

Exploring Pragmatic Context in African Oral Literature for National Development in the 21st Century

¹Olubimpe Olasunmbo M. **ADEKUNLE**

olubimpe.adekunle@gmail.com

+234 802 376 4186; +234 810 179 6333

&

²Bosede Juliet Mary **AKINWUMI**

akinwumiore@yahoo.com

+234 703 448 8304

^{1&2}**Department of English**

School of Languages

Federal College of Education, Abeokuta

Abstract

Language use in any speech community is mainly for communication. The purpose of communication is therefore marked by the choice of medium or tool for communication. Apart from conveying meaning, language use within a speech community is subjected to the community's interactional and transactional norms. Hence, a language user decides what to say, where to say it, when, how and for what purpose language should be used. As language is used based on the people involved and the situation that informs its usage, the concept of context is very germane in this study. The issue of national development in Nigeria cannot be discussed without considering its situational/contextual use. Therefore, this study examines the place of context of situation in African Oral Literature as a vital tool for achieving national development in Nigerian society. The functions of African Oral Literature and its relevance to national development in Nigeria in the 21st Century are enunciated through selected prose, drama and poetry of African setting. This study revealed that context as a pragmatic tool is effective in ascertaining the functions of language in African Oral Literature, and elucidating the contextual meaning of the message being disseminated through each of the genres used. It thus recommends that as African Oral Literature is a form of language use in context, it is suitable for enhancing positive societal change and development, by bringing sanity into the Nigerian economic, political, educational and communal lives through its satirical, didactic and pedagogical, entertainment and therapeutic functions. Hence, teachers and learners of English as a second language and African Oral Literature should endeavour to teach and learn the content of the subjects according to their context of usage, for a result-oriented language

teaching and learning, and positive acquisition of knowledge for national development in the 21st Century.

Keywords: Language, Context, African Oral Literature, National Development

Introduction

African Oral Literature is the primary form of literature which man grew up to meet in existence. The secondary form of literature is the written form. There have been alternative definitions of African Oral Literature. Some people call it primitive literature, which is not accepted by the custodians of orality, for primitiveness is pejorative. The definition of Oral Literature is both paradoxically intricate and simple. A Eurocentric scholar may come up with a definition that suits his bias and prejudices, while a genuine African Scholar will define the subject with the awareness of the fact that his culture has been misconceptualized and mistakenly misrepresented by the use of pejorative concepts like “folktales”, “folklores” and so on. Folklore encompasses things that are necessarily literature, it also involves customs. The argument has always been that there are no folks in Africa. Nevertheless, as much as Africans passionately seek ways to promote their culture and tradition passed on to them through the words of mouth by their progenitors, the fact remains that language is a key factor in any communicative discourse, be it spoken or written.

African Oral Literature, like the written literature can be classified into the three genres of drama, prose and poetry. Of the three genres, poetry is common in all cultures, as it comes naturally in form of chants, recitation and songs. This implies that Africans hold poetry in high esteem as major aspects of their culture and tradition such as festivals of marriage, burial, child-naming as well as festival of the gods and ancestors are mostly celebrated via poetry. Hence, poetry is of a higher sophistication among Africans.

Prose on the other hand comes in form of folktales which are ways of documenting some of the preoccupations of the African society. Drama in oral literature comes in form of performance, which is usually brought to the fore during the observance of the festivals. Many of such

performances are carried out in form of entertainment and/or religious antics.

This study thus presupposes that language use in all the genres of African Oral Literature can still be adjudged appropriate to the growth and development of our society in the present/modern day, irrespective of the influence and effect of technology (especially the social media) on every sphere of human endeavour. Thus, keen considerations of the use of language in selected documentations in African prose, with particular reference to folklores, riddles, and proverbs; examination of requisite use of language and choice of words in selected oral poetry illuminated through songs, chants, heroic epics, praise poems and the likes, and deliberate exploration of the performing arts explicated in drama during festivals in African Oral Literature, will go a long way in bringing to limelight the significance and relevance of language use in context exemplified in the genres of oral literature, for national development in the 21st century.

