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A Literary Analysis of Oral Tradition in Ogba Cosmology

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Abstract: ***The whole world in Ogba cosmology exists for man's sake and the universe is divided into two: the visible and invisible parts (the heaven or sky and the earth). The sky is the invisible as well as the underworld that is below the earth, while the earth is visible part. Ogba people believe in the link between earth and heaven which they reflect in their oral traditions. This paper analyses the oral tradition of the Ogba people; their origin, religion, belief system and their functions and relevance to human experience. And to achieve this, a brief analysis of Ngugi Wa Thiongo's Devil on the Cross and Chinua Achebe's Thing Fall Apart are used as oral traditional novels. The paper comprises the introduction, themes and languages of the oral tradition, the oral tradition of Ogba people, an overview of the oral tradition and finally conclusion. The paper discovers that oral tradition features prominently in the works of African writers; explaining in details the culture milieu as perceived in festivals, dances, funerals and songs. The paper focuses on the aesthetic values of the Ogba cosmology using ethnopoetics and historicism as a theoretical framework. The paper finds out that the oral tradition of Ogba people is a unifying force that brings the people together to live in peace, unity and love.***

Keywords: Literary, Analysis, Oral Tradition, Ogba, Cosmology.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ogba people of Rivers state, south-south of Nigeria believe that they occupy a central position in the world, between *Oru* and *Igbno,* from where they survey all the activities of mankind. This is reflected in some of their customs and traditions which portray them as a people standing between the living and the dead. According to Ohia (2017):
The culture and tradition of Ogba people are manifested in their daily lives and habits, and provide rich information about their background and origin. The Ogba cultural tradition features elaborate greeting, myths and legends, ceremonies, praise names and titles, proverbs

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and slogans, peculiar traditional festivals, stratified age-grade organisation, traditional religion and others, which articulate the people's worldview (p.2).
A lot of the oral traditions have been adopted by African writers in their works. Such writers as Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Amos Tutuola, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and others. This new trail (oral tradition) in literature, they have in their mind adopted – a peculiar trend in fictions. This trend injects oral traditions into literature