Oral Literature Scholarship in Kenya: Achievements, Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract

This paper aims at sharing Kenya's experiences in teaching, fieldwork, documentation, and digitization of oral genres with a view to leveraging best practices. The paper is divided into three sections. Section One examines the role of art in a changing society. Section Two delves into the substance of this paper. It reflects on Kenya's experiences in teaching, fieldwork, documentation and digitization of oral genres in terms of achievements, challenges and prospects. The concluding section of this paper discusses lessons that other African researchers of orality can learn from Kenya's experiences.

Introduction

This paper is premised on the understanding that oral genres in Africa are alive, dynamic and responsive to developments in information technology. Technological change is rapidly altering the way verbal art is composed, performed, documented and disseminated. At the same time, oral genres are redefining and compelling information technology to be of service to Cultural Revolution, something it was not originally intended to do. The annual Haddis Alemayehu Institute of Cultural Studies conference is a significant event as it provides a platform for scholars, researchers and cultural enthusiasts to reflect on the resilience of the African oral genres in societies in transition. The forum, among other things, aims at: preserving, analyzing and promoting Ethiopia's indigenous knowledge and cultural heritage for national development; strengthening academic partnerships; and launching collaborative research projects on the preservation and promotion of Ethiopian Cultural and Literary Heritage. The conference, in addition, aims to identify major areas of research in manuscript studies, indigenous Knowledge in collection, documentation and analysis of oral literature. These noble aims reflect the aspirations of scholars, researchers and practitioners of oral genres across the continent of Africa, and the world at large.

Kenya, my country, is also struggling with the above goals. I have noticed in my undergraduate oral literature classes some anxiety. My students have been asking many questions: What is the role of verbal art in a changing society? What can oral literature do to alleviate challenges like endless conflicts, wars, displacement of population, unemployment, poverty, disease and illiteracy? Can one live decently out of performances? Can society remain traditional and modern at the same time? Does oral literature bridge ethnic, racial and religious differences or it exercabates them? Honestly, I have not been able to answer all the questions to their satisfaction.

Neither does the scope of this paper allow me to answer them now. I have, nevertheless, explained broadly that by its very nature and functions, oral literature is supposed to perpetuate humanity by championing values that promote peace, prosperity and dignity of all human groupings. Through oral history, narratives, songs, riddles and proverbs, people appreciate the functioning of vibrant communities with values anchored on understanding, collaboration, and interdependence.

It is even more fitting that this important conference is hosted by the institute named after a pioneer Pan-Africanist, a patriot of Italo-Ethiopian War, Diplomat-Minister, educationist, writer of international repute and above all, a visionary cultural icon - Haddis Alemayehu 1902- 1996 E.C. (1909-2003). Alemayehu did not only fight for Ethiopia at the frontline against Italian occupation, he also defended Ethiopia's interests through remarkable diplomacy after the war. He is best remembered for his masterpiece of Ethiopian literature *Fiqir Iske Meqabir (Love Unto Grave, 1968)*, which celebrates the power of art to create peace through love. In the face of hopelessness, cynicism and despondency, Art heals through what Aristotle called catharsis. In a strife-torn society like ours, literature heals the world through its power of love and integration. It mirrors with clarity, depth and compassion, the thoughts, desires, achievements, disappointments and hopes of each generation regardless of differences. In art, humanity is tied together with what Athol Fugard, the celebrated South African playwright calls *The Blood-Knot*. I believe that these noble ideals of art inspired Haddis Alemayehu to strive for a happier and secure world for all humankind.

Oral Genres in Kenya: Oral Literature in Africa continue to attract interest of researchers and scholars because of its enduring aesthetic appeal and relevance. It reflects community life, the spirit of ancestors and the process of development in society. The performances, actual or recorded, come from the hearts, minds and memories of individual artists and other tradition bearers who are not just in touch with reality in their communities but also the changing dynamics in the modern world. Communities value traditional performances because they provide education, socialisation, recreation, livelihood and identity. The genre has the capacity to entertain and educate, uphold morals, preserve traditional knowledge and keep history alive. Our lives are defined by narratives. Telling stories has always been a way to join people together,

a way of humanising that which is in the danger of being dehumanised, of bearing witness and keeping history a live (Lathem L 2005: 83).

