

Between Oral and Written Literary Forms: (Re)Understanding the Dichotomy

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Abstract

Arguments about the contradiction of oral and written forms of work of art generally known as literature have been posited by many scholars. However, there are hardly studies on what primarily constitutes oral literature and the correctness and appropriateness of the phrase and the literariness of those constituents. The seeming negligence on this critical perspective may be motivated by the fact that folklore, orality and oral heritage are mistaken to mean oral literature by many scholars which is an obvious misconception of the discipline. Even though early researchers on the field of oral literature were not literary scholars, it is pertinent that the misconception about the field is corrected and the record set straight. This paper, therefore, concerns itself with proper categorisation of what oral literature is not with keen conceptualisation of the literariness of what constitutes oral literature; attempt is also made to invite scholars to a consideration of a universalised categorization of genres of African oral literature. Drawing insights from classical literary theories and hermeneutics, the core of oral literature is established thereby filtering out what were hitherto mistaken to be oral literature. Furthermore, oral literature is contrasted with its

writtencounterpart to critically establish that the only difference is that the former is transmitted by “word of mouth” while the latter is written.

Keywords: literariness, folklore, orality, oral heritage, orature and oral literature

Introduction

In discussing what oral literature is not and to put more succinctly, the many misconceptions about oral literature and the inherent contradictions often associated with classification of oral and written forms, attempt is made to bring our understanding to the etymology of the phrase 'oral literature'. Some scholars and students alike use folklore and orality interchangeably with oral literature. These scholars assume both terms to be conceptual synonyms. Those scholars who perceive these terms as the same may have got their orientation of oral literature from early researchers who were not literary scholars. While they are not entirely wrong for using these two terms to mean the same thing, it is important that we clarify these misconceptions by dissecting these words from the general to the specific. To do this, let us look at instances from the critics that have used this term interchangeably and the contexts in which they have used it. For instance, F.B.O. Akporobaro (2012) is one of the scholars who seemed to have used folklore interchangeably with oral literature:

...folklore provides a vast tapestry which are woven in terrifying images and colours, many actions and incidents which can chill, terrify, depress and or excite the human imagination. Whether written or oral tales and lyrics are in a significant sense “creative refractions” of human condition into its varied colours to express vividly the realities of good and evil inherent in the soul of man (426).

Similarly, M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham (2012) whose work *A Glossary of Literary Terms* has been instrumental in the definition of some critical terms especially for students of

literary studies also used folklore interchangeably with oral literature. In the entry for folklore, they defined it as “...sayings, verbal compositions, and social rituals that have been handed down solely, or at least primarily, by word of mouth and example rather than in written form...Folklore includes legends, superstitions, songs, tales, proverbs, riddles, spells, and nursery rhymes” (135-136).

In the above excerpts, it is glaring that folklore has been used to mean oral literature. To think of oral literature as folklore is a myopic way of looking at the entire lore of a folk. Oral literature is an aspect of folklore and not folklore itself.

According to the website of The World Oral Literature Project, established by the University of Cambridge in collaboration with Yale University, a Canadian Encyclopedia suggests that “the term *oral literature* is sometimes used interchangeably with *folklore*, but it usually has a broader focus. The expression is self-contradictory: literature, strictly speaking, is that which is written down; but the term is used here to emphasize the imaginative creativity and conventional structures that mark oral discourse too”

Another term that scholars have used to designate oral literature is orature. The term was coined by PioZirimu, a Ugandan linguist. Zirimu seems to have coined this term to evade the use of the phrase *oral literature* because of its misconceived contradiction. According to André Kaboré (2007) PioZirimu proposed the term “orature” to palliate the alleged contradiction in the phrase “oral literature” or “spoken literature”. In another paper, Kaboré further argues thus: Many terms or phrases have been used to refer to literature that is not written. Femi Abodunrin in his critical appreciation of such a literature in Africa says that “oral literature, orature, traditional literature, folk literature or

folklore” have been used to describe this specific type of literature (29). The term orature which is mentioned in this list was coined by the Ugandan linguist Pio Zirimu as a substitute for oral literature because, at the opposite of the German word “Wortkunst” (literally, art of words) which includes both oral and written forms, the term “literature” privileges writing, leading those who have a book-bound definition of literature to see a contradiction in the phrase “oral literature”; in their mind literature is nothing but written. (14)

To clarify these misconceptions, we do not intend to use a particular theory with rules and methods of analysis, rather, we shall use a sequence of logical objective interpretation to elucidate this age-long scholarly oversight.

