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The Folk Speaks: Indigenous Aesthetics in Oku Oral Narratives

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Abstract

As early as 1965 Alan Dundes disputed the notion of an oral literary criticism *tabula rasa* in Africa and stressed on the need to consider the meanings attributed to folklore texts by the people who use them but even now our students are exposed to courses on theories and aesthetics of western oral Literature but are not introduced to the practical criticism of their oral Literature. The question of aesthetics is crucial to literary criticism. Aesthetics is concerned with the description, interpretation, and evaluation of arts. Aesthetics hangs on the notion of the beautiful and the concept of beauty is culture bound, so it is wrong to use a taste nurtured by another culture to judge an art product that evolved from a different culture. It is hoped that after this study we will understand the indigenous aesthetics of Oku people and be able to subject external art to the principle of our indigenous aesthetics. The study is based on the assumption that the aesthetic of Oku oral narratives can only be formulated through the application of tools of analytical philosophy that originate from the folks. The research is directed by

questions such as, what philosophy emerges from the folks on oral narratives as it concerns theoretical issues such as the nature, the functions of Oku oral narratives and the role of the oral artist in society. What does the folk mean when it says a narrative is beautiful? What are the prominent criteria employed in the evaluation of Oku oral narratives by the folks? The Reader Response or the aesthetics of reception is used in this study. This approach focuses on the audience, a group completely forgotten by both the positivists, and the formalists. This method exposes the expectation of the audience and how far the work of art satisfies or fails to satisfy them. The audience plays a vital role in Oku orature and they have yardsticks they use to distinguish a good narrator or narrative from a bad one. Some of these yardsticks are functionality, authenticity, clarity and creativity or originality. We have used two variant versions of a tale titled *Ikey's farm*, one collected in 1996 and the other in 2015 for our illustrations.

Keywords: Folk, Indigenous Aesthetics, Narratives

Introduction

The idea of an oral literary criticism *tabula rasa* in Africa, a colonial invention, has survived thanks to the cloning of specialists of African oral Literature who are educated in institutions where scholars rely exclusively on non-African paradigms of literary criticism. This employment of European critical statements in the evaluation of African art has led to a hiatus and lack of cohesion in the criticism of African oral Literature. As early as 1965, Alan Dundes argued for the need to consider the meaning attributed to folklore texts by the people who use them but even now our students are exposed to courses on theories and aesthetics of western oral Literature but little is done to introduce them to the practical criticism of their oral Literature. Another factor that has motivated this research is the misrepresentation and distortion of our cultural expressions. For example, when people are paid to do performances on television or in front of tourists, the cultural context is often lost. The art is distorted, devalued and perverted and the performance becomes a show. If Africa hopes to survive the challenges of the twenty-first century, they will have to as Ake (2001: 122-123) ^[2] says “empower themselves to repossess their own development”. This, could, in addition to other mechanisms, be done by rebuilding their national images, by fighting corruption and, by insisting on their own cultural preferences, and terms of membership in the global village. This, he says will only be possible through a sincere, committed sociological, cultural, economic and political realignment that is truly African in nature, and intent. This is why indigenous aesthetics is important.

The question of aesthetics is crucial to literary criticism, for it raises fundamental questions with regard to the language of poetry and poetic semantics. Aesthetics deals with the principles of beauty and artistic taste. It is concerned with critical statements that describe, interpret, or evaluate particular works of art. As John Hosper (1969:2) ^[18] states:

In aesthetics we attempt to answer questions such as: under what circumstance can a work of art be said to exist? When is an object beautiful? Is there anyway of deciding when there are varied interpretations of a work? Which one is correct or is there no such thing as correctness of interpretation? Are there any criteria for distinguishing good works of art from bad ones? Are the criteria of value, if there are any, the same in works of Narratives as in the works of music, for example? If not, how and why do they differ? What is the relation of art to nature? Has art anything to do with truth or with morality?

Aesthetics, as Tala Kashim (1986:11) ^[35] says, 'hangs on the notion of the beautiful'. Carrit (1969:21-24) defines beauty as "that assemblage of Grace or proportions of parts which please the eye, or imagination" and says 'a beautiful object should not only be significant but sensuously significant'. Since the meaning or significance of anything for us depends on our nature or acquired association with the thing, its beauty is not a quality it really has but only a capacity for becoming significant in a certain way to us. Beauty thus is not a physical thing or the quality of things, but our projection into them by our own aesthetic experience. A people's aesthetics is therefore their notion of what they consider good or bad and what they consider beautiful or ugly as far as regard artistic productions are concerned. Since aesthetics is culture bound, it will be wrong to use a taste nurtured by another culture to judge an art product that evolved from entirely a different culture. This is because, as Gayle maintains, 'unique experiences produce unique cultural artefacts and mandate unique critical tools for evaluation. We admire works of art for their intelligence, wisdom, sincerity, depth of feeling, compassion and realism, but each culture exerts its influence in the definition of these terms.