In their book *African Oral Literature for Schools*, Jane Nandwa and Austine Bukenya (1983) devote a whole chapter to the development of African Oral Literature. Though the title is continental, the content of the book is mainly drawn from Kenya. It is apparent from their analysis that oral literature development mirrors closely the historical and political developments in Kenya as a nation. The major landmarks being the colonial period, struggle for independence and attainment of political freedom and the development of oral literature as an academic discipline in the postcolonial dispensation. The two scholars contend that oral literature suffered repression during the colonial domination. The occupying regime never allowed Kenyan oral literature to thrive under the pretext that it was witchcraft. The real intention was to thwart all forms of traditional cultural expressions since they considered them powerful mobilizing tools for agitation for cultural, economic and political freedoms.

When pioneer African scholars started championing the revival of African oral literature after the independence, they were not in sync with the cultures of the communities they purported to write about. They too had been alienated through deficient colonial education which inculcated in them inferiority complex and a craving for everything Western. They had lived and operated from Europe, some of them since childhood, and therefore, were 'rootless' as far as their African background was concerned' (Nandwa and Bukenya 33).

Some of these scholar-politicians were Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, Milton Obote of Uganda and Abdul Diop of Senegal. These scholar-politicians conducted research to prove that Africans had their culture and to protest against colonialism and agitate for political freedom. They assumed that nationalism and intellectual enterprise were synonymous. Jomo Kenyatta, the founding father of the Kenyan state studied in Britain under Bronislaw Malinowski (1884 – 1942), the enigmatic father of social anthropology. Kenyatta became a graduate of Malinowsky's functionalist approach to understanding the survival of societies and later published *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938), an anthropological work of the utilitarian school. According to Celarent, Kenyatta's book is an ethnographic rendition of the stable, peaceful Gikuyu and their disturbance by the British, who are portrayed as rapacious, hypocritical, and occasionally rather funny" (723). The same westernization of the emergent African leadership is seen in Kenyatta's

contemporary, Milton Obote, the first head of state of Uganda. According to Ali Mazrui (2003), Obote was taken in by the Western civilization that he even renamed himself after John Milton: "Uganda had for Head of Government a person who had changed his name because of admiration of the author of the great English poem, *Paradise Lost*. Obote became Milton Obote out of admiration of John Milton" (136).

The Great Nairobi Literature Debate: The 1960s to mid 1980s recorded increased interest in researching and teaching African oral literature in East African schools and universities. The shift was due to a change in the English syllabus that introduced African literature as the foundation of learning about other literatures. The renaissance in African oral literature in East Africa, known as 'the great Nairobi literature debate' was initiated on 24 October 1968 through a departmental memo in the Department of English at the University of Nairobi. The African scholars: Owuor Anyumba, Ngugi wa Thiongo and Taban lo Liyong rebelled against the colonial English syllabus and demanded the introduction of African literature syllabi in schools and universities. In a paper entitled "On the abolition of the English Department", the trio argued that the primary duty of literature is to illuminate the spirit animating a people, to show how it meets the challenges and investigates possible areas of development (Ngugi 1986, 89). They emphasized the need for a cultural reinvention and revival of Africa's cultural past to help address some of the emerging challenges in independent Kenya (Odhiambo,T, 2004). The rebellion led to major changes in the literature syllabi not only at the University of Nairobi but also at the University of Dar es Salaam and Makerere with oral literature receiving serious attention in scholarship. The radical Africanization of English syllabi in Makerere and Dar es Salaam Universities was influenced by Pio Zirimu and Grant Kamenju respectively.

As explained above, the literary indigenization revolution swept through the three East African universities at the same time. However, it was more pronounced at the University of Nairobi where the name of the department changed from the Department of English to the Department of Literature. The philosophy that guided the curriculum review was based on the premise "that knowing oneself and one's environment was the correct basis of absorbing the world" (Ngugi 1993, 9). The new curriculum "placed East African literature and orature in first year, with other Third World and then European literatures introduced in the following two years. The shift from "English" to "Literature" had nationalistic ramifications. Making national literature core

curriculum redefined the nation (Sicherman, Carol, 1995: 129). No writer captured the mood of the moment better than Okot p'Bitek through his famous publications *Song of Lawino* (1966), and *Song of Ocol* (1967). The publications were a defiant celebration of the rich African culture that the previous colonial English curriculum had either suppressed or ignored.

It is rare for a scholar to discuss the growth of scholarship in Kenyan oral literature without locating the academic footprints of Owuor Anyumba, considered an institution in the genesis and development of fieldwork in oral literature in the country. Operating with zeal in 60s, 70s and early 80s, Anyumba recorded several performances based on the strict adherance to the structuralist school. Most of the recordings were done with students of the University of Nairobi under his training while the rest he did alone. He had cartons of tapes and transcriptions in his office which he always planned to process and publish. He was the first local researcher to collect, document and analyze *Nyatiti* praise poems in Nyanza that he published under the title of *Nyatiti Lament Songs* (1964).