Objectives of the study

This study aims to explore the use of language in African Oral literature as an avenue to illuminate the functions and relevance of oral literature in the African context as a vital tool in sanitizing, re-engineering and re-channeling the society in the right direction. It also seeks to investigate how language is used to correct some vices exhibited through unwholesome selfish attitudes of our leaders, which are rubbed on the youths gradually and are deep-rooted in the society today. It is also the purpose of this study to exhume the rich cultural practices that oral literature possesses and promotes through language, and which in turn are expedient for national development and a healthy peaceful co-existence of the people in a nation.

Theoretical Framework

This study principally concerns itself with the use and relevance of a form of language in a speech community. So, in order to achieve the aim and objectives which tailor towards the use of language for national development in a discourse, this study considers the pragmatic theory of context relevant to achieving the study objectives. Hence, it is

pertinent to describe the concept of context. Lamidi, (2000:107) affirms that 'the context of a language is the environment in which a text comes to life, it is the environment of language use where every utterance is interpretable, given the background to it'.

Adegbite, (2000:61) opines that 'the term 'context' is an abstract category used by language scholars to provide links between linguistic items and the social and situational factors of communication'. There are two types of contexts which are: the verbal context and the situational context. While the verbal context interprets the linguistic items used in an utterance, situational context interprets language use in a discourse based on culture and situation that calls for the use of language among the participants in the discourse.

Using the pragmatic tool of context to analyze data from African Oral Literature which according to Ogunjimi and Na'Allah (1991:6) is considered as 'the literature of non-literate societies not yet contaminated with the world of technology', it is expedient for the purpose of this study to note that African Oral Literature is considered as relevant data base to achieve the objectives of this study because its creative process and the production are generally affected by the socio-cultural and philosophical setting of Africa, which include beliefs, customs, traditions and modes of communication of Africans. Examining the context of such socio-cultural norms could therefore be palpable for national development in any African nation in the 21st Century.

Literature Review

Oral literature performance is a collective expression and the celebration of culture-related communal experiences that give voice to values. According to Dasylva (1998:27), these values are rooted in the philosophical society. Oral literature embodies the different hues and shades of colour on the canvas of shared cultural experiences. Oral literature is a significant function of the folklore (or culture) of a traditional society, the latter serves as the context which foregrounds the former. If indeed folklore serves as the pool from which oral literature draws its material, it also by implication constitutes the latter's contextuality. Okpewho, (1992:3) for instance, describes African Oral Literature is identified by various scholars by referring to it as: "Oral Literature"

“Orature”, “traditional literature”, “folk literature” and “folklore”. This indicates the consciousness of not only the variety of definitions already advanced for the subject, but also of the pejorative aura of some definitions given by European scholars.

Finnegan, R. (1970) on her part echoes most European scholars but also did not support them as she said:

The concept of an oral literature is an unfamiliar one to most people brought up in cultures which, like these of contemporary Europe, long stress on the idea of literature of literacy and written tradition. In the popular view, it seems to convey on the one hand, the idea of mystery, on the other, that of crude and artistically undeveloped formulations.

One important idea that cannot be overemphasized in the study of African Oral Literature is the fact that it is an unwritten tradition passed down from one generation to the other, through the words of mouth. This is why it is considered oral. It needs to be clarified at this juncture that its orality does not in any way make it less literary than the written text, for those who stress the idea of literacy and written tradition had to pass through the oral stage. Homer’s epic for instance, emanated from the oral stage of the written stage. So, African Oral Literature is not a signal of the “primitivism” of the Africans, our possession of oral tradition is not an indication of African primitivism as oral tradition cuts across all the peoples of the world.

Chinweizu, (1980:26) opines that ‘it is the task of the objective African scholars to “decolonize” the criticism of African Oral Literature’. Chinweizu is therefore correct to have insisted that ‘it should be borne in mind that ‘written literature has a long tradition in parts of Africa because Africa was not totally illiterate when the Europeans arrived there; and some parts of Africa had written literatures long before many parts of Western Europe’.