The purpose of this paper is to contribute towards the empowerment of Africa by examining its cultural preference as far as literary criticism is concerned. By analysing the critical statements of the folks on their oral Literature we would come up with a body of generalities and rules that will make the future criticism of Oku oral literature more objective. It is also hoped that after the study we will be able to, as (Tandon 1989:2) suggests, subordinate external art to the logic of African Art. In determining the indigenous aesthetics of Oku people we have done what (J. Nketia 1974:3) ^[25] proposes: 'search out the opinion of leaders of thought and the approbation of those in authority as well as the performance practice and verbal statements that are made about specific artistic events or aspects of such events' and have analysed the role of the oral artist in traditional society, the taste of the member of the community that nurtures and sustains his compositions; that is, the role of the audience in oral criticism and the yardsticks they employed.

The study is based on the assumption that the aesthetic of Oku oral narratives can only be formulated through the application of that tool of analytical philosophy that originates from the folks. The following questions directed the research, what philosophy emerges from the folks on oral narratives as it concerns theoretical issues such as the nature, the functions of Oku oral narratives and the role of the oral artist in society? What does the folk mean when it calls an art form or a narrative beautiful? What are the

prominent criteria employed in the evaluation of Oku oral narratives by the folks?

Background to the study Area

Oku is the second largest fondom in the Bui Division of the North- West Region of Cameroon. It as Ngwa (1985:6) ^[24] says, occupies a stretch of land lying approximately between latitude 6°40 and 6°50 north and longitude 10° 40 and 10°50 East. The fondom is made up of thirty-three villages with a population of about a hundred thousand inhabitants. It is bounded on the north by Noni Sub Division, on the west by Boyo division, on the south by Ngoketunjia division and on the East by Kumbo. Oku according to Eyongetah and Brain (1981:4) ^[14], 'falls on the geographical region known as the central Cameroon high-lands –a volcanic zone that runs across the country with an average height of four thousand feet above sea level'. An example of these high lands is Mount Oku or Mount Kilum. The slope of this mountain is forested and there are trees like pagara rubescence, which are used for producing xylophones and other musical instruments. The lone species of the bird bannaman-bannerman's tauraco and Tauraw bannemani (known locally as FEN) are found in Oku. Oral tradition holds that the people of Oku are related to the Nso people- one of the Tikar groups that settled in Bamenda. Nchoji and Warnier (1982) ^[23] maintain that:

The chiefdoms of Nso, Oku and Mbiame do not only constitute a geographical continuum but, they have also dynastic connexions, cultural, political and alleged historical links. They look to the upper Mbam region as their original homeland. ... Oku tradition recounts the migration of the three brothers with their followers from the Tikar country after a dispute. The tradition further asserts that the Oku dynasty was founded by the eldest brother while Jing, the younger, founded Nso and Mbiame was founded by the youngest. The father of these brothers died while Tata (the founder of Oku) was on a hunting expedition. Jing his younger brother was enthroned; when the elder came back, he was vexed and so took a number of followers with two kibai (Ndishangong and Ndifonson) and migrated to found his dynasty (32-33).

Oral tradition says, when Tata and his followers arrived at the present site of Oku, they met the Ntul people from whom they obtained arable land and residential sites. Tata was hardworking, respectful, and honest in his dealings with the Ntul people. As a result, the Ntul Fon made him an interim heir to the throne but he and his people used their intelligence to outnumber the Ntul people, silenced them and became their leaders. Tata was succeeded by his son Mnkong Moteh, who has become a legendary figure and the protector of Oku people.

Oku, like every human society, has a culture and this embodies everything they do to ensure their continuous existence as a group. Culture includes the geographical setting, historical origin, religious beliefs, and social lives, codes of conduct, ceremonies and economic activities. Oku is a closely knit society and their culture does not allow them to treat each other or the environment with cruelty. There are therefore, taboos which prohibit such deviant behaviour as incest, suicide, adultery, murder, stealing and abusive use of nature. There are clear distinctions in sex

roles. Besides oral transmission of information from individual to individual, information is also transmitted by the town crier and *Kwifon* (the sacred cult of the land). People also get to know about the happenings in the society when they listen to narratives and songs composed about these happenings.

Oku people are deeply religious. What they believe in, to use Okot P'bitek's (1973:38) ^[31] words, governs their lives; it provides their world view - the general direction along which they live and relate to each other and the universe. Besides believing in the existence of a Supreme Being – Feyine Mbom, they believe in and worship about fifty other gods who act as messengers to the Supreme Being. Shrines are erected for these gods in pools of water, thick forests and shades of huge trees caves, large stones, etc. Sacrifices, incantations, libations and supplications are made to the gods at special times of the year or when the need arises. Some of these gods are: Mawes (a lake), Lumetu (a thick forest), Tolon (a water falls and a snake), Sendus, Yicham, Wuchia, Nchak, Tingho (a cave), Mmyguoh and Wanmawes (a small lake), to name but a few. In times of crisis or in the face of challenges, they summon and invoke the spirits of their gods and ancestors. Oku culture forms an important reference point for her poets and storytellers.