Oral and Written Forms and the Dichotomy

For Isidore Okpewho (1992), “the word *folklore* implies much more than just literature and some quarters underplay the literary aspects of what folk do” (4). Folklore is the entire body of culture of a group of people. It includes their customs, tradition, legends, history and art. Thus, we can say that folklore is a hypernym with the following hyponyms: customs, tradition, legend, epic, history, and art. Oral literature is not mentioned here as one of the hyponyms because it is subsumed in art, that is, it is one of the hyponyms of art. To put this more succinctly, art is a hypernym of the following hyponyms: music, painting, sculpting, literature and perhaps architecture. Literature (Poetry) according to Aristotle is the only form of art whose manner of representation is language alone. For the linguists also, language is a semiotic code with double signification- oral and written. So that we can now have oral and written forms of literature. Using the two terms interchangeably is synecdochical. Okpewho gives credence to this in his clarification of the term:

Sometimes the use of the term folklore and oral literature is a little confusing. In many cases, the latter is used when the former is meant, i.e, a scholar may praise a Yoruba or Kibuyu proverb as an example of the quality of the people's folklore. This is something of a generalization. For if we examined the various aspects of the material culture of some people (their traditional architecture and weaving), there might be nothing so 'poetic' about them. Such generalizations, in which a part is used to represent a whole, are quite frequent in literature and perhaps excusable. Whatever errors may have been made in the early history of this subject, however, it is important to note that the folklore of a people consists of two kinds of activity: what these people intentionally say (e.g. songs, proverbs and tales) and what they traditionally do (weaving, dance, ritual) (5).

Similarly, orality is not the same as oral literature, even though oral literature is subsumed in orality. Orality, however, is a complex whole that includes things that are literary and things that are not but are verbally expressed. Paul Bandia (2018) has given credence to this by stating that “orality has shed its negative image as primitive, unwritten, non-literate and exotic and grown into a major field of scientific interest and the focus of interdisciplinary research” (125). This paper also agrees with Walter Ong (1982) in his categorization of orality according to the different contexts that produced them. He termed orality of cultures untouched by literacy as primary orality while orality that has come in contact with high technology, he termed secondary orality. In his words,

I style the orality of a culture totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print, primary orality. It is primary by contrast with the secondary orality of present-day high-technology culture, in which a new orality is sustained by telephone, radio, television and other electronic devices

that depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print (11).

However, for Panagiotis Roilos (2011), 'Orality' should be understood as a more flexible notion than 'oral traditional literature', since it may refer to all or any combination of the following processes of the creation and communication of verbal art: composition, performance, or transmission (233). Orality involves all patterned verbal expressions whether literary or non-literary. Like our earlier analogy of folklore, orality has so many hyponyms of which oral literature is one.

Having clarified these misconceptions, let us now attempt a re-evaluation of the term, Oral Literature and also take a review of the ongoing scholarly debates on the term. For many scholars, oral literature is an oxymoron that literally contradicts its meaning. It is the fear of falling prey to this seeming contradiction that have pushed many critics to prefer the use of such terms as folklore, orature, orality, oral tradition and oral heritage. Amidst these debates, Isidore Okpewho, perhaps influenced by, Ruth Finnegan, has posited that this literature (oral literature) is the kind that is transmitted by word of mouth (1); so that the adjective *oral* before the *literature* is merely telling us the kind of literature it is. To further clarify this contradiction, it is important to reiterate Aristotle's position on the term, literature; even though he never mentioned the term, literature, outright; he avers that literature (poetry) is the form of art whose manner of representation is language alone-it is the study of things that can matter only to creatures that possess language. As we have earlier stated, language is a semiotic code with double signification-oral and written. This presupposes that we can have oral and written forms of literature. Oral literature is simply literature minus writing.

Another important question on the ongoing scholarly debate is what constitutes oral literature. If we define it exclusively as literature of the illiterate folks, we risk relegating this form of literature to the preliterate past. It could be argued that in those cultures where we hitherto found illiterate folk, we can now find greater percentage of the population of those folk to be literate. Then do we now say that since this literature, which should be oral, is coming from literate folks they should not be termed oral literature because of its old kinship with illiteracy? Or should the language define which is oral literature and which is not? Will a text become oral literature because it is written in, say, Igbo, Yoruba or Hausa? or any language that is not European?