Ajadi (1999:238) asserts that ‘whatever definition scholars (both African and non-African) give, we need to internalize the fact that African Oral Literature embraces the entire spectrum of the African way of life, thoughts and ideas in terms of the philosophy, feelings, behaviours,

psychology, the African relationship with his fellow Africans, and his ways of expressing this relationship in terms of socio-cultural values'. African Oral Literature does emphasize the concept of "art-for-art-sake", an idea which Chinua Achebe has rightly called "a new deodorized dog shit" that emanated from the literary movement of the late 19th century. Instead, it is functional because the elements of African traditions carry the existential experience of the Africans. According to Finnegan (1970:45), African Oral Literature is dynamic in the areas of psychology, sociology, economics, philosophy and religious conviction and in the general well-being of the Africans.

In the light of this, African Oral Literature can be said to come in diverse forms- as riddles, proverbs, oral poetry, and narratives. Riddles, according to Miruka (1994:2) include proverbs, puns, tongue twisters, idioms, euphemes and dicta. A riddle is a short oral puzzle which presents the peculiar characteristics of a concept whether those characteristics are physical, behavioural or habitual and requires the unravelling of the concealed literal reference. It usually involves two people- one throws a challenge, while the other unravels the challenge in a response. The recipient of a riddle has to decode the literal reference and identify the concept meant.

The social functions of riddles include the fact that they are used as overtures before any narratives, so as to give an insight into the content of the story about to be narrated. Riddles are also used for environmental education, to inculcate cultural norms, for social commentary and record of change. Examples are found in the following:

Challenge: A small married woman who cooks better than your mother

Response: Honeybee

Challenge: I am here and I am there

Response: The shadow

Challenge: All around my farm there is only one policeman

Response: The moon or sun

Riddles are also efficacious for environmental education, as they create awareness about what is constituted in the environment. They engender diversity in environment, acting as a tool for making the child understand his environment and construct a full picture of the concept in it. . Examples are in:

Challenge: A person has sweet potato vines, a leopard and a goat. He would like to cross a pond. How would he cross?

Response: He would take the potato vines and the leopard first, then he would return and pick the goat.

Proverbs on the other hand belong to the realm of language use for artistic communication. Depending on the context, proverbs can be used to encourage a leader to forge ahead despite difficulties, to advise a leader during his inauguration that leadership is a challenge and he/she should expect some rough times. Proverbs can be used to criticize a leader who has been overwhelmed by pressures of leadership and/or summarize a situation where a leader has had to suffer for the sake of his/her followers or vice versa.

Examples

1. He who is taught by the mother is taught by the world
2. Wisdom is not always white-headed
3. When the tide is high, it ebbs; he who climbs the ladder comes down again.

Methodology

To attain the set goals for this study, the researchers used riddles, oral poetry, songs from Ayinla Omowura (Apala singer in Egba dialect), and Efe in Ijebu dialect to illuminate the satirical function of African Oral Literature. Drum language is also explicated in the data to show the entertainment and edification functions of oral literature. Some heroic epic from Mali and Zaire Republic were utilized to show the pedagogical and edification functions of oral literature. Prose extracts from Chinua Achebe's 'Things Fall Apart' and 'Anthills of the Savannah' also form part of the data base for this study. Extracts from all the genres of African Oral Literature used in this study are contextually selected to agree with the functions of literature for societal and national development.

Results

Based on the diverse data gathered on this study, the various functions of African Oral Literature are illustrated as follows:

Didactic Function of African Oral Literature

African Oral Literature is very much functional in the area of didacticism in the sense that it teaches moral lessons. African tradition that mostly depicts this function is African storytelling. Traditionally, Africans have revered good stories and storytellers around the world who are rooted in oral cultures and traditions. Among the characters of African stories, most familiar of all are the animals, particularly the wily tortoise, spider and their larger dupes. There are also many stories about people (ordinary and extraordinary), legendary heroes or ancestors. Some familiar features of the folktale can be discerned in 'Tortoise and Birds', an Igbo folktale recounted in Achebe, C. (1966:67-70) *Things Fall Apart*:

Once upon a time, all the birds were invited to a feast in the sky, the Tortoise "full of cunning", manages to trick the birds out of all the food at the feast, but for his selfishness he is punished. Tortoise falls from the sky and "His shell broke into pieces.