Context and setting of Oku Oral Narrative

Most critics of African oral literature have stressed the fact that stories are usually told at night; especially moonlit nights. C.A. Okafor (1983:4-5) makes this same observation in his study of the Tonga tales. According to him, the Tonga believes the ideal time for story telling is night. This is also true in Oku. In addition to this night occasion, Oku tales are told with the backs of the audience turned to the fire. The tales are told mostly by mothers to children while waiting for the evening meal, making fire under a pot of cocoyam meant for the next day, peeling beans, or lulling children to sleep. The insistence of stories being told only in the night is because the night is the only time when members of a family or a whole compound are able to be together. The Oku people believe that a child, who looks at the fire when stories are told, listens to or tells stories during the day will stop growing and grow grey hair. Nowadays, things have changed. Stories are now told during the day by children in schools, patients, in hospital, on the farm while resting or on a long journey and on radio and television. Often story telling sessions are not fixed occasions but arise spontaneously when the informal groups gathered together for leisure. There is no restriction as to participation. The stories are set in the remote past and the action could take place either in the human, animal or spirit world so characters range from animals, plants, spirits, human beings and even objects.

Definition of Terms

Since aesthetics constitutes a major part of the analysis in this study, a brief excursion into the concept and theory of aesthetics is necessary. www.dictionary.com/browse/aesthetics sees aesthetics as the branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of art and with judgments concerning beauty. It says "What is art?" and "What do we mean when we say something is beautiful?" are two questions often asked by aestheticians. (Hosper 1969:2) ^[18] says it was Alexandra Baumgarten in his work "Reflections on poetry" who gave the name

aesthetics (from the Greek word *aesthesis*, meaning sense perception) to what earlier philosophers had called either the theory of beauty or the philosophy of taste. He further says 'in aesthetics we clarify the basic concepts we employ in thinking and talking about the objects of aesthetic experience... We are interested in words ... for the sake of clarity in identifying and handling concepts like aesthetic beauty or value, aesthetic meaning, symbolism, representation, expression, truth, art'.

Another term that needs to be defined is oral narrative. Pre-literate societies have no written narratives, but possess a rich and varied orature. Orature covers oral traditions, folk epics, folklore, proverbs and folksong. However, not all aspects of oral tradition are narratives (<http://encyclopedia.farlex.com/Orature>). Oral narrative is used by anthropologists and others to refer to unwritten forms which possess literary qualities. It covers such oral forms as, myths, legend, folktales and epics. We are concerned in this study with folktales.

Methodology

Written sources were consulted; but the research is based extensively on field work. In the field the psychological, historical and cultural contexts in which Oku oral narratives are composed and performed are analyzed. Observation and interview methods are the major means of data collection. The interview method is indispensable for, as Macdonald (1972: 40) ^[21] has pointed out, 'interviewing is the core of field research. Pre- and post-performance interviews were conducted. These were beneficial to the study since they helped to clarify some potentially difficult aspects of the performance. The audience were interviewed to decipher their aesthetic conception of their oral narratives and to confirm ethnographic descriptions of their environment got from libraries and archives.

Observations were made on the nature of the audience and on extra-linguistic features like mime and facial expressions which generate meaning and provoke emotions. This is necessary because as Peek (1981:21) ^[32] says: "If we must understand cultural attributes towards the creation of verbal art, it is necessary that we come very close to the speaker, take part in the performance event to get to know the underlying culture". Data collected was transcribed in the local languages and then translated into English but only the English version is presented in the appendix.

Literature review

Implicit in the existence of literary arts is its criticism, for the very survival of a verbal work of art beyond the historical moment of its creation is evidence of the approval of some sort from the consuming community. We are aware of the numerous critical debates on whether there should be only one universal critical standard. Tracing the evolution of the criticism of African oral literature Okpewho (1990) ^[30] points out that:

Until recent times, traditional African art was studied exclusively by anthropologists and art historians who often did not go beyond identifying the art by region of origin or distribution. They seldom tried to get into the roots of the aesthetic principles on which the art was executed, so device black theories that had exotic appeal but were incapable of giving an insight into the

fundamental creative spirit that brought such art to being' (1).

The reasons for this ineffective study of African oral literature which Isidor Okpewho refers to in the above statement are firstly that these anthropologists and art historians (expatriate scholars) based their researches on assumptions so their findings were unable to provide the relevant data needed to evaluate the true picture of the criticism of African Art. Secondly, these expatriate scholars ignored or appeared ignorant of the fact that Africa possesses indigenous critical terms and that artistically, African traditional societies are highly critical of their performance. Also, as C.A Okafor (1979:84) ^[28] observes 'the theories of European folklore which they applied in the study of African folklore, were based on speculations and had mostly hindered, rather than promoted, a true understanding of European folklore; applying them in the study of African folklore he says was like "trying to pass on to a new client a garment which could not fit its original customer".

