

## The Nature of Oral Literature: Concepts and Genres

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**Abstract:** Oral literature is an aspect of literature preserved not in written form but in oral form. It is highly valued in Africa in general and in Igbo in particular mainly because of its didactic nature. To some people, Oral literature is only but a mirage because what is not written down cannot in any way, be regarded as literature. The researcher sees this as an illusion and thus, in this paper, he makes it vivid that anything written down was first conceived and probably rendered orally. He sees oral literature as an indispensable aspect of literature. In this paper, he has chronicled various forms of oral literature, stating their areas of overlap and their differences as well as their various needs and uses.

**Keywords:** Genre, Oral literature, Orature, Folklore, Tales, Performance

### INTRODUCTION

To a great extent, the phrase 'oral literature' seems self-contradictory. It is an oxymoron – a situation where two contradictory things are placed side by side. The word 'oral' denotes that which is spoken and not written. On the other hand, literature means that which is written down for one who is literate in the language to read and understand. Whenever the term 'literature' is mentioned, mind goes to that which is written rather than spoken. Therefore, when the two words are juxtaposed so that we

have oral literature, it sounds awkward. According to Okoh [1], since oral literature as a concept comprises two words, oral and literature, it is appropriate to take as our starting point an examination of both terms. The second and weightier is derived from the Latin word, littera (letter of the alphabet, Litterae letters), is one commonly used in modern term. Okoh goes further to explain that the word 'literature' is employed, for example, by manufacturers in describing or advertising their latest products. According to him, 'a pharmaceutical conglomerate, electronic giant or engineering outfit on offering the customers some new products, encloses a leaflet or manual, which it labels literature.' All that Okoh emphasizes here is that literature is written and not oral.

However, despite the sharp contrast existing between oral and written literature, it is erroneous to say or believe that oral literature is impossibility. Anything written was first conceived and in most cases, uttered out. Aristotle has defined literature as an imitation of life. It is therefore, possible that one can compose story that aptly mirrors one's society and tell the story to a direct audience. Although the story is not written down, the audience listens and enjoys the story as the raconteur tells the story. If any member of the raconteur's audience is literate, he may document the

story of the raconteur in written form. When such is done, we have literature borne out of orality. Literature therefore, need not be what is written only, it can as well, be spoken as long as it is rendered in a language of man. Before the colonization of Africa, mainly Africans were illiterates because they could neither read nor write, but they had their stories which were communally composed in their indigenous languages. When the Europeans made the assertion that Africans, Igbo people, in particular had no literature, Achebe quickly refuted the assertion because Igbo people had their stories, songs and such similar things which were communally composed and passed down from one generation to another, orally. Eventually, the communal stories of the Igbo and other communities in Africa began to be written down.

Oral literature is synonymous with folk literature and it is a broad term which may include ritual texts, curative chants, epic poems, musical genres, folk tales, creation tales, songs, myths, spells, legends, proverbs, riddles, tongue-twisters, word games, recitations, life histories or historical narratives. Oral literature, therefore, refers to any form of verbal art which is passed down from one generation to another generation by the words of mouth instead of being written down. It is because of the fact that this form of

literature is transmitted orally and not in written form that oral literature is wildly regarded as literature of the primitive community. According to Nandwa and Bukenya [3], oral literature includes “those utterances, whether spoken, recited or sung, whose composition and performance exhibit to an appreciable degree the artistic character of accurate observation, vivid imagination and ingenious expression.” Similarly, Canadian Encyclopedia, suggests that the phrase *oral literature* is sometimes used interchangeably with folklore, but it usually has a broader focus. It is the means of transmitting the totality of tradition, culture and total belief of a people to the younger generation in spoken means. Just as literature imitates and mirrors the author’s society, oral literature preserves cultures and tradition. Oral literature is used by people mainly the illiterate community, like the literate community uses written literature to express their ideas, beliefs and values, and negotiate through their net social relationships. According to *Annual reviews mobile: global, mobile, relevant research*, oral literature is a form of communication which uses words in speech in highly stylized, artistic way. Literature is written in emotive language, likewise the oral literature. When a good raconteur tells a story, one listens with rapt attention because of the emotive language employed by the story teller. When a poor raconteur tells a story, the story tends to be boring but when a good story teller tells the same story, punctuating the story with apt proverbs and other stylistics usually employed by good writers, the audience appreciates the story.