Oral literature scholars should, as a matter of necessity, be able to clearly distinguish oral literature from other fields of study like anthropology, music, archaeology and history. Even though these are forms of art, they are not literature. Aristotle has clearly distinguished between history and oral literature in his *Poetics*; this distinction should not only be viewed vis a viz written literature only if we agree that literature is literature whether oral or written. He noted thus:

It is, moreover, evident from what has been said, that it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen —what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity. The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose. The work of Herodotus might be put into verse, and it would still be a species of history, with metre no less than without it. The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history in particular. By the universal, I mean how a person of a certain type will on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability

or necessity; and it is this universality at which poetry aims in the names she attaches to the personages (11).

The above position by Aristotle has been widely held by literary scholars. However it is viewed, there is no defence for not according African oral literature the many similar qualities it shares with its written counterpart. Almost every discipline in the humanities lays claim to oral literature because the early scholars failed to unbundle it from Folklore. The object of what is known to be oral literature should be clearly distinguished so that scholars and students would understand that the enterprise of their field is not questionable. Besides Okpewho, G.G. Dara, another scholar who realized that the field of oral literature is threatened by disciplines in the humanities and social sciences noted that folklore studies during its developing period followed trends set by evolutionist and anthropologists; for him, these scholars concentrated on the usefulness of the product and not on their artistic qualities (4).

As far as evidence has allowed us to see, we have had more archaeologists and anthropologists theorize and philosophize on oral literature than literary scholars themselves. This has greatly affected the comparative categorization of oral literature and its written counterpart. For instance, an anthropologist has this to say about oral narrative:

(1) It allows humans beings to escape in fantasy from repressions imposed upon them by society. (2) It validates a culture, justifying rituals and institutions to those who perform and observe them. (3) It educates those in need of education, children in particular. (4) It maintains social control by encouraging conformity to accepted patterns of behaviour. (Poetry as Social Praxis, 68).

Okpewho has earlier pointed out that those who started the study of oral literature were not literary scholars so their interest was not centred on the literariness of the oral art forms. For instance, the chants, sung poems, masquerade performances, folktales and proverbs or other veiled forms of language meant no more to them than a sociological tool through which the folk were entertained. The biased focus of their research informed the many non-literary elements introduced into oral literature. One of such elements is oral history which has been unbundled into legend, myth and ethnology. Even though those insights helped the informed knowledge in the discipline, the researchers have come to realise, after a thorough critical study, that the cores of oral literature have been strangely twisted. This is mainly because we have allowed those who are not literary scholars to theorize on oral literature and designate the primary objects of the discipline hence the infiltration of so many non-literary elements in the field. Even though some of these elements can be transmuted into oral literature, basic oral literary terms should be clarified to set boundaries between the discipline and other disciplines that have affiliations with folklore.

It should be stated in strong terms that folklore, oral heritage, oral tradition and orality are not the same as oral literature and should not be used interchangeably. However, oral literature is subsumed in each of these terms. In view of this, Okpewho noted that the major breakthrough in the field of oral literature started when African scholars began to undertake research into the oral tradition of their own people (4). Even though literature has resisted a watertight definition from the classical times, it is important to have a universal categorization of genres. It is evident that oral literature has no defined genres perhaps because the supposed genres are strangely twisted with their elements so that those terms that are supposed to be devices/elements in the discipline are elevated to the status of genres. For instance, in

African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory, Olaniyan and Quayson(2007) enumerate the following as genres of oral literature: storytelling, proverbs, epics, incantations, panegyrics, occasion-specific poetries and dramatic performances. As noted by Panagiotis Roilos, oral literature constitutes a conspicuous nomenclatural oxymoron (Oral Literature, 225). Proverbs, riddles, tongue twisters, adages, retorts and other epigrammatic configurations should not be categorized as genres of oral literature since these things are also found in literature but are not classed as genres of literature. They are, no doubt, figurative but they cannot be grouped under the three major genres of literature. Panagiotis Roilos further poses this as a research question here:

Should the concept of 'oral literature' include all types of verbal discourse (e. g. tales, spells, proverbs, riddles) that deviate from the communicative norm of everyday speech in terms of form (aesthetics) and 'function' (performance)? If, as is indicated by scholarly practice in a number of fields, a positive answer to the last question seems to enjoy a significant consensus among researchers, approaches to the two other issues are more controversial and certainly more demanding, since they presuppose systematic investigations into specific synchronic textures of sociocultural interaction (229).

It should be noted primarily that language is the only manner of representation of the art form called literature; and in language, there is the oral and written modes of transmission. This presupposes that there are oral and written forms of literature. If literature is universal, there should also be the universal categorization of the genres of literature-the oral and written forms.

