

ON NAMING "TRADITIONAL ORAL LITERATURE"

By

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The problem of definitions is one of those knotty issues that have featured in scholarly discourse in the African domain, notably because many disciplines are still struggling to rid themselves of encrusted prejudices bequeathed to them by the activities of well-intentioned but ultimately misguided pioneering amateurs in the field of African studies. Now-obsolete evolutionists theories have had many unfortunate effects on the extant work of the early ethnographers, explorers and adventurers. One of the most persistent prejudices fostered by such an orientation has been the habit of regarding the continent as "retarded" in more than the strictly technological sense. An extension of this is the outlook that regards the un-written literature of so-called "primitive" societies across the world not as literature yet, but rather as the raw (or source) material from which "literature" will eventually emerge in some later evolutionary stage of development.

Such arguments run counter to several facts. For one thing, all cultures have evolved their modes of literary expression first in an oral mode and later in a written mode. The primacy of speech over writing in all civilizations is unquestionable. But whether a culture is literate or not, it manifests modes of expression that we organize as "literary" because they contain evidence of the imaginative use of language in a creative perspective to comment on the human condition, help man to cope with his environment and heighten man's awareness of the beautiful and the sublime. Such literary qualities are evident in verbal data not primarily intended to communicate "facts", as well as in some data that is

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written. The appeal to the etymology of the word "literature" which leads some scholars to insist that the term should be limited in its application to written materials is untenable. It smacks of unnecessary obsolescence and provides some cover for those who, in addition to propounding such views, would like to insinuate that written materials are deserving of more serious literary study than unwritten ones. There is every justification therefore for talking of both written literature and oral literature.

Secondly, now-written literature has persisted (in its own right) in cultures which have developed systems of writing. Whereas there are obvious links between the two literary modes, it cannot therefore be argued that oral literature will vaporise when written literature emerges in any specific culture. This is demonstrably false.

In the domain of African Literature, the debate as to what to call the unwritten congener of modern written literature has gone on for some time. Contending schools of thought have argued the rival claims of "verbal art", "oral literature", "traditional verse" and "traditional literature". Ruth Finnegan's *Oral Literature in Africa*, a monumental exploration of the field, should, one would have thought, have finally decided the matter in favour of the term "oral literature". But occasional rumbles do get heard still.

In this essay, therefore, it is intended to re-examine some of these issues in the light of two fairly recent publications in this domain: *Igbo Traditional Verse* compiled and translated by Romanus Egudu and Donatus Nwoga, two Igbo-speaking literary scholars at the University of Nigeria at Nsukka; and *Guardians of the Sacred Wood*, Ewe Poetry, compiled and translated with explanatory notes by the Ewe-speaking English-medium poet and literary scholar, Kofi Awoonor of Ghana, currently Professor of Comparative Literature at Stonybrook, New York.

What, one may ask, is the dispute about? There lingers in the minds of some people a notion that unwritten materials are somehow inferior to, and less reliable than, written ones. The study of African Literature, like African historiography before it, is having to divest itself of these prejudices. It is unfortunate that some African scholars (e.g. E.O. Akyea and C. Angmor) have found these arguments persuasive enough to adopt them in dissertations. Even the Americanism, "verbal art", begs the question. For neither this term nor its presumed opposite, "unwritten art" possesses the definitive power that we need so as to adequately discuss areas of artistic activity such as drama, which may be written, read or quintessentially declaimed on stage; or music, which can be notated but not vocalized. Which of these three art forms is not a "written art"?

No, the term "verbal art" is somewhat otiose and lacks the precision that we would like to see in our terminologies. It would be readily admitted that the increasing corpus of written literature of our continent, although mostly articulated in European languages, bears unmistakable evidence of its debt to our (equally contemporary) African-language traditions of literature. Indeed, it is highly desirable that this link should be made manifest in scholarly studies so that the aesthetics of this form of literary expression may be objectively revealed and also so as to pre-empt any attempt (and attempts have been made, for instance in the Leeds School's proclamation of the entity "Commonwealth Literature"!) to balkanize and appropriate the output of our writers by claiming that anglophone African Literature belongs primarily to the English-speaking world, and Francophone African Literature belongs to the French-speaking world. Claims of this nature fly in the face of all the evidence which proclaims an affinity in narrative techniques between, for instance, anglophone Chinua Achebe of Nigeria and francophone Ferdinand Oyono of Cameroun, both of whom write under the inspiration of literary traditions separated by only a few hundred miles of territory.