Having Africanised the Literature syllabus and introduced African Oral Literature in to the education system, the immediate challenge was how to teach and examine African oral literature in schools and universities. The conservative expatriate English scholars argued that the spoken art could neither be taught nor examined as an academic discipline because it had no 'intellectual perimeters.' Committed African scholars out to prove the conservative colonial scholars wrong, urgently embarked on the collection and production of teaching material to facilitate the delivery and examination of African oral literature in secondary schools and universities. This led to hurried collection of oral narratives, proverbs, riddles and songs without any clear research methodology, detailed background of the texts or incisive analysis. Graduate students in the Department of Literature at the University of Nairobi did the collection under the supervision of their lecturers and this effort produced the much-needed teaching material. The texts published focused only on the collection of oral texts themselves with scanty analysis suitable for high school students. In 1980s, teaching of oral literature in high schools and universities had taken root. The texts published included *Nyatiti Lament Songs* by Owuor Anyumba (1964), *Popular Culture in East Africa* by Taban lo Liyong, (1971), *Keep my Words* by Roscoe and Ogutu (1974), *Oral Literature: A Certificate Course* by Odaga and Akivaga (1982), *Kikuyu Folklore* by Mwangi R (1983) and *Gikuyu Oral Literature* by Wanjiku Kabira and Karega Mutahi(1988).

These publications confirmed that oral genres had intellectual perimeters and that they could be taught, examined and graded just like any other, though with a few adjustments.

The Africanization of Literature syllabi in the East African region did not achieve much initially. The change became famous due to its nationalistic and political import than academic achievements. It created a weak foundation in terms of researching, teaching, examination, and criticism of oral literature in East Africa. Though local scholars were urgently keen to re-introduce oral literature in the education system, they did not ask – "which education?" They ended up bending African oral literature to meet the requirements of written European literature. They focused more on writing for examination purposes as an alternative to preserving the texts in performances. Instead of inviting resident artists to be employed in Departments of Literature, history, and African studies to deliver texts as was the norm in the community, students were occasionally taken to the field to listen to the performances; not to enjoy and learn from them, but to have the ear for transcription, translation and analysis to earn high grades. In many cases, students were not even exposed to the performance experience in the field for logistical reasons ranging from lack of money to lack of interest by the lecturers in charge. An incident is reported involving Okot p'Bitek when he refused to write down marks a student had scored in her BA dissertation. The student had conducted research in oral literature and written a report. Okot p'Bitek, who was the supervisor, read the report and submitted the marks orally. He went to the chairman of the Department and verbally told him that the candidate had scored an "A" Grade. When he was requested to submit the Mark sheet dully filled and signed, based on the examination regulations, he refused arguing that the university must also accept grades submitted orally because that is African. To save the candidate the agony, the university accepted marks submitted orally, which was then irregular. Based on this anecdote, I concur with Carol Sicherman's assertion that, the colonial educational pyramid erected by a brutally rigorous examination system remained standing at independence, its highest level an attenuated needle.

Oral literature was therefore partially revived to meet the academic cravings of the emergent elites who, though passionate about the academic revival and advancement of the discipline, were, for practical considerations, more interested in teaching out of nationalism, grades or publications or all of the above. It would not be kind to rubbish all the effort by these pioneers, but my contention is that as the performances were being recorded for Western education

standards, effort should have been invested equally in capturing, teaching, and examining African oral literature in its authentic form in the community and not as a derivative. As a result, we got publications and in rare cases, audio tapes but missed out on the vibrant living lore that finds its expression in the intercourse between a charged performance and an equally gratuitous audience. This tradition persists up to today. There is no dialogic engagement between scholars of the living art and their students on one side, and the community of creators, performers, and preservers on the other. The various camps work at cross purposes pursuing different goals.

The East African experience in cultural revival confirms that in post-colonial societies, tentacles of domination and self degradation run deep long after the flag independence. There is a way in which colonial education, lifestyle and practices infect the mind of and degrades rationality and self respect in the colonized. Subalternism and "otherness" are then accepted and rationalized by the educated elite under liberal accommodationist terms as cultural tolerance, globalization, and internalization. What is never mentioned is that it is a unidirectional engagement based on primordial Darwinian evolutionist dichotomy of high and low cultures. A number of local cultural institutes in Africa have found themselves hostages to Western cultural tastes, attitudes and economic maneuvers due to funding challenges and misplaced national priorities. In the cold war era, Western powers competed to fund cultural centers in Africa, some of which were centers for espionage. The same story is repeating itself again in a number of African countries. The difference is that it is China that is now selling its culture to Africa as a smokescreen for extracting raw material to sustain her bourgeoning economic growth.