Because of these assumptions and the use of European standards in the study of African oral narratives, the researchers did not go into the roots of African oral art. Fundamental issues in the study of oral performance like the artist, his background, his temperament, the occasion of the performance, the reaction of the audience and the aesthetic qualities of the art were played down. Reacting to the approaches by anthropologists and art historians, Arewa and Dundes (1975:38) ^[3] have stated that 'if there is oral Narratives, there is oral literary criticism' and have observed that 'the shelves of folklore are filled with text and materials telling us what folklore means and what its value is, but few of these explanations and evaluations come from the folk. In a paper entitled "African Narratives and European critics" delivered at the seventh annual meeting of African Narratives Association in Chicago, Robert Armstrong of North-Western University sees African Narratives as an autonomous entity and insists that "the best criticism usually stems from those sources from which the best work originates" and that the validity of the critical statements extracted from a work therefore depends on how far the critical statements and the work share a common culture base.

Thirdly, since these expatriate researchers dealt with world views that were different from their own, they had the problem of lack of knowledge of the language of the people under study; and as Bernth Lindfors (1977:44) ^[20] has pointed out 'there are sensitive zones- the inner sanctuaries and sacred groves which are closed to strangers and accessible only to those within the society who have grown up learning the pass words. Chinua Achebe (1975:7) puts this more succinctly when he says: "No man can understand another whose language he does not understand." Language to him means a people's worldview and their way of life. Austin Shelton's (1971:46) ^[33] research on Igbo proverbs is a handy example of how lack of knowledge of the people's language or their critical criteria can undermine research objectives and cripple research efforts. Shelton translated the Igbo proverbs "enwe si na ya ma ka ya ra wee noo mkpuru utu," as "monkey says when he copulates, he eats in order to maintain the seed of his penis". Echeruo (1971:64) ^[12] condemns this interpretation and explains that "mkpuru utu" is a fruit with a large seed and many people will

hesitate to swallow it since it will eventually have to be expelled. He gives the correct interpretation of the proverb as," monkey said he knew how big his anus was before swallowing the 'utu' fruit'. This is why this research is out to investigate the criticism of oral Narratives from the folk's point of view.

The three points discussed above led to an ineffective study of African oral narratives but in recent times, there has been a revitalization in the study of African oral narratives through the stimulation of new research and theoretical statements which demand close attention to culture and performance context, the native taxonomies, the artist's skill, the role of the audience and the text. With this revitalization, the dynamic qualities of African oral narratives are now appreciated. Original and outstanding works have been produced in various genres of African orature especially by Africans carrying out research in their own languages. The contributions of these scholars range from classification, description and analysis to textual presentation of certain genres of African orature. These researchers share in common one thing. That is, the fact that they employ those artistic values that operates in their respective societies. They have demonstrated that their orature is a warehouse, a repository of knowledge where the society's history, culture and language are stored. Their works provide invaluable tools and insight for any study of African orature but in these pioneer works the researchers, still to a large extent; base their criticism of African oral narratives on European theories rather than on the oral literary criticism.

Theoretical framework

Three approaches have so far characterised the European criticism of African oral literature, the colonialist approach, the Eurocentric approach and the Afrocentric approach. The colonialist approach is content oriented and is concerned mainly with socio-anthropological information. The more socio-cultural information a work yields the higher it is rated. The Eurocentric approach is formalistic and is concerned more with the art and craft employed in a literary work and less with the content. The Afrocentric approach is culture oriented and asserts its faith in the existence of an African aesthetics. These sociological methods are positivistic. They involve collection and analysis of observable material but literature and its appreciation go beyond the materially observable. The Reader Response Theory is used in this study. The Reader Response or the aesthetics of reception proposed by Robert Jauss focuses on the audience, a group completely forgotten by both the positivists, and the formalists. By studying the reception and impact of a literary work on an audience, this method exposes the expectation of the audience and how far the work of art satisfies or fails to satisfy them. The disparity between the expectations of an audience and the text, the magnitude of the change in public attitude and tastes required by any new work constitutes in this approach its aesthetic distance. Jauss says, the narrower the distance, the more ordinary the work and the wider the distance the more significant the work. This distance, he claims, can disappear with time. J.H.K. Nketia (1974:58) ^[25] also speaking on how to trace critical criteria, this time in the musical arts, says that we should search out "the opinion of leaders of thought and the approbation of those in authority" as well as "the performance practice and verbal statements that are made

about specific musical events or aspect of such events". In line with the reader Response, we have examined the immediate context of the performance and the general socio-cultural context suitable for a comprehensive appreciation of Oku oral Narratives. We have examined the utilitarian values of the narratives, their literary qualities and the yardsticks which the audience use to distinguish a good narrator from a bad one and a good tale from a bad one. The audience plays a vital role which ranges from encouraging the narrator by clapping hands if he performs well, directing him, participating in the songs, maintaining order in the course of the narration, asking and answering questions when the need arises and functioning as a critic. Some of the yardsticks the audience uses to distinguish a good narrator or tale from a bad one is functionality, authenticity, clarity and creativity or originality. We have used two variant versions of a tale titled *Ikey's farm* one collected in 1996 and the other in 2015 for our illustrations.