Scholars who argue that oral literature is a contradiction because

the etymology of the word literature means 'writing' so that the word 'oral literature' is a kind oxymoronic violence that should not be tolerated in scholarship should also understand that there is a hypocritical contradiction staring them in the face in the etymology of many words of English language. The word language, just like literature, is from Latin origin (*langue*) which literally means 'tongue'. Language does not mainly function a means of communication, its primary function is for the production of thoughts and not merely communication. If language which draws its etymology from 'tongue' is now flexibly receptive to accommodate some other forms like the written form and sign language, then how is oral literature a contradiction? If 'Written' can stand as a participle before language and 'sign' can stand as an adjective before language, then are we not recklessly negligent and guilty of the same nomenclatural oxymoron about which we accuse scholars who argue that oral literature is the literature that is transmitted by word of mouth? As Panagiotis Roilos posited, the corpus of verbal art defined as 'oral literature' is distinguished from written literary forms on the basis of its 'orality' (225).

To further buttress this position, if we take a brief look at the history of some words, what is called, in linguistics, etymology; we would find out that some words do not have any kinship with their etymology. They, are therefore, arbitrary with their etymologies. If we take a look at the origin of the word, language, we find out that it is of Latin origin, *Langue/Lingua*, which means tongue. Similarly, the origin of the word *salary* is quite arbitrary to its usage nowadays. Salary actually drew its origin from the word *salt*. For instance, the word mouse does not have any relationship with its etymology. The meaning was attached to the word because of technological advancement. Some have argued that computer scientist came about the name because of the device's resemblance with the rodent, mouse. If the meaning

came about as a result of this resemblance, how do you explain the wireless mouse? The arbitrariness of language has allowed meaning association to many words. For instance, the words mouse, web, window, page, cloud, application, key and many other words have undergone a grave semantic shift since the middle of 20th century till now due to advancement in technology. To accept that all these words mentioned here do not have any clear etymological relationship with the recent semantics they embody will be very startling to scholars who still perceive oral literature as a contradiction.

In view of this, how do we explain that these words do not have any kinship with their origin? What accounts for this according to linguists is semantic change. For Traugott:

Since language is a communicative activity, semantic change is inevitable (1). Linguistic approaches to semantic change have addressed the outcome of meaning change and analysed the types of change, such as meaning broadening and narrowing, metaphoric and metonymic extension, and the developments of positive and negative meaning or what is referred to as amelioration and pejoration... Words change their meanings overtime and acquire new semantics. (Hock & Joseph 2009; Paradis 2011; Traugott 2012 qtd in "The Semantic Change of Positive Vs. Negative Adjectives in Modern English", 1).

Since words are arbitrary, any word is capable of encoding an infinite number of meanings without the meaning necessarily having any relationship with their etymology. However, semantic change does not just occur, there are reasons that account for the shift even though linguists have not come into unanimous conclusions on the motivations for these changes. Johan Andersson has summarized some of the reasons that account for such changes in his paper, "Bug Report: A Study of Semantic

Change during the Digital Revolution", thus:

Researchers often refer to two different types of factors that cause semantic change: Linguistic and Extra-Linguistic. Daiu (2015) discusses some of the linguistic factors, for instance, the influence of other languages, where borrowed words can cause older expressions to fall out of use. Furthermore, the existence of homonyms can cause semantic change. If two words appear the same but denote entirely different things, one of the meanings might be used less in order to avoid misunderstandings (Daiu, 2015). Extra-linguistic factors range from human psychology to the environments we live in. One example of how human psychology works as an extra linguistic factor is discussed by Crowley (1992). Another extra-linguistic factor is technological advances. For example, Riemer (2010, p. 373) mentions the verb fly. Today fly can denote being a passenger on an aeroplane, which would have been impossible before the invention of the aeroplane. Given that the speed of technological advancements has been much greater during the past few hundred years than ever before it should entail that many new meanings have been added to the English language. Harris (2014) maintains that technological advancements create new environments for people. New environments, in turn, cause semantic change(1).

Conclusion

We can see that trends in technology, for want of creating new words, have invested meanings on existing words which do not have any etymological kinship with these associated meanings. However, metaphorical relationships are forced on them so that they embody these meanings without any need for holding any word conference by linguists. If these words can embody these meanings without much scholarly arguments, why

would literary scholars have issues with the word literature capturing its written and oral forms?

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