The "success" of the pioneers in East Africa, in mounting oral literature as an examinable discipline in schools to universities regrettably, led to complacency among scholars of oral literature at the time and the government of the day. This is confirmed by the decline in broad-based, publicly-funded organized research in Kenyan oral literature from the late 1980s to 2000. Scholars argued that a lot of material had been collected and what was needed was analysis and not further fieldwork. It is appropriate to acknowledge that once the nationalistic favor settled, and the independence of flag confirmed, the government's interest in promoting African culture waned, and with it evaporated the enthusiasm of fieldworkers. Mlama, reflecting on oral performances in Tanzania after independence, posits that oral poetic genre has been hijacked and manipulated by the, "political class for the benefit of the ruling classes, leading to its

domestication and disempowerment" (24). It is common knowledge that the best oral poets are recruited to perform for political leaders at airports and other political events based on texts created for them by official propagandists. This has stifled creativity, made artists partisan and dwarfed their talents.

From 2000, scholarship in oral literature in Kenya was revived through the activities of the Kenya Oral Literature Association (KOLA). KOLA is a professional organisation of ethnographers with passion for research in oral genres in Kenya. It is a multi-disciplinary forum for historians, anthropologists, philosophers, linguists, sociologists and economists. There is equal interest in theoretical, technological and methodological issues. The association has engaged public and private universities, cultural institutes, museums, archives, donor community and individual researchers to shape the strategic direction for cultural studies in Kenya. One area that the association focuses on currently is digitalization of intangible heritage and how best to secure the gains of digital revolution without falling into the trap of Western and Eastern commercial avarice.

Digitalization and African Oral Genres

In the following section, I will reflect on the need for collaboration between various stakeholders to promote research, preservation and dissemination of African oral genres. I will then interrogate the place of digitalization of African oral genres and the politics of digital repatriation. It is my observation that the primary challenge for oral literature in the 21st Century is that of preservation for access. In my oral literature fieldwork experience, one area that has been of concern to me is the broken link between data collection and analysis on one hand, and preservation and access on the other. This is the missing link between ethnographic field work and archiving for increased access. While a number of reasons explain the gap between research and archiving, it is my argument that lack of collaboration between researchers and archivists is the main challenge. The problematic relationship between fieldworkers and archivists is represented by the two antagonistic camps led by Clive Cochrane and Bruce Bruemmer. Cochrane blames fieldworkers for concentrating too much on recording practices and not enough on access, while Bruemmer retorts that archivists by not engaging fieldworkers and exploiting the full potential of digital technology are to blame for the lack of access to recorded collections

(Swain, 352). Lack of collaboration is also reflected in conflicting theoretical approaches to research and archiving, methodological deficiencies, especially lack of archiving framework for fieldworkers, and attendant attitude problems. To ensure that oral genres are clinically collected and scientifically preserved for increased access, I propose that fieldwork methodologies be modified to integrate archiving practices into data collection and processing procedures. It is important that collectors acquaint themselves with both traditional and digital archiving practices in order to ensure that preservation component is part of fieldwork methodology from its inception in terms of the research design, transcription, translation, data analysis, and archiving. In this way, fieldworkers and curators will work in harmony and complement each other's effort.

Apart from collaboration in research and archiving, digital revolution is also shaping African oral genres in new ways. A number of arguments have been advanced in the past to appreciate both the value modern information communication technology brings into cultural studies and the dangers inherent in the new technologies (Ong (1982); Bolter (1991); Nelson (1992); Ess (1996) and Lanham (1993)). In different ways, these scholars suggest that the new communication technology can serve as a lens through which to re-vision the scholarship in humanities. Ong, in particular, sees the return of orality in the electronic age and calls it the era of 'secondary orality' (Ong W, 1982: 3). While I concur with Ong's 'primary' and 'secondary' orality typology, I think that he leaves the third and final stage. The third stage is 'digital' orality. This orality is too advanced to be classified as secondary orality since it is so close to primary orality. It is my argument that digital orality takes us back to primary orality and therefore strengthening the foundation of primary orality. Application of digital technology to oral genres confirms that oral literature, like other genres, is dynamic and adjusts itself to take "full advantage of the new technology in order not only to survive, but also to reach out to the new horizons" (Ahmad 2005: 224). CMC, among other contributions, expands the audience which, in turn creates demand for new and challenging performances from committed oral artists. For instance, the borderless performance space in the internet allows oral artists to explore new territories and push their artistic frontiers, share ideas, collaborate and raise their profiles nationally and around the world. It also promotes research in folklore by cutting the cost considerably in accessing the relevant literature and identifying and contacting important oral artists. In addition, the cyberspace democratizes performance space thereby, creating greater equality, both in terms of artistic composition and in terms of communication across entrenched boundaries of politics, gender,