Functionality

Emmanuel Obiechina says 'the artist is a man who feels the pulse and the heart-beat of his contemporaries because he is one with his contemporaries... He speaks to his contemporaries about those matters of weight and moment which define their destiny as living and loving and dying creatures; he brings hope to the hopeless, gives voice to the voiceless, injects life to the lifeless, and touches the heart and conscience of those who are dead in their souls' (1-4). In an interview on the role of the artist in Oku society, Late Fai Nyuom's asserts that 'we are the voice of the society, without us the society will perish' while Mama Nuse says 'we direct the society with our songs'. These views echo Plato *Collingwood's view on the poet when he says*, 'We should reverence him as something holy and marvellous and delightful, we should tell him that there is not any one like him in our city... we should anoint him with myrrh and crown him with a diadem'(47) However, unlike Plato who proposes that we send the poet 'away to another city and for our own part, continue to employ for our welfare's sake a drier and less amusing poet and story-teller'(47), the story teller is indispensable in Oku society and a drier and less amusing story-teller is condemned. The performance of Oku oral narrative is a communicative art in which social discourse takes place principally between a narrator/performer and an audience and there is nothing in Oku as art for art's sake. Besides providing an occasion for recreation and creativity, it serves as a commutative act, as a vehicle for social control, group solidarity and social purification. The narrator must contribute to the moral, spiritual, cultural, social, economic and political development of his society. This is where functionality comes in as a yardstick in distinguishing the beauty of a narrative. A good story is thus not simply the facts stated. A good story affects the audience in one way or the other. That is, it must have an emotional component.

Communication is the major function of Oku oral narratives. Besides oral transmission of ideas and information from individual to individual and by the town crier and *Kwifon* (the sacred cult that rules the land); people also get to know about the happenings in the society when they listen to narratives composed about these happenings. Oku values and mores are transmitted from generation to generation through folklore. The tales are thus means of propagating Oku culture and educating youths and strangers on what

constitute acceptable, and unacceptable behaviour - what wins praises and what attracts censures. For example, in the tale titled *Ikey's farm*, love, peace, honesty, humility, foresight, friendship, commitment, humility and respect, attitudes that ensure social harmony are praised while vices like jealousy, stealing, pride, foolishness, stinginess, irresponsibility, rivalry and stealing, attitudes that lead to social disintegration are condemned. For example, it is the responsibility of the parents to ensure that the children fit into the society when they grow up, so Fegie, a bad parent, is condemned. She teaches her children to be proud, disrespectful and to accept lies. This is seen in the attitude of her three children who though aware that their mum still says she is wrongfully accused, cried to fill a bowl with tears to show they love her and mock and dehumanised Naa their sister who spoke the truth. Naa stood for the truth (My mother stole. I wish she had been beaten to death) and is rewarded. She is good, honest, humble and respectful, a model for the society (she respected the bridge she met on her way and is humble to respect the life style at the Hade). The story has an ascendant plot, she moves from a despised child to the most respectable member of the community. The tale teaches the people that honesty and intelligence are indispensable for survival and prosperity. Naa is not only honest but intelligent to know that she needs to totally separate herself from those that are unlike her, even if they are family. She takes this decision and the gods concurred with her by granting each of her wishes. As stated in the tale,

One day, when everyone had gone to the farm, she came out from under the bed in search of food. As she was moving about the compound, she picked a grain of corn and wished it were a basket of corn and it became a basket of corn. Again, she picked a melon seed and wished the seed were much melon and it became much melon. Then she wished the corn and the melon were ground and prepared and they were. She ate some and packed the rest in her basket and left.

The message here is that social norms surpass family ties. Nana's behaviour after her husband killed her uncle also portrays her intelligence and teaches the people how to wriggle themselves out of trouble. Naa's uncle washed his feet in the clean stream and got trapped in it. On his way back from the farm Naa's husband saw him and killed him. Immediately he was cut, his blood fell on Naa's leg at home and she started weeping. When her husband arrived home and asked her why she was crying she lied that she was troubled by smoke from the fire. He told her that he has killed that her thing by the stream but she did not respond. Naa teaches us that silence is a virtue that is better than confrontation because it can prevent many ugly situations. The next day Naa, without informing her husband, took her normal children and returned to her parents' home. This emphasizes Oku belief that in-laws must be treated with respect. Her husband committed an abomination. Naa would have stayed back if some other member of the community, not her husband had killed her uncle. Naa is rewarded for her humility, generosity and respect for others' space (she washed the little bridge which she had pushed into the stream and gave it some food, followed its advice and she respected the culture of the Hade) while her uncle and sister are destroyed to show that pride and

disrespect for others' space is not only detested but can have fatal consequences. Oku people are taught that everything in life has value. For example, it is the little bridge that Naa pushes into the stream that gives her what she needed to fulfil her destiny. We also learn of the healing power of water. It is water that Naa uses to revive her uncle after he mocked the culture of the Hade and died. Water should thus not be misused as is the case in today's society. The functionality of the tale is also seen in the nature of the plot. The story has the mirror-image plot; what Ayo Bamgbose (1969:6) ^[5] calls a symmetrical plot, a plot which he says deals with contrasting characters – good and bad, clever and stupid. The heroes take symmetrical series of tests but their reactions are in inverse relationship to each other and could be described in moral terms as good or bad. The positive character is rewarded while the negative one is punished. Naa's mother obeyed all the instructions that Naa gave to her and is rewarded while her uncle who disobeyed them is killed. Naa's sister imitates her but meets failure because of her disobedience and arrogance. Tales with this type of plot are used to praise norms and condemn vices.