#### **Differences between oral and written literature**

It has been vividly stated that oral literature is the totality of a communal norms, traditions, cultures and beliefs that are preserved and made known to the younger generation through the spoken words instead of being written down. The major difference between oral and written literatures include the obvious fact that while the oral literature is not written down, rather, it is kept alive through oral means, written literature is written down.

Oral literature has no known composer because it is a communal lore, jointly composed to mirror communal beliefs, written literature has known authors and it mirrors the writer’s society as the author perceives it.

Because oral literature is not written down, it is subject to moderations. Each raconteur is free to narrate a known story however he or she likes as well as incorporate tales that are not originally part of the subplot just to captivate the listener. In written literature, the story remains what the writer has made it to be.

Oral literature has a conventional opening depending on the choice of the raconteur. Some begin with “Once upon a time....; Long time ago....; In the land of the animals....” etc while the written literature has no such conventional openings.

Oral literature requires audience participation while it is not so in the written literature. Audience in oral literature performs active role of making the performance interesting by singing the ditties where necessary.

Written literature is usually long, longer than all aspects of oral literature. A novel, for instance, cannot be finished in a sitting, a raconteur in oral literature starts and finishes his or her tale in a sitting. Although some aspects of oral literature like the epic, may be long, it is usually not as long as the written version. The audience becomes bored if any tale becomes unnecessarily too long.

#### **Performance and the occasion**

In Africa in general and in Igbo in particular, oral literature is valued very highly. The reason for this is not far-fetched, it is a means of educating the young ones as well as preserve the culture of our people. Although it is not written down, people from a particular community, both old and young, are conversant with the community’s oral literature because occasions always call when oral literatures are performed. It is a fact, universally acknowledged that one remembers and retains that which one hears and sees. Because oral literature is performed like a drama before a direct audience, it remains indelible in the minds of the audience who would in due cause, transmit same to the generations yet unborn.

All aspects of oral literature are performed before the direct audience. As I have earlier mentioned, the audience in oral literature is not a mere passive listener. Members of the audience contribute a lot as a particular aspect of oral literature is being performed. For instance, they help in singing the ditties where necessary, if a particular tale chronicles any tragic episode, they exclaim “hei! Chei! Oh! or Eiyaa! On the other hand, they clap their hands and shout “Good! Wonderful! or Great!” when a comic episode is chronicled.

It is pertinent at this point to mention that although oral literature is very crucial in our society, there are occasions when certain aspects of oral literature are performed. It is therefore, an aberration if any lore meant for a particular occasion is performed in a different occasion. For instance, certain genres of lore are performed in funerals, others are performed at a childbirth. The lore meant for funerals must not be performed at childbirth.

Again, there are specific periods of the day when certain lore are performed in Africa. Folktales and other similar tales used to teach morals to the young audience are performed late in the evening. Africans are known as industrious people who are not lazy. In the morning hours, they would be at their different places of work, mainly in their farms and market places. When they return in the daytime, they would do the domestic works and later in the day, they would enjoy their tales.

Any able bodied young man or woman seen around during the day time performing any aspect of oral literature for fun while others are at their various places of work is regarded as *efulefu* or a loafer as Unoka in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

### Forms of oral literature

Like the written version, oral literature is classified into various forms. Although the forms of oral literature have areas of overlap, they are distinct from each other. They include:

- The poetic genre
- The dramatic genre
- The dramatic genre

### The prosaic genre

According to Baldick [4], prose is any form of language not organized according to the formal patterns of verse: although it will have some sort of rhythm and some devices of repetition and balance, these are not governed by regularly sustained formal arrangement, the significant unit being the sentence rather than the line.