In attempting to justify the criteria on which their collection is based, Egudu and Nwoga say (p.1):

It might be questioned by what criteria we include contemporary verse on life and persons which obviously has been composed in the last few years within the 'traditional', since 'traditional' is normally understood to mean the product of a forgotten past, handed down from generations immemorial. We do this because our concept of 'traditional' has its antithesis 'modern' and both are separated in the African context not so much by time as by mentality and mode.

This statement strikes at the root of the matter: the contention, while not overtly denying and continuity of feeling between the "traditional" and "modern", does underline the fact that the two worlds are separable. The traditional relates to group-emphasis in those spheres of contemporary African life that derive their essence from indigenous ritual, belief and practices; the modern defines those new forms of expression whose social reference owes much to the influence of alien cultures, notably European culture.

The authors' next statement, however, leaves room for much potential confusion by seeking, to my mind, to equate "traditional" with "unwritten" and "modern" with "written":

The mode that distinguishes the modern from the traditional in this context is whether the verse belongs to the written tradition or to the oral tradition. The verses in this collection belong to the oral tradition of the Igbo.

(A subsidiary amplification ascribes the essential quality of these texts to the fact that they are uninfluenced by the forms and techniques introduced through formal education; that is to say, the poets have not been influenced by European literary experience).

The equation between "traditional" and "written" cannot be pressed very far. To make a trite point, do the verses in the Egudu-Nwoga volume cease to be "traditional" now that they have been trapped on paper? Or let us recall what happened some few years ago when a dinner was held in honour of Robert Graves on his seventieth birthday. On that occasion, he made an impromptu speech which everyone present acclaimed as pure poetry; the unanimous opinion was that it was a shame that this spontaneous poetry was not recorded and preserved. It presumably was unwritten but, since Graves was a native of some locality or other, was it also "traditional"? Or "verbal art" rather than "oral poetry"? It is clear that the Egudu-Nwoga equation cannot hold.

As we shall see in the discussion of the Awoonor volume below, the anonymity of authors cannot in itself be a defining criterion, for the three poets he features are distinct individual artists whom he interviewed as recently as 1970. Besides, we cannot ascribe a defining role to the literacy or illiteracy of the poet. This is because the method of composition described by Awoonor's poets bears a specific resemblance to the modes of composition that creative writers in the Western and other traditions have attested. Akpalu, the most famous of the three, exemplifies this (p.3)

Sometimes....a song comes to me in my sleep.
At first cock-crow, I nail its substance down.
Then I arrange it in stanzas. Some may demand
four or five stanzas. I think seriously about
the tune that will carry it, since it is this
that gives the song its emotional and lyrical
appeal.

The experience of poets in the written traditions is analogous to Akpalu's. It may therefore be contended that the accidental factor of the literacy of the author is not a useful criterion for establishing what constitutes traditional poetry.

Indeed, another of Awoonor's assertions on the role of the individual artist in traditional literature should commend itself to us (p.12).

Akpalu is acknowledged as the master and the teacher. His example is one of the strongest evidences we have to counter the claim often made by scholars that all oral poetry is the work of anonymous men in a vaguely defined tribal tradition. Like Magolwane of the Zulu during Shaka's reign, Akpalu took an older tradition and turned it around, forging it into a new and more dynamic poetic medium.