The occasion, as well as the nature of the performance of Oku oral narratives, enhances group solidarity. The stories provide the performers the poetic license to comment on events in the society without being held to ransom. Hence providing outlets for suppressed emotions and protecting the society from direct attack and drastic change. The teaching process of *Oku narratives* is different from that of formal education, here the people learn by participating in the performance. A good narrative as Mama Nene Lydia says, is one which besides its realism teaches a moral, a belief or custom (interview 1996). A good oral artist in Oku is thus not just an entertainer, he looks critically at communal experiences and makes pronouncements. He should be a spokesman for the community to being critics, moralists, investigators, spiritual therapists and guardians of the ideals and values of Oku society, brilliant commentators and imaginative leader seek first and foremost to give vitality and meaning to the community's life. The narratives thus take the place of newspapers and are used to report and comment on current affairs. The audience shows its approval through hand clapping, cheering and laughter and condemnation through jeering and mocking.

Creativity/Originality

Each narrator brings his or her own experience to his judgment and interpretation of the reality expressed in his narrative. William Bascom (1954:29) ^[6] thus states that, 'In the course of retelling a story, experience shows that changes occur. Kashim Tala (1986:82) ^[35] concurs this and says 'if we examine the structure of the variants or versions of the same narrative, we are likely to notice that the structural features exhibited by the oral narratives can be traced to the performer's manipulation of his material. Oku oral narratives are not just primitive tales told just for the sake of telling them but are aesthetic works because in telling them, the narrator not only uses language, the tool for a literary artist in a specific way but he uses literary devices and improvisation to add beauty and variety and convey meaning. Creativity is thus seen in improvisation and language use.

Language is a vital tool for the verbal artist and as Chapman (1973:4) ^[8] observes, "language materials in Literature are chosen and manipulated with greater care and

complexity than users of the language either can or wish to exercise". The hallmark of style in literature is thus the beauty with which language is issued. Unlike other forms of Oku orature like 'key of' (the lament) and masquerade poetry which are presented in idiomatic language understood mostly by the elders, Oku oral narratives are presented in simple and straightforward language that ordinary Oku people can understand. Complex sentences are hardly used, analogies are not complicated and the plot is straight forward. This is because the audience is most of the times dominated by youths and the narrator is conscious of the fact that story telling is aimed at teaching the children morals and their culture. However, the storytellers intensify their ideas by using imagery. Components of imagery are descriptive words and figures of speech. The figures of speech range from onomatopoeic words, personifications, ironies, hyperboles, similes and symbolism.

Onomatopoeic words embody idiophones. These are descriptive words which sharpen the audience's understanding of an action by the use of vocal reproduction of sounds supposed to be similar to those made in the action described. Examples are '*mbulung, mbulung, mbulung* and *chick, chick, chick*' which describe the different ways in which the dog goes to bite the visitors in the Hade. These idiophones appeal to the audience's auditory, kinetic and visual senses and therefore concretize the events described. Personification is also used. Personification deals with the attributing of human or animate qualities to inanimate objects. For example, the Little Bridge speaks to Naa and her sister and the trees understand and take Naa's mother and uncle to the Hade. This enables the narrators to emphasize on the interdependence of all the elements in Oku ecosystem and stress the need for respect for others' space and to caution Oku people against the destruction of trees and other elements of nature.

Irony is a common image in Oku folktales. It is used in satirical tales. Oku is a closely knit society so there are laws which have been enacted to safeguard the dignity of the individual and society as a whole. Satire which Abrams says is the literary art of diminishing a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking towards it scorn is used to ridicule individuals who go contrary to these laws and accepted norms and customs of Oku society. Satire censures and ridicules. For example, Naa's uncle and sister are brought to scorn because they go contrary to Oku norms that advocate respect to persons and the environment. They are negligent, irresponsible and proud. These are vices that prevent harmony and social stability. Naa's mother is condemned as a thief but when she changed her ways, she became an acceptable member of the society, so the community rejoiced with her when her daughter Naa returned and joined her to destroy the dangerous animals and objects that her stubborn daughter brought home. There is irony of situation when Naa who spoke the truth is dehumanised and her sisters who lied are praised. Her success at the end of the story teaches us that the truth will always set us free and that social value surpass family ties. It is ironical that it is the little bridge that Naa pushes into the stream that gives her what she needed to fulfil her destiny.