The language of prose is simply, the language of communication in natural context. Glaring among the oral narratives include: *the folktale, epic, legend, myth and proverb*. For easier understanding, the aspects of the prose narratives would be treated one after the other

### The folktale

Folktale is a short but highly didactic imaginary story that uses mainly animals, birds and human beings as the characters. In folktale, animals and birds who are part of the characters talk and behave like human beings. In most cases, they live with human beings and share a lot of things in common. This is not possible in real life and that is why folktale is regarded as tales that are not possible to happen in real life like the realistic fiction. However, folktales contain a lot of moral lessons so that at the end, one should be able to say what one has learnt from the story. Folktales are used to teach the younger ones some fundamental lessons of wit because one major issue about folktale is that it centres on the theme of encouraging virtue and discouraging vice. Wicked and foolish characters in

folktales are made to suffer for their wickedness and foolishness so that the audience would be discouraged from vice.

According to Baldick [4], folktale is a story passed on by word of mouth rather than by writing, and thus partly modified by successive re-telling before being written down or recorded. In the same vein, Akporobaro [2], describes folktale as an imaginative story in prose form which may have a basis in real facts but generally, the story is imaginative. Although Akporobaro says that folktale may have a basis in real life and may be believed, the obvious fact remains that folktale has no historical reality and has absolutely no possibility to happen in real life.

Mainly, characters in folktale are usually flat and the plot linear, devoid of the usual complications of the conventional plot. Again, folktale is believed to relate tales of imagined episodes that transpired in an imagined place in the remote past and that is why it usually starts with "long time ago or Once upon a time."

Today, many writers, mainly in a bid to preserve our folktales and mainly for stylistic purposes, incorporate folktales in their written literature. Chinua Achebe is prominent among such writers. Mike Ejeagha, a popular Akuko na Egwu musician tells a great number of folktales and in an interview, he stated that he inherited the tales from his father who on his own, inherited same from his own father. Ejeagha's statement here, goes to consolidate the fact that folktale, like other oral literature, is preserved through the word of mouth. He goes further to say that since his songs are folktales, he can never conclude his tales without stating the moral lessons of his tales. Such stories as *The greedy tortoise*, Okafor, J. N. J's *Animal kingdom*, *Nnyagu*, Uche's *The kite and the chicken*, *Lizard and the chameleon* and *The hands of the gods* are some examples of folktales now preserved in book form. There are many interesting folktales in F. C. Ogbalu's Mbediogu. The story of how tortoise betrays elephant is a popular good example with a lot of moral lessons.

The major onus of folktale is to pass some moral lessons. This is why Ejeagha made the statement that he can never conclude his story without stating the moral lessons of the tales. In the past, folktale used to be what a traditional Igbo used to educate the younger ones. This is because, apart from the entertainment the audience enjoys as a tale is told, moral lessons are derived from them

### Epic

Epic is a long narrative story or poem that celebrates the tremendous achievements of a legendary hero. The hero is in a number of ways, different from ordinary persons. For instance, the hero in an oral or

traditional epic possesses supernatural prowess that enables him perform great feat no ordinary mortal can. The birth of the epic hero is beyond ordinary and in most occasions, there was no sexual intercourse before the epic hero is conceived. He uses his supernatural prowess to save a nation or a community but he in turn, antagonizes the society that he had saved. Milton's Paradise lost, Virgil's Aeneid, Homer's Iliad and the Anglo-Saxon poem, *Beowulf* is among the popular known epics.

Umeasiegbu's *Anukili ugama*: an Igbo epic is a good example of traditional epic. Anukili as an epic, possesses all the qualities of the epic. For instance, Anukili at birth, is discovered to have cut teeth. This is a taboo and unheard of in Igbo. Also unconventional, Anukili comes into the world, leg first and even his father rejects him saying he never slept with his wife before Anukili was conceived.

As Anukili begins to grow, he begins to exhibit such unconventional prowess that appalls everyone; he saves his people from the terrors of ada, the hippopotamus that has been terrorizing them. The entire community cannot do anything to exonerate themselves from the plights of the ada. Anukili, single-handedly, kills the dangerous creature to save his people. This feat is not possible for one who does not possess supernatural power. In the long run, Anukili begins to antagonize the same people he had saved; he ate up their foods so that they continue to starve. When they can no longer bear the plight, they conspire to kill him. They set him ablaze, the house is burnt down but Anukili comes out unhurt.