race, ethnicity and social status. The cyberspace further enables oral artists and audience to explore art and technology around the world. It strengthens cross-cultural fertilization and global understanding because as performed oral literature texts are digitized, stored and mediated by databases and networks, culture itself becomes available in new ways. Digital oral literature archive can promote collection and preservation of verbal art covering a long period. To illustrate my argument in support of digitization of oral genres I use the example of "story telling Project" in Ethiopia found at *www.ethiopianfolktales.com*. The project documented oral narratives from all the eight regions of Ethiopia. The texts collected were processed, translated into English and the best selected for publication. Not all the storied processed were published. The project ended prematurely for lack of funding. The stories that were published are uploaded in the internet at www.ethiopianfolktales.com/enthe-stories. on this site, the reader can access the oral narratives of the Afar, Amhara, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambela, Harar, Oromia, Somalia, Tigray and SNNPR. Local and international users may search, save, and study or e-mail these records to other intended users. In addition to the names of oral artists and titles of individual performances, the database can also provide information on the place, date, and method of recording, the media in which the performance is represented in the collection, biographical facts relating to the researcher, the oral artist and various other details of interest. If a song or text is available in digital format, users can link directly from the database record through the hypertext to the associated digital object(s). The hypertextual navigability of cyberspace allows for ongoing dialogue between the author, the medium, and the audience, thus blurring the traditional boundaries of 'organization' 'style' and 'audience' concerns. In this particular respect, Ethiopia is ahead of Kenya, and certainly a number of countries in the region. Kenya is yet to digitize and upload a collection of oral genres in the custody of researchers. Cyberspace enlarges the bracket of audience by attracting and involving the literate and highly mobile young people, popularly referred to as the *dot.com* generation, whose artistic sensibilities are increasingly shaped by and developed within the digital media through *tweetrature*, *technauriture* and *facebooking*. It is therefore, not an overstatement to argue that digitizing oral literature can improve the economic well-being of hitherto unknown village-bound poor oral artists, and source communities through royalties and advertisements.

As we discuss digitization of African oral genres, one area we need to be aware of is the current push by the industrialized North to digitally repatriate tangible and intangible heritage stolen

from Africa in the best. Mark Turin of the University of Columbia in a paper entitled, "Indigitization: The Afterlives of Collected Orality," advocates for digital cultural repatriation. This proposal raises many questions than answers: What is returned digitally? Can a thief negotiate conditions for surrender of the stolen property? Is there common understanding that African artifacts in Europe and America were fraudulently or forcefully taken away from communities? What are the likely economic, cultural, political and legal implications of digital repatriation? How do we repatriate intangible heritage like the spoken art? Can repatriation be considered as a form of social justice or a palliative for political correctness? Is returning the surrogate a repatriation or deception? And, who owns the copyright? These are concerns that scholars of orality, curators, policy makers and International Law experts have to deal with to ensure that Africa is not swindled again.

Conclusion

Scholars have realised that digital society is not a dream but reality with significant benefits to oral artists, audience and society. Oral artists, audiences, and scholars are exploring possibilities that exist for tapping technology to aid cultural renaissance sweeping across the villages and urban centres in Africa. Though received with resistance initially, there has been a quick realisation that though digital revolution poses some risks, it still has tremendous value. 'Othering' does not have to be spacial. It is concealed under intellectual, psychological and economic 'liberation' of the 'other'. Subalterns having been pushed to the periphery of self knowledge and existence, are made to internalize cultural rootlessness, suppressed regret for black identity and unusual readiness to embrace exotic cultural, economic and intellectual 'liberation' by commercial predators from Eastern and Western hemispheres. We should treat "digital evangelism" from the west with a lot of caution. These 'missionaries' of new technologies operate as "digital migration crusaders" out to convert analogue societies in Africa to their new ways of life. Such evangelists create a utopian picture of digitality as magnum of all the challenges in collection and preservation of cultural material. They may have a point, but their zeal is questionable. Like early missionaries, digital crusaders are self conceited, impatient, and overzealous in selling the miracles of digitalization. They conceal the dangers inherent in the new medium. Digital migration of oral genres in Africa should be handled cautiously. We must retain the traditional modes of performances, collection, storage and dissemination, just in case

the digital platform collapses like the Titanic. The modest effort made by Haddis Alemayehu Institute of Cultural Studies of Debre Markos University should be emulated by others. Africa must arise.

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