Hyperbole, the blowing up an object or idea much more than its normal size or proportion is used in Oku oral narratives. For example, Fegie's children except Naa are said to have each cried a bowl full of tears to prove the

intensity of their love for their mother. Hyperbole leads to a suspension of disbelief and also makes the stories wonderful.

Improvisation

Oral literature, as Kofi Awoonor (1972:1) ^[4] says, 'is dependent on a performer who formulates it in words and there is no other way in which it can be realized as a literary product. He gives body and form to the material, formulates and realizes it within regulated and specified occasions'. Since the audience is not captive and will not listen to pure didacticism however instructive, the success of a narrative depends on the narrator's ability to stimulate enthusiasm in the audience. A good narrator in Oku is thus one who is creative, who can reformulate the traditional subject in order to bring it up to date, to make it understandable and palatable to the contemporary audience. Hence, the narratives have many versions and new elements, objects and ideas are introduced. In version two of our tale collected in 2015, Fegie is said to have asked for bread and ice cream, a phone and even a car. But in the first version collected in 1996, she asked for bananas and cocoyam, things that could easily be gotten in the society at that time. Ice cream, phones and cars are now a common reality in the community so the teller brings the material up to date. This adaptability of the tales to contemporary situations reveals the dynamic nature of the story teller and he is praised for his creativity.

Clarity

Clarity deals with what the narrator does to make his story easy to understand, with how he uses language and other stylistic devices to communicate. Storytelling in Oku is a communication system in which social discourse takes place principally between a narrator/performer and an audience. The narratives are not just primitive tales told just for the sake of telling them but are aesthetic works and since the aim of every art is to pass across information to the audience, Oku storytellers use simple language and specific communicative devices to convey meaning. Here, we have followed Egudu Romanus's (1975:70) ^[13] advice and looked at some artistic props, the literary devices ...those linguistic and structural devices that constitute the ingredients of intellectual pleasure, ... the designs used specifically and consciously to embellish literary expressions. Some of these artistic props are dramatisation, humour, contrast, voice modulation, repetition, allusion, songs, suspense, minute details and figures of speech.

Dramatisation

The audience is not captive and will not listen to pure didacticism however instructive so the success of a narrative session depends on the narrator's ability to stimulate enthusiasm in the audience. In order to create enthusiasm in the audience, the narrator in telling the story sits, stands, jumps, bends, crawls close his or her eyes, shouts, whispers and frequently changes his or her voice in an effort to present the true action of the story. Dramatization is thus a very common feature in Oku narratives. Oku storytellers frequently use action to match words. They use gestures, facial expressions and voice modulation to express themselves. Facial expressions usually communicate emotions unable to be expressed in words while voice modulation enables the narrator to

effectively impersonate the characters involved in the narrative. This appeals to the audience's emotions and hastens understanding. Impersonation or role-playing is thus a common technique in Oku narratives. This can be done either by the narrator or the audience. Often the narrator, like the actor, assumes the personality of the characters he is describing. He acts their dialogue, facial expressions and gestures and shifts from role to role with fluidity and grace. Meaning is made clearer when the audience watches and even participates in some of these dramatisations. The meaning of chick chick chick chick and mbulu mbulu mbulu mbulu is only gotten after the dramatisation as seen in,

Narrator: When a dog came chick chick chick chick (dramatising the quick movement of a dog) and bit Naa's uncle he cried; Then it came mbulu mbulu mbulu mbulu (dramatising the slow movement of a dog) and bit him. What do you think he did? Audience One: He did not cry. Audience Two: He cried again (Version one)

Repetition

Repetition, a prominent feature in African Oral literature is employed in Oku tales. This could either be the repetition of actions, phrases or words. Repetition of words is seen in 'Naa's mother was very very very happy' when she found Naa her lost child. The repetition of 'very' shows the extent of her happiness. The repeated jumping across the valley especially by Fegie and the repeated singing of the same song by all the animals that jumped across the valley shows the justice involved in the act emphasized the notion of crime and punishment. Repetition serves to indicate time. In the first version of the tale the repetition of waited – On the first day Naa's mother waited, waited, waited and waited, but the thief did not come, indicates the length of time Naa's mother waited on her farm to catch the thief that has been stealing her cocoyam. There are also repeated actions that involve different characters and serve to reveal their character traits, reveal themes and to develop the plot. In both versions of the tale Naa and her sister leave home for a journey to the unknown and go through the same experiences while Naa's mother and uncle go through the same experience when they visited her in the Hade. This repetition does not just expand the plot but is used to emphasize pertinent issues and for characterization. For example, Naa is presented as kind, humble, obedient intelligent and loveable (virtues acclaimed by the society) while her sister is seen as proud, foolish disrespectful and wicked (vices condemned by the society) Naa's mother changes from a thief and an irresponsible mother to a mature and responsible person. Through her emphasis is made on the need for change and to respect others' space. Naa's uncle on the other hand, is presented as irresponsible and we learn from what befalls him that disrespect for other people's culture can have fatal consequences. Each member of the community sings the same song to jump over the valley and this repetition helps to emphasize the justice in the action. Repetition is to enhance meaning, for emphasis, for clarity and as an aid in production.