The story explains a cause, origin, or reason for something, and gives an etiological explanation at the end. In this case, it gives reason for why the tortoise's shell is not smooth. The story dramatizes a moral lesson as the greedy Tortoise received pain, shame and reproach for a reward. We can therefore see how didactic the story is. In folktale, words such as "naughty", but not "irredeemably" wicked characters, as Achebe describes Tortoise, are often restored and reintegrated back into society. In this case, "a great medicine-man in the neighbourhood" patches Tortoise's shell together again. This portrays another significant value in African culture and tradition, which is, "the quest for a repentant heart". We can now see how African Oral Literature is didactic to both the offender and the offended. Thus, the act of recounting tortoise stories in African communities can be used to reaffirm the priority and wisdom of the community, reassure its members that balance and harmony can and should be restored, and that community will survive and prevail despite all odds.

African novelist like Chinua Achebe often introduces oral stories – such as narratives, proverbs, song-tale, myths, folktales, fairy tales, animal fables, anecdotes and ballads into literature. An example is in *Things Fall*

Apart where Ikemefuna's song represents a condensed version of an Igbo folktale, according to Emmanuel Obiechina:

Eze elina, elina!

Sala

Eze ilikwa ya

Ikwaba akwa Oligholi

Eba Danda nete egwu

Sala

Achebe, C. (1966: 42) *Things Fall Apart*

Translation: (the singer calls :)
King, do not eat it, do not eat!
Sala (the audience responds)
King, if you eat it
You will weep for the abomination
Where Danda (White ant) installs kings
Where Ususu (dust) dances to the drums

The full tale is the story of a perverse, headstrong king who breaks a sacred taboo by eating roasted yam which is preserved as sacrifice to the gods. The song is an attempt by the people to warn the king not to commit an action that would compromise himself... his high office and the continued prosperity of his people.

Like the king in Ikemefuna's song, Okonkwo is on the verge of committing an abomination, (the killing of a child who has lived with him for three years and called him father). Here, storytelling is used to advise, guide and warn people not to break the law of the land and not to maltreat their fellow human beings.

Another prose narrative that depicts didactic function of African Oral Literature is titled:

The Vulture and the Hen

Long ago, the hen and the vulture used to live on excellent terms helping each other at any time they needed a hand to procure their domestic necessities. One day, the hen thought of borrowing a razor from the vulture to shave the little ones. The vulture though reluctantly gave hen

the razor because it is his only source of livelihood, so, it must be returned immediately after use. Alas, the hen used it and forgot to return it in good time. When the vulture asked for the razor, the hen sought for it but never found it. She tirelessly sought everywhere to the extent of pulling down her hut, scratched and scratched the ground, all to no avail. The vulture then gave her a condition that each time he calls asking for the razor and the hen fails to produce it, she will substitute a chicken for it. This the vulture did continuously till today because the hen could not find the razor. This is the reason why the hen is always scratching the ground, and the vulture swooping on chicken even in our days. The hen is still searching for the razor and the vulture compensating himself for its loss.

It is obvious that there are moral lessons to be learnt from this story which affirms that it pays to be careful and mindful of the way we handle other people's things, and that one should be content with whatever one has. As the saying goes- 'he who goes a borrowing goes a sorrowing'.

Pedagogical Function of African Oral Literature

The functionalism of African Oral Literature is also very much pronounced in the area of pedagogy which is closely related to didacticism. Oral Literature in Africa, right from the ancient times, has been used for pedagogical purpose as children and young people are usually taught the rules, beliefs, culture and superstition of the society they belong to through oral literature. Oral Literature then becomes an unwritten document containing the rules, beliefs, culture and taboo of any community in Africa. Heroic epics for instance are usually mythical, didactic and etiological. This means they explain how certain institutions came about in a society. This is obviously pedagogic in outlook.

African epics also perform moralistic functions, but these functions are more implicit than explicit as the hero is usually a national hero who brings culture and institutes a particular way of doing things. The effectual

conformity of the hero to the ethical values and social norm of his society and culture is also emphasized and this is pedagogic.