Even the physical appearance of Anukili distinguishes him from the normal human being. According to Umeasiegbu in the preface to the text, Anukili was a sturdy in ugliness. He was huge and tall, his skin was tough and coarse. His stomach was a big water pot, his face was dotted with scars, his eyes were bloodshot and his lips were as thick as the back of a tree. To demonstrate how ugly Anukili is, Umeasiegbu states that "His teeth resembled elephant tusks."

### Myth

In the words of Baldick, this is "a kind of story or rudimentary narrative sequence, normally traditional and anonymous, through which a given culture ratifies its social customs or accounts for the origins of human and natural phenomena, usually in supernatural or boldly imaginative terms." (P. 163).

In a way, myth looks very similar to folktale in the sense that both of them are short narratives of quite incredible tales. However, a close examination of both folktale and myth shows that despite the semblance, they differ significantly from each other. Glaring, while

folktale uses animals, birds and humans as the characters, myths use animals and supernatural. In myths, animals interact with gods face to face and in the end, a particular problem is mysteriously solved. Folktales aim at teaching morals while myths proffer solutions to a universal problem. However, like in folktale, solution given by myth about a given mythical problem is not true. For instance, such tales that illustrate the origin of death, the origin of rainfall, why women don't grow beards, why tortoise has broken shell and the etymology of life and death are examples of myth.

In each example, the supernatural appears as one of the characters so that with his influence, a mystical problem can be solved. In the story that illustrates the etymology of death, tortoise and dog were said to have been sent to god, chukwu. Tortoise is to tell chukwu that if anyone dies, the person should remain in the land of the dead. Dog is to tell the god that there would be no death and that if anyone dies, the person should come back to life. Dog is given the task because it is a faster runner than tortoise and it is believed that it would get to the god first before the tortoise. The two creatures set out for the task, tortoise secretly keeps some palm nuts for the dog on the way that he would take to go to chukwu. Dog comes, sees the palm nuts and begins to enjoy the nuts. Soon, it falls asleep as before dog wakes up, tortoise had gone to chukwu and told him that there should be dead. When dog wakes up later, it runs to chukwu to deliver the message but he is told that chukwu does not listen to later words because the first words of tortoise had been taken. The tale concludes that it was because of this that there is death in the world up till now.

### Proverbs

Proverb is defined as a simple and concrete saying that expresses a truth based on common and intuitive knowledge or the practical experience of humanity. Proverb does not state the obvious fact directly, it rather uses indirection to state the fact. Among the Igbo people, proverb is seen as the oil with which words are eaten. To understand proverbs, it is recommended that one considers the context in which the proverb is used. This is because, a proverb does not say things directly, it requires intuition and rationale to understand it. Despite the esoteric nature of proverb, it is expected that every good Igbo should know proverbs, know how to use them as well as understand them when used. This is why we hear people tease one who don't understand proverbs used for them that the bride price his father paid to marry his mother is a waste.

Like the other aspects of oral literature, proverb is handed down from one generation to another by the way of the mouth. Again, proverb is a communal property and nobody is credited with the authorship of



any proverb. Depending on the society, different animals and objects form part of proverbs but the reflection of the proverbs is on human beings. For instance, when one says that a toad does not run in the day time for nothing, “toad” in the proverb refers to somebody. It is either that it refers to the speaker, the listener or even a third person, present or absent, depending of course, on the context.

Proverbs are formulated using objects that are popular in a particular society. A community surrounded by bush used local games as objects of their proverbs. The proverb “eneke, the bird says that since hunters shoot without missing, it has learnt to fly without perching” is popular among bush communities whose people are predominantly hunters.

“If the hill decides to break an old woman’s waist as she climbs, the woman learns to climb the hill with tactics” originated from communities surrounded by hills. On the other hand, the proverb “a patient person eats fish caught with a hook” originated from communities surrounded by rivers whose people are fishers.

Whenever a proverb is used in conversation, it is used to pass information across and that is why the listener needs to listen attentively to get the context under which the proverb is used. If attention is not paid to the context, the meaning of the proverb is eluded.

