angel in complaint of Oba Yejide’s mercilessness and misconducts against Nigeria. With this he provokes the people to fight against the foreign rules. Ogunde applies and makes use of local praises drawn from Yoruba oral literature. These are in form of music, proverbs, dialogues mingled with Christian – foreign concepts and repetitive device.

**Ama Ata Aidoo and Efua Sutherland**

Common traditional folk tales based on people’s cosmology, common people, wise and foolish people, happy and unhappy people exist in traditional African Societies, and some playwrights base their plays on such stories. A typical example is Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Anowa* and Efua Sutherland’s *Edufa*.

The two plays reflect the concept of story-telling among Ghanaians in the West African Coast. The two playwrights borrowed a lot from their traditional African background. Anowa dramatizes the well-known story of a willful, beautiful girl who rejects every suitor the parents propose because she wants to make her own choice. Anowa’s attitude is against the existing rules. Ama uses the rebel girl motif which is an important
motif on marriage in African culture and folklore. According to the motif, if a girl refuses to marry a man the parents suggests for her, she would suffer misdemeanor in form of disappointment in her marriage for violating social laws/rules. Though Ama portrays Anowa as being very intelligent, pretty and knows what she wants in man, she suffers disappointment because her husband is unable to make her pregnant. This in the end tallies with the penalty inherent in African folktale that forms the bases of Ama’s art.

In Edufa by Sutherland, apart from classical influence on the play, Alcestis by Euripides, her work reflects a story of legend among the Ashantis of Ghana where a woman exchanged her life for her husband. The legend holds that a woman is only concerned for the preservation of souls.

Wole Soyinka
The same African folklore inspired soyinka’s Death and King’s Horseman. It is inspired by a historical fact that concerns the people’s belief system. The historical event took place about 1946 when the King (Oba) of Yoruba land. Oba Alafin is representative of god on earth. As Yoruba tradition demands that when the king dies, he must be accompanied to the grave by his horseman because the horseman’s spirit is essential in helping the king’s spirit to ascend into the spiritual realm. Otherwise the king’s spirit will wonder the earth and bring harm to Yoruba people. This explains the belief in the transitory nature of human life which promotes the relationship between the dead, the living and the unborn. The living is assumed to come from the dead; so a cyclic rotation between life and death is the core of Yoruba philosophy.

There are also many traditional stories about animals. Some modern plays are based on animal stories. Again Efua Sutherland has dramatized some of them especially Anansewa which literarily means Ananse stories. Efua uses the story to show that spider Ananse is a kind ofcharacter seen in some men. She uses it to show the people whom they are and how such qualities such as greediness, ambition, silliness or slyness affect the society. The character of Ananse may be ridiculous in his tricks but it has great moral information. She uses Ananse to criticize the covetousness of man.

Zulu Sofola
Zulu Sofola’s works show how strongly tradition continues to persist in contemporary African drama. Sofola’s writing can be accessed from traditional and folkloric dimension since they are based on traditional and cultural society. She presents people within a society whose beliefs, plights and struggles and sociological organization can be properly assessed from the lens of African values, beliefs and modes of behavior and this is the hallmark of African oral literature. She believes that traditional influences must be mingled within modern society and that the past should be used to strengthen the present to make projection into the future. Her plays that conform to the societal culture which Okoye (2009b:16) confirms to be “shared in common by members of a particular culture which are transmitted apocryphally either by writing as word of mouth from generation to generation”. Her plays that conform to African culture are: King Emene, Wedlock of the Gods, The Sweet Trap and Old Wines Are Tasty.

In Old Wines Are Tasty,0kebawo, an educated and widely travelled man meets his fall and tragic end as a result of his disrespect for tradition. His people’s strict adherence to the customs of their land appears awkward to him, as he turns deaf ears to his admonitions of both his uncle, Akagwu, the elders of Izuani town council and even his mother. His death therefore did not elicit pathetic response from the audience, because it went as expected.

Emene displayed the same kind of obstinacy in King Emene. He was cautioned against the impending danger of performing the rites of ushering in the peace week because of the totally reprehensible crime that has been committed in the palace. He turns his deaf ears to the warning in respect of his people’s way of life. According to tradition, the King must be purified. The oracle and the gods must confirm that he is purified before the King enters the shrine. But all is not well because the elders warned the King to make a public confession of what the King’s mother has done. But King refuses to adhere to the elder’s warning for the purification of throne. His rejection of the advice leads to his tragedy.
Wedlock of the gods also finds its roots in the ritual of death and mourning. The traditional solemnity of the ritual is distorted because the widow refused to engage in the normal funeral rites and rituals which should have cleansed her and sent the spirit of the deceased to the world of the gods; she rather expressed sense of liberation from unwanted marriage. Her mother-in-law in turn performs the rites meant to destroy her son’s widow as an act of vengeance for supposedly killing her son. Ugwome’s mother-in-law therefore avenges his son’s death by killing Ogwoma with magical charms. Uloka kills her too, but commits suicide and dies with his love Ogwoma.

From Sofola’s play it is discernable that she advocates adherence to custom and tradition of the Africans because she penalizes the characters in the plays that ignore or disrespect the tradition handed down from the past generation. Even in her The Sweet Trap she advocates the leadership and supremacy of husbands over their wives and frowns at women who do not submit to their husbands. In the play Femi Sotubo refuses to consent to Clara; her wife’s birthday against his prior approval. Clara concurs with the advice of her divorced friend and holds the party some other place. When the party is disturbed, Clara sought the advice of her uncle, kneels and apologizes to her husband and there was peace again. This proves that Sofola approves male superiority even when they are seemingly wrong as it is the accepted in African culture where men have the final say.

Femi Osofisan (2006) also relies on oral forms in the crafting of his Women Owu because it has poetic forms and heavy reliance on traditional and ritualistic language. The same thing applies to Chris Ngozi Nkoro’s (2006:17) The Sick Throne. There is artistic use of poetic language in her dialogues:

He asks. He asks questions
Like the babe that he is.
You are greater than today’s great men
Already ensconced on the stool
You are he that’s awaited…

What comes forth from the studies of the above playwrights is the obvious connectivity and influence of their imaginative works to oral performance and tradition. Therefore, notwithstanding the western language used by the playwrights, the bedrock of their plays prove to be from African oral forms.

Summary

Africans still underrate African oral literature and cling to Western way of life even when we have a better alternative. But we can only be identified as a people by our own culture which is embedded in our oral form. Africans are encouraged to preserve our rich oral heritage. This essay has established that there is an inseparable bond between African oral literature and Modern African Drama through performance and that most African playwright have been influenced by African oral literature in crafting of their dramatic works.

The early playwrights such as Ogunde Hubert and Duro Lapido use complex cultures of the Yorubas to produce historical and mythological dramas. Again Ghanaian playwrights: Efua Sutherland and Ama Ata Aidoo use traditional folk tale based on their people’s cosmology in their plays. Soyinka applies Yoruba myths to create Death and Kings Horsemen. Zulu Sofola, Ahmed Yerima, Femi Osofisa, and Chris Nkoro demonstrate their adherence to custom and tradition of the Africans in her various plays. The playwrights have demonstrated the nexus between oral literature and modern African drama.

REFERENCES