Oral literary tradition in Africa helps to project African politics, history, philosophy, science and ethics. Every folktale for instance teaches lessons on politics, culture, religions, economic, social and ethical matters. For example, a Yoruba proverb asserts that: “Omode gbon, agba gbon, l’a fi da lle-lfe”, meaning-, *‘the youths’/children’s wisdom combined with those of the adults are used to establish life tribe or land’*. This proverb teaches that the old and the young are both relevant in national development and growth of a tribe or ethnic group, as they both have ample attributes to contribute to the positive changes of their society, so, no one should be relegated, neglected or pushed aside in decision making process. In line with the pedagogical function of African Oral Literature, one can deduct from the following that riddles can be used in teaching Mathematics and Logics, thus:

Challenge: Afar Fallarood god wadagate (Four arrows meet in a hide simultaneously)

Response: Geela marka lailsayo (Milk entering a gourd during milking) (SOMALI)

Therapeutic or Medicinal Function of African Oral Literature

A lot of advantage is derived from African Oral Literature when it comes to the application of therapy and the use of medicine. African medicine for instance has been very much useful in the contemporary context of health-care delivery. Most diseases that are very difficult for modern orthodox medicine to cure can very well be treated and cured by traditional medicine. African traditional medicine can easily take care of diseases like malaria, diabetes mellitus, ulcer, tuberculosis, sexually transmitted diseases, asthma and so on. A lecturer at the University of Ilorin, Dr. Gabriel Ajadi, has just developed an anti-malaria drug called “*Ajadilopea*” from the local herb. The involvement of Ifa Oracle is also an important aspect in the role of African religion as a source of solutions to critical human problems. We are taught to obey instructions, especially medical prescriptions which are given from the perspectives of the expert, if we must get well from any form of ailment. Yoruba incantatory

poetry is both ritualistic and religious where the supernatural forces are controlling the universe.

The primary content of this poetry is ritual observance. It can be referred to as a prayer in disguise. Thus it has: 1. Negative Correlate which implies a formula which is based on the denial of a happening's possibility especially something evil. For example in:

A kii gbo gbi, irawe, a kii gbo gbi, eera, So, I must not fall gbi!

'Irawe' is a dry leaf, while 'eera' is an ant'. For illustration, one can deduce that whenever either of these falls on the ground, no one hears any sound, so, "no evil report shall be spread about me."

Also, we have incantations used against conspiracy of opponents. Example:

Agbajo igi won kii ju iroko -Meaning: Several collections of trees are not equal to an Iroko tree.

This is a way of fortifying oneself against adversaries. It is also a way of connecting oneself to the supernatural sphere for protection.

2. Positive Correlate is based on the affirmation of a wished occurrence. For instance:

- i. Ewe osan a san wa o, lasan male
- ii. Oju oro nii leke omi, Osibata nii leke odo, kawa leke ota wa O.

This simply means that one will always overcome, in spite of any predicaments hovering around one, as long as the water lilies would always float on the water, and the orange leaves reveal the potency of the orange tree. By implication, words are used here to pray for oneself and pronounce good wishes upon oneself or other persons.

African festivals also have therapeutic effects on the celebrants/worshippers. The festivals of ancestors depict the Egungun festival. It is the general belief of the participants that their ancestors have descended from heaven to cleanse their community. Egungun (though depending on the clan) comes out in the mid-night from the groove and roars as a way of scaring or warding off evil spirits. It is called Okebadan, in Ibadan land, to purify Ibadan land from the bad deeds committed by Lagelu on

Okebadan. In Owu-Ikija in Ijebu land, fire is used for purification when each person lights fire-brand (oguso) and tries to chase wicked ones/spirits away. In some other tribes it may be Oro festival, Agemo festival, Osun festival or Sango festival that they worship for societal purification. The worshippers often consider any pronouncement in form of prayers or curses (as the situation demands) as sacred utterances from their progenitors.

Satirical Function of African Oral Literature

In African communities there is a great deal of satirical chanting for corrective purpose. The real context of satire is for bringing sanity and decorum into African communities. It is regarded as an important ordeal to comment on the evils that have been done to the community in order to cleanse it and make evildoers realize their evil deeds. The voice used is usually that of the masses, but echoed by an individual or group. Satirist exaggerates in order to win the hearts of the masses. The types of people that are mostly satirized are:

- i. Women who are not reserved, or who always prove superior but gullibly yield to seduction of men;
- ii. Women that are promiscuous and wayward;
- iii. Corrupt politicians or town chiefs;
- iv. Influential personalities who are arrogant and insolent.