It should be clear, therefore, that the crux of the definition of traditional literature lies in its sources of inspiration and its artistic technique. If we put Akpalu's work side by side with that of the early Awoonor or Okot p'Bitek, on what basis are we going to say that the one is "verbal art" and the others are not, seeing that all three derive their inspiration and technique from a living indigenous tradition: Akpalu happens to have been non-literate and (I believe) monolingual in Ewe; Awoonor in his early work translated much oral Ewe poetry into English; Okot p'Bitek wrote his *Song of Lawino* first in Acholi and then translated it into English. Radio Uganda broadcast the Acholi version extensively, and it is reported that non-literate Acholis had no hesitation in recognizing it as authentic Acholi poetry, that is, poetry in an unmistakable Acholi tradition.

Is it any wonder that the irrepressible Komi Ekpe, one of the poets in Awoonor's collection, should devise an elaborate linguistic ruse to ensure that he is not consigned to some "non-modern" ghetto?

He has in his day sung in many places across Ewe country including Ho, Kpedze, Kpetoe, Anyako, Anloga, Vuti and outside Eweland in Nsawam and Koforidua. He is a poet whose power rests on sarcasm, insult, allusion, exaggerated use of events, real or fictional, and a sharp wit. He knows a smattering of English and pretends to a knowledge of Hebrew, German, French and a countless number of other African Languages. Some of these claims are for pure comic effect. He neither reads nor writes any single language including his own (p.9).

It would be a shame if we made our prejudices compel our most gifted artists to resort to such tedious tricks so as to get the recognition they deserve.

To dispose now of the Egudu-Nwoga volume, it provides in its introduction a very informative statement on the Igbo (and therefore traditional African) understanding of poetry, giving appropriate emphasis to its group-orientation, the importance of techniques of performance, the cultural and social background from which it has sprung. Its statement on the aesthetics of literary texts is noteworthy (p.4):

Moreover, and this is significant, except for narration, the oral situation calls for succinct statements rather than for long logical discussion. The performer is therefore expected to show expertise, not in the building up of a complicated sequence of thought, but in the variety of expressions with which he can state, expand and deepen a single statement. When this fails the result is uninteresting tautology. When it succeeds it is a marvellous exposition of imaginative wealth.

In thus drawing attention to the cumulative (as opposed to progressive) technique of artistic performance, the authors provide an important clue to one of the aesthetic principles underlying traditional literature. They also justify thereby their action in editing out of the text those occasional exchanges between performer and active audience which are a common feature of the actualization of traditional oral literature.

The volume is divided thematically into chapters dealing respectively with Praise Poems, Invocation Poems, Incantation Poems, Igodo Dance Poem, Relaxation Poems, Satirical Poems and Lamentation Poems. There is much material here that will sound familiar to the Ghanaian reader, a veritable proof of the cultural unity of (at least West) African peoples. The slot-filling word-play of the relaxation poems (pp.45 ff) have a positive echo in a type of light Ewe poetry that the people of Ada are very fond of. One example starts thus:

E do loo?
E e e !
Nuka e do loo?
E do loo afanyal

Nuka e do loo?
 E do loo afanya!
 Nuka tsitsi?
 Tsitsi mia!
 Nuka mia?
 Mia.....

 ogboo!

Nuka ogboo?
 Ogboo lati!
 Nuka lati?
 Lati olor!
 Nuka olor?
 Olor korsor!

Nuka korsor?
 Korsor....

And so it goes on to a grand finale.

The one final question one is prompted to ask on the Egudu-Nwoga volume, though, is in regard to the material on pages 25 to 27. Here we find a presentation of Igbo male and female names, with English translations. Useful and interesting information on toponymy, no doubt. But by what definition of verse does this short and disjointed series qualify for space in a chapter on Praise Poetry? How usefully can we apply the term Praise Poetry to Schapera's substantial work on the Tswana and at the same time to this list of names? This, surely, plays into the hands of those who would have us believe that all traditional verse is no more than the raw material out of which poetry may be made! This kind of material detracts from the worth of the genuine praise poetry with which it shares the chapter.