The Use of Songs

Music is an integral element in Oku oral narratives and this music is either through songs, hand-clapping, beating of

sticks and buckets or repetition. The songs not only explain, expand, advance themes and develop the plot but create an occasion for audience's participation, which is very essential in a narrative session. The audience joins in singing the songs and their enthusiasm in the tale is sustained and entertainment heightened as seen in:

The third animal was Nmuma I want you people to sing how he sang.

Audience: I am from the family of nmuma, nmuma. We do not steal, only cripples steal. I will cross over, and crossed over. (More Cheers and hand clapping)

The audience thus appreciates tales with songs more than those without songs. The songs in this tale help to develop the plot and advance themes. For example, the animals sing the same song (only cripples steal), this song condemns stealing and emphasizes the need for hard work. It is after the repeated singing of this song that punishment, the next action in the tale is introduced and the notion of crime and punishment advanced. Human beings, especially children learn faster through songs so when the songs are sung repeatedly, the messages in them are assimilated. The songs also create occasion for repetition through which rhythm is created and themes are emphasized. The songs produce a pleasing configuration of a specific kind.

Humour

The narrator uses humour to stimulate the audience. He does this through the juxtaposition of incongruous situations. For example, Naa's uncle's disobedience of Naa's instructions and washing his legs in the clean stream and not the dirty one and getting trapped in the streams creates humour. The audience laughs at an adult's failure to know that instructions should always be obeyed and his failure to know that things are not always as they seem.

Contrast

Contrast is one of the techniques used in the narratives. Characters take symmetrical series of tests but their reactions are in inverse relationship to each other. Naa's mother obeyed all the instructions that Naa gave to her and is rewarded while her uncle who disobeyed them is killed. Naa's sister imitates her but meets failure because of her disobedience and arrogance. Tales with this type of plot are used to praise norms and condemn vices. The contrast between the activity in the world of the living and that of the death portrays cultural differences and provides the narrator the opportunity to emphasize on the need to respect the space of others.

Authenticity

Kelly Griffith (1982:14) ^[17] says 'Literature can be faithful in the facts of reality and true because it interprets the real world'. Authenticity in this context is not concerned with truth in scientific sense but with the realism in the stories. A story is real not because it is factual or a first-hand experience but because of how it relates to the society and to the genre. There are many genres of oral literature in Oku and narratives are known as *Emgannen* (stories) and there are *emgannen emyemen* (stories that are narrated and sung are folktales) and *emgannen emchioten* (stories that are answered are riddles). Often story telling sessions begin with riddles. Each genre has its features and for a tale to be

authentic it must meet the requirements within culture. Vladimir Propp in *The Morphology of the Russian Folktales* describes the oral tale according to its component parts and the relationship of these parts to the whole. This is applicable to an extent in the oral criticism of Oku narratives. Propp termed the actions of the *dramatis personae* "functions". He identified and assigned an alphabetical code of 31 functions. These functions are not sequential in Oku narratives because action in the tales does not follow the same pattern. However, Propp's Morphology is relevant to this study because it enables us to distinguish between an authentic tale and one that is forged. This is because an authentic tale is expected to have at least some of the basic functions. This means an authentic story must have functions like absent, interdiction, violation, reconnaissance, delivery, trickery, complicity and villainy victory and or return. Tales without these basic functions are thus not authentic. Fai Ndifon says an authentic story must have characters, a story to tell and a problem to resolve. Our tale is authentic not just because it has these basic elements but because it reinterprets reality. The world view, the character and the setting in the story are symbolic to those in Oku universe.

Conclusion

Oku narratives are not just primitive tales told for the sake of telling them, but they are literary works because in telling them, the narrator uses literary devices to convey meaning and add beauty and variety. We have in this study of the aesthetics of storytelling in Oku emphasized the aesthetic of performance because as Alan Dundes says. 'The whole nature of performance, the voice and the mimicry, the stimulus and the response of the audience) means as much to the narrative as the text'. The audience in Oku narrative sessions is a participatory audience and the narrator counts himself lucky if his audience is enthusiastic and asks questions. This is unlike the Hausa audience who Nwanze, Regina (1986:78) ^[26] says 'is just there to listen attentively to the narratives'. The audience in Oku asks and answers questions and its opinion is sought as the narrative proceeds thus, "what do you think Naa's uncle did when the dog came chick chick chick and bit him?" This question got different responses from the audience and enabled the audience to participate. The audience's reaction gives life to the performance and is the barometer the narrator uses to evaluate his performance. They sympathize or rejoice with the characters in the tales through their reaction. A good tale in Oku as Nene Lydia says is one which besides its realism, teaches either a moral belief or custom and is interesting; and a good storyteller is one who besides his excellence in composition, is fluent, sociable and tells tales that teach, direct society and make people laugh.

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