The essence of satire to these different behaviour is to abhor the offender and mock him or her publicly with abuses that are maliciously rendered so as to force or persuade the person to change for the better for his or her own good and for the good of the society at large. So, satire is often used for corrective purposes. The following are examples of chants and songs usually rendered during festivals or other public gatherings to achieve specific purposes:

Owo titi bu wen ti se? Owo titi bu wen gbe gba O?
 A gbe wen leyin e tun fi bu wa je,
 Orisa oke a bi wen o (Efe, in Ijebu dialect)

Meaning: (*“What have you done with the money that is meant for mending/ constructing the road? We voted you into power, but you are not representing us well. God will surely visit you with His wrath if you are not accountable to the masses”*).

This is issued to the corrupt leaders and politicians who use public fund and properties for personal and self-aggrandizement rather than for the purpose it is meant to serve.

In the same vein, Ayinla Omowura, an 'Apala' singer from Egbaland, also sang satirically to sound a note of warning to any woman who engages in an act of promiscuity, especially bleaching thus:

Aanu re lo se mi, l'o je ki nba e damoran (2ce)

O ye ki o bi meji k'o o to bora.

(Meaning: *'Let me just advise you out of pity that you should try to have at least two children before going into the act of bleaching, because the outcome of bleaching may be catastrophic during child delivery, in case you may want to be subjected to Caesarean section'*).

Also, drum language can be used to perform satirical function for societal moral and social development. An example is in the following:

Iyawo gboran s'oko 'enu (2ce).

Ni'gba t'o ba ya, wa loko o feran re,

Gboran s'oko lenu. (Meaning: *'Wife, obey your husband so as to always enjoy his favour'*).

This, is a message for young and old married people (especially wives) to be sober, humble and submissive to their husbands, to ensure a happy and peaceful home in particular, and habitable society at large. Of course, miscreants in the society are often products of broken marriages.

Entertainment and Communication function of African Oral Literature

When it comes to entertainment and communication, African oral poetry and drum language (which forms a vital aspect of oral literature) play key roles in the lives of individual members of a society and the society in its entirety. Drum language for instance is a form of oral traditional performance in Africa through which instructions and information are given to individuals or group of people as warnings, advice, or praise. Some people refer to a type of drum as –'African talking drum' popularly

called “gangan” in Yoruba language. Drum language as the name implies is the message one gets when a drummer manipulates the drum (by following the tone in African tonal languages) for the purpose of communication, entertainment and rituals. For the purpose of communication, drum language plays dominant significant roles in re-engineering, re-channeling, and restructuring the society at large and re-directing individual members of the society in the right direction through songs, chants, dance steps and a host of other related ways. For instance, drum language, can be used to sanitize or re-engineer the society towards positive direction by urging the leaders or elders in the society, the likes of kings and eminent personalities to speak the truth always and say things the way they are, without any form of intimidation or prejudice.

An example is in this drum language:

B’o ba ti ri ni e wi (2ce)

Ala ki i b’omo loru, k’o ma le e ro, b’o ba ti ri ni e wi.

(Meaning: ‘Say it as it is, a child is never afraid to relay his dream’)

The message here is that an elderly person is expected to be a role model that should steer clear of corrupt practices and shady dealings as a result of bribery. He must not join the multitudes to do evil, rather, as an elderly person, he must be ready to be a lone voice for truth and integrity.

In “Saworo ide”, a play by Akinwumi Isola, produced and directed by Tunde Kelani for instance, drum as a veritable instrument of entertainment and communication was used to institute the course of justice where history was about to be re-written because of inordinate quest for position or power. In the play, the drum as a historic symbol of cultural preservation was sounded to trace the truth and institute justice in putting the rightful person on the throne of his forefathers. A spectacular drum has to be sounded, and once the drum is beaten, it is only the rightful person to the throne that would be able to decode its message and act according to its dictates.

Aso funfun nii sunkun aro, ejigba ileke ni sunkun ekeji dandan (spiritual connection)

If a wrong person is enthroned through a dubious means, at every sound of the drum the person would develop a great headache that would eventually lead to his death.