### Uses of proverbs

Proverbs are used either actively or they are used passively in speeches. When used actively, the reflection is either on the speaker, listener or another person and the aim is to encourage, to advise, make suggestions, or to convince someone. What this means is that proverb is used actively to refer to the present. For instance, one uses proverbs to encourage someone to embark on a venture, it is actively used because the venture has not been embarked upon. On the other hand, when something has happened and one uses proverb to blame, praise, indict or scorn one for any action already carried out, the proverb is said to have been used passively.

If for instance, one was advised not to marry a person, he insists and marries her, if in the long run, the girl begins to exhibit the characters which the elder had seen in her before advising that she should not be married, one will say for instance that “a deaf fowl hears in the soup pot.” In the proverb, the fowl reflects the person who has made the wrong choice and the proverb is used passively because the action had taken place before the proverb is used. If the same proverb is used to advise one not to do something, the usage of the proverb becomes active.

### Poetic genre

Poetic genre in oral literature includes those compositions meant to be sung and chanted. It is composed in stanzas and lines rather than in prosaic and like the written poetry, oral poetry is embellished in emotive language so that when it is performed, the rhythmic sound appeals to the ears. Oral poetry is synonymous with traditional songs composed by known and unknown composers to be sung in specific occasions. As Okoh [1] observes, “For members of several traditional African communities, virtually every occasion necessitates singing and, for the composer, provides suitable material for the composition of new songs. Because songs permeate every aspect of African life and culture, they commonly derive their names from the different occasions on which they are performed, or from which they derive” (139).

As it is the case in the modern or written poetry, oral poetry is classified into subgenres so that we have funeral songs, war songs, work songs, praise songs (panegyrics) and birth songs

### Funeral songs

Funeral song is an elegiac poem composed to mourn the death of a dear one. It is any composition meant to be sung as a song lamenting for the death of a beloved one. Akporobaro [2], describes funeral song as the lament in poetic form of a mourner for a departed loved one.

Death is abhorred and when it strikes, many people especially the loved ones go into mourning. Funeral songs are therefore, used to mellow the mourners. Funeral songs are endowed with pacifying messages. Coupled with stylistics and performance, the mourners tend to forget their sorrows.

As an aspect of oral literature, funeral songs, though they were originally composed by people from a particular society, because they were not written down, the composers are not usually known. Funeral poetry is preserved orally and communities borrow other communities’ funeral songs and indigenize them. Though it is quite obvious that funeral songs were composed by individuals, they are taken to be communal property used only during funerals.

To ensure that funeral poetry does not go into extinction, some concerned individuals began to record and document the songs in book form. Sam Uzochukwu has a good number of Igbo songs in his *Abu akwamozu* and *Mbem akwamozu*, likewise *Nnabuenyi Ugonna* and F. C Ogbalu in their *Abu na egwuregwu* and *Mbem oyoko* respectively.

### War songs

War songs are such chants sung by warriors who are about to engage in warfare or at a heroic dance or ceremonies which represent actual warfare. War songs are usually sung by warriors to encourage themselves, or they are sung by their supporters to encourage them not to stumble. War songs are easy to compose, many of them are extemporaneously composed. One person may simply raise his voice and utter a word, and immediately, the refrain would be added by the others. Example,  
The soloist: Nzogbu nzogbu  
Refrain: Enyi mba enyi  
Soloist: Zogbue nwoke  
Refrain: Enyimba enyi  
Soloist: Zogbue nwanyị etc

We find out that the refrain always remains the same word or phrase which is repeated each time the soloist utters a word or phrase. Another example of war song is “Obi” sang as  
Soloist: Obi kerelenke  
Refrain: Obi

As the soloist sings, the refrain remains simply “Obi”  
These songs when sung, even the weakling is moved to join in the race.

### **Panegyrics**

Panegyric is also known as praise song. It is a Latin originated word which denotes a formal eulogistic composition intended as a public compliment. As an aspect of oral literature, panegyric is a traditional composition sung in praise of one who probably may have done something quite impressive. Some panegyrics have no known composer while some others are composed by known gifted minstrels who usually go round palaces and places of celebrations to sing praise songs to prominent and wealthy people around who in return, would reward them with some cash.