Awoonor's volume explores entirely new ground, as indeed has been intimated above. Already widely known as an English-medium poet who transmutes the poetry of his people into the English language with more modesty as well as more artistry than Taban lo Liyon claims to have done in *Eating Chiefs*. Awoonor spent the summer of 1970 sitting at the feet of three acknowledged contemporary (modern?) Ewe poet-cantors. These are unsung heroes of Ghana's literary firmament, innovators whose one disability is that they are not fluent in the language

of our erstwhile colonial masters; but they are master-craftsmen whose names are legend in their immediate traditional milieu. Hesino Akpalu, the most famous of them all, earned no more than a 3-inch paragraph in *The Ghanaian Times* when he died late in 1974. The other two, Komi Ekpe and Amega Dunyo must now be respectively 81 and 87, if they are still living. One hopes that some national recognition can be given to them before they pass away.

Awoonor's introduction is an excellent poetic-prose tribute to his fellow poets. Among other things, he draws attention to the integrated multi-artistic nature of Ewe poetry. On the role of drums in Ewe poetry, for instance, he states (p.16)

Poetry among the Ewes is embedded in their drums. By drums I do not mean the physical entities of leather and wood, rattlers, gongs and other instruments which are part of the African musical ensemble. I mean the variety in musical and poetic approaches of the various drumming groups that have become part of the Ewe cultural tradition.

Thus it is that each of his poets are credited with having founded a drum. This re-affirmation of our predilection for the concrete is further illustrated by how Komi Ekpe installed his Muse, his god of song, in his house after a diviner had recommended that he do so. The relations between god and cantor are best illustrated by Ekpe's affirmation: "He is still with me. When he tells me not to appear in public, I do not". (p.8).

Awoonor's definition of the ramifications of Ewe poetry is also noteworthy:

The song in the Ewe tradition is structurally the poem. Incantations, chants, salutations and praise names are part of the same poetic conception. Its essential features are revealed in statements of allusion, imagery created through simile or metaphor, and repetition.

The statement is capped by the final observation to the effect that among many groups in Africa, "the poem is the music, the drum and the dance". With appropriate modifications (e.g. for drum read cora among the Wolof of Senegal)

the generalization holds good for our continent. Equally valid is Awoonor's list of skills needed by the poet-cantor: good voice, verbal skill, excellent drumming and superb dancing (p.7).

It is precisely because African thought abhors the Caucasian penchant for compartmentalization that Western-oriented criticism has been loath to accord the status of literature to much of the material from the traditional milieu on our continent. The African poet is often a composer-arranger-diviner-dancer-songster. His protean gifts make him an elusive character to recognize if one approaches him strictly from the perspective of the Western tradition. But there should be no doubt of his status as a poet with an individual voice, as well as a carrier-on of a living tradition. Awoonor's introduction contains two pertinent observations:

I was struck by the discovery that each poet within the oral tradition is a distinct individual, propelled by a deep sense of loneliness and an overwhelming ennui that are the burdens of all true poets. (p.2).

and Because they ate all older poets they carry in their work a continuing tradition which goes back in time. They are also poets who have influenced younger poets. (p.11)

It is, I hope, superfluous to indicate that "eating older poet" in the second quotation is an earthy, concrete and faithful translation of the (metaphorical) act of absorbing the works of the artist's predecessors. The evidence on the role of individual creativity in poetry (see Harold Scheub) and the folktale (see S.L. Ansah) must by now be overwhelming.

To conclude then, these two collections do much service to the student of African Literature in thus making available in print some of the gems of literary creativity which the language barrier would otherwise have made the exclusive preserve of Igbo and Ewe speakers. The texts vary in quality, which is not surprising; but they do provide evidence (if such should be needed) of genuine creativity of anonymous authorship in the case of the Igbo volume, and of the repertoire of three distinctive Ewe poetic personalities. The Awoonor volume in particular is a timely reminder that due

recognition should be accorded to the artistic stature of those many unsung practitioners of arts in our various African countries, torch-bearers of a living tradition. In the same way that they have extended the boundaries of the aesthetic traditions in which they work, we need also by study and even experimentation to extend the scope of their achievement.

In the circumstances, who are we to deny them the status of literary creators by quibbling over whether to call their output "verbal art", "traditional verse" or some such piece of apologia. Their bequest is literature, albeit literature in an oral medium. To be amply specific, it is "traditional oral literature".

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