Buttressing the functionality of African Oral Literature in the area of entertainment and communication, the great African novelist, Chinua Achebe himself explains that a story does many things. "It entertains, informs, it instructs". He further said in, Achebe's (1987)'s *Anthills of the Savannah*:

It is only the story that can continue beyond the war and the warrior. It is the story that outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story...that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort, without it, we are blind.

Edification Function of African Oral literature

African Oral Literature helps in edifying people in the society and instill a sense of belonging and morality in them. These functions are exhibited by heroic epics. Examples of heroic epics are: I. Salute to Opomulero (from the Oriki of the Yoruba, translated by Prof. Oludare Olajubu).

Opomulero Mojaalekan Abimbeku native of Aleoyn

(Meaning: A good roof tree that is called Moja.

Cloth makes the whole man....)

Opomulero means (the post/beam that holds/ fortifies the house). This is a praise rendered in honour and memory of a legend – a former king of Oyo of Iwata origin. The words of the praise poem serve as a reminder of his power, value and prowess as exemplified in the meaning the words connote.

- I. Shaka (Izibongo of Zulu)
Dlungwana Son of Ndaba!
Ferocious one of the Mbelebele brigade,
who raged among the large kraals,
so that until dawn the huts were being
turned upside-down

Further examples of heroic epic are:

- The Menzon cycle of the Bambara (Mali republic)
- The Silamaka Epic of the Fulani (Though great, he was killed by an uncircumcised albino)

- Sunjata Epic of the Mandeka
 - The Mwindo cycle of Banyanga (Mwindo could walk and talk from birth)
 - The Lianja Epic cycle of the Mongo (Lianja came out of his mother's tibia with all the weapons and insignia of his father)
 - The Mabila Epic of Balega
(Zaire Republic) Mubila speaks in the womb, uses magical formulae, and selects his own name.
- No wonder Leslie Marmon Siko said in his epigraph to ceremony (1977)
- I will tell you something about
Stories They aren't just entertainment.....
They are all we have..... to fight off illness and death.
You don't have anything if you don't have the stories.

Conclusion

One of the fundamental things that Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC '77) has tried to achieve is to help Africans recover their cultural pride from ages of denigration and contempt. It was significant that the festival devoted a considerable part of its activities to oral literary performance in form of songs, recitals, music and dance because oral literature has for a long time been one of the sources of cultural discredit. The study of the oral traditions of various African societies has become a truly serious business which has moved steadily away from the limited evangelizing purposes of the earlier Christian Missions from Europe (in which folklore was systematically collected and carefully employed by the missionaries to get their messages and wishes across), to a more intellectual acceptance of the oral material both as legitimate and respectable aesthetic qualities. Considerable attention has also been given to the study of the physical form of the oral tradition.

Today, linguistic science addresses itself to oral literature not as a way of understanding the strange character of uncultured (as most of the 19th Century Philologists did), but for the purpose of exploring the complex beauty of its structures. Rather, oral literature scholarship (with an eye on the material as first literature and then something else) has gone further in seeking to establish the real aesthetic basis of this kind of literature. It has thus become possible for us to correct the misconception

of earlier generations of scholars, especially foreigners, about oral art in Africa.

Of poetry, there is a good deal both in the sense in which we have come to recognize the word in literature culture and in the more dynamic sense of the live act of creation in a context orchestrated by music and the human response of the audience.

Of metre and rhyme, we can point (among other things), to the skill with which various communities (e.g. the Hausa and Fulani) have struck a balance between the form of the **casida** verse from the received Arabic culture and the fundamental looseness of traditional African prosody. One very significant feature of oral literary study in Africa today is that Africans themselves are doing much of it and achieving much through it. Professor S. Adeboye Babalola's heroic poetry (Ijala) of Yoruba hunters ranked as one of the very few attempts made in African Oral literary study to subject a wealth of material to critical analysis. Professor Daniel P. Kunene's study of Sotho heroic poetry remains unmatched in the area of formal and stylistic analysis of African Oral literature.