### **Lullaby**

A lullaby is a melodious song, composed by mainly unknown persons used to lull a child to sleep and to stop crying. Like many other aspects of oral literature, though lullabies are usually without any known composer, rather, they are made popular and also preserved by the way of the mouth (ie, they are passed from generation to generation orally), lullabies are popular. The popularity of lullaby is majorly based on its importance to the society. Lullabies though are composed to be sung as songs, they, like folktales, tell simple stories that cohere with the rhythm to help lure the child to sleep.

Lullaby is as important as funeral song. I have stated elsewhere in this paper that as long as death has continued to kill people, funeral songs will continue to exist. In the same vein, as long as childbirth continues,

people still get young ones to babysit their babies, lullabies will continue. Each time a good babysitter carries a crying baby, especially when the mother is not around to breastfeed the child, all that the babysitter does at the moment is to sing lullabies for the child. As the lullabies are sung, the baby begins to doze off.

In some lullabies, the first stanza or line usually asks questions whose answers are supplied by the subsequent stanza or line. We have many instances of lullabies in Igbo. Example:

Onye tiri nwa na ebe akwa?  
Egbe tiri nwa na ebe akwa

According to the Wikipedia free online dictionary, a lullaby is usually played or sung to young children. The major issue in lullabies is not the wordings of the song but the beauty of the rhythm which aids to pacify the child and make it to sleep. The purpose of lullabies varies. In some societies, lullabies are simply used to pass down cultural knowledge or tradition. In that case, when such lullabies are sung, the wordings chronicle cultural norms. In the Igbo example, “Onye tiri nwa na ebe akwa?” as one listens to the message, one is made abreast of the fact that in most Igbo communities, it is the responsibility of the men to fend for their families thus “ndi nna na oba na oba” the line, when translated, reads “fathers are always in the yam ban.” The line also makes it categorical that Igbo men are industrious and are never idle.

Lullabies, like some other traditional songs, enjoy a lot of repetitions. The repetitions not only help to enhance the rhythm of the song, they also aid in emphasizing on certain issues.

### **The dramatic genre**

Drama, as a genre of literature, can best be appreciated when acted on the stage. What this denotes is that drama is meant to be dramatized before a direct audience. Unlike other genres of literature, drama appeals to both the ears and the eyes as it involves speeches and actions. As an aspect of oral literature, drama here is not written down and does not usually have a known composer. It rather involves the spectators who gather in a traditional square (setting) to entertain their eyes and the ears by a group of performers (actors). Performers here include masquerades that dance and exhibit some acrobatics to amuse and entertain the audience. During some traditional festivals like the new yam festivals and such similar festivals, people usually gather in certain squares (*ebede*) to watch such masquerades like Ijele, Izaga, Okwomma as well as other masquerades. In most occasions, smaller masquerades engage in certain friendly wrestling for the delight of the audience.

During some popular traditional ceremonies like the Ofalla festival, masquerades and such other dancing tropes entertain the direct audience in the Igwe's palace. It is not always only masquerades that entertain; able bodied young men thrill the audience with wrestling. In Achebe's *Things fall apart*, it is made vivid when Okonkwo in such a combat threw Amalinze and that attracted Ojiugo, whom he later married as a third wife.

During funerals, minstrels entertain the sympathizers who constitute the audience. The minstrels sing and dance while the audience watches with euphoria. That is a typical example of traditional drama composed not only to entertain, but also to aid the mourners forget their sorrows. For instance, when the minstrels (actors) perform in a funeral, the tension of the mourners is gradually being alleviated. This is why Benard Shaw insists that dramatic literature, no matter the type, is indispensable as it helps humans to understand life.

#### **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

A careful study of the different genres of oral literature shows that they share one thing in common,

performance. Unlike the written literature, oral literature has performed before a direct audience. The members of the audience also contribute in making any aspect of oral literature lively. In the prose example, the members of the audience sit listening to the raconteur. They are not mere passive listeners for they sing the ditties when necessary. This audience participation makes the story telling session interesting and lively. Both poetic and dramatic forms are performed in various occasions and the audiences are not only entertained, they also tend to forget their sorrows. The researcher, thus believes that oral literature is very important and should be preserved rather than allowed to go into extinction.

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