One of the things that our study of oral literature has opened our eyes to is the deep personal touch with which the oral narrative poet weaves his personality easily into the fabric of his work in many circumstances. The study of oral literature in Africa is thus deeply consonant with the quest for cultural rediscovery. To crown it all, the pedagogical, didactic, satirical, entertainment, therapeutic, rejuvenating and aesthetic nature of the African Oral Literature will make it ever functional and relevant in any discourse for national development and in whatever circumstance in African societies in the 21st Century and beyond. In order to concretize all that have been raised as points in this write-up, it is expedient to conclude this study with this praise song titled:

Praise of the Word

The word is total, it cuts, excoriates, forms, modulates, perturbs, maddens, cures or directly kills, amplifies or reduces according to intention. It excites or calms souls. (*Praise song of a bard of the Bambara Komo society.*)

Way Forward

From this study, it is obvious that Africans have the tools and resources sufficient for the growth and development of the continent in the power of language. So, it thus recommends that;

- i. African leaders can utilize the creative nature in which language is used in African Oral Literature in solving some social, political and economic challenges in the society, to ensure national development.
- ii. Parents and teachers and other stakeholders in child upbringing through formal and informal education should use the rich cultural ethics embedded in African story-telling, praise poems, riddles and jokes and the likes, to teach children at all levels of learning, how to conduct themselves at home and school, for a healthy interpersonal relationship in both the informal and formal settings. As it has been revealed in this study that riddles and folktales broaden the intellectual horizon of the African child, teachers should use them as rich language teaching methods to enhance creativity and quality in language acquisition.
- iii. The use of language and choice of diction in African songs and drum language also play vital roles in sanitizing the home and society at large, hence, should be inculcated in the school curriculum and used during indoor and outdoor games at school and home, to impart morals in children and adult members of the society, thereby curbing vices, thus promoting healthy positive behaviours leading to national development in this age of civilization.
- iv. African proverbs phrased towards building the society should be regularly used at home, school, social and religious settings in order to teach the members of the society (irrespective of their age or status) the rich African norms and values. This will go a long way in reminding the young and adult members of the society of the rich African heritage that must not be jettisoned in the name of civilization.
- v. African proverbs are strong pragmatic language tools that can help African leaders in decision making, culminating in solving diverse societal problems emanating from ethnic, religious, and social differences among citizens.

- vi. On the whole, this study upholds the fact that language use in the three genres of African Oral Literature is efficacious in building a healthy society, therefore should be consciously taught and passionately used among all citizens irrespective of age and status, so as to encourage national growth and development in all facets of human endeavour in the 21st century.

References

- Achebe, Chinua, (1987). *Anthills of the Savannah*. London: Heinemann
- Achebe Chinua, (1996) .*Thing Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann
- Adegbite, Wale, (2000). "Pragmatics: Some Basic Principles and Procedures" in A.O. Babajide (Ed.) *Studies in Language*. Ibadan, Nigeria: Enicrownfit. Pp 60-80
- Ajadi G. (1999). "African Oral Literature: Definition, Theory and Taxonomy" in *The English Language and Literature in English* E.E. Adegbija (ed.) pg. 235 – 248. Unilorin Press.
- Chinweizu, C. (1980). *The Values of African Oral Literature*. Nsukka: Prince Press.
- Finnegan Ruth, (1970). *Oral Literature in Africa*. Nairobi: Oxford University Press
- Lamidi, Tayo, (2000). "Language: Varieties and Context" in A.O. Babajide (Ed.) *Studies in Language*. Ibadan, Nigeria: Enicrownfit. Pp 105-112-121
- Obafemi Olu,(1994) .*New Introduction to Literature*. Ibadan: Y-Books
- Ogunba, Oyin,(1991). *Notes on Oral Literature*. Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife.
- Ogunjimi, Bayo & Na'Allah, Abdul Rasheed, (1991). *Introduction to African Oral Literature*. Ilorin, Nigeria: University of Ilorin Press.
- Okumba, Miruka, (1994). *Encounter with Oral Literature*. Nairobi, Kenya: East African Educational Publishers.
- Olatunde Olatunji, (1984). *Features of Yoruba Oral Poetry*. Ibadan: University Press Limited
- Omowura, Ayinla, (1976). *Apala Music*. Selection of specific samples of his Apala music relevant to the study.
- 'Saworoide' (1999). A play produced and directed by Tunde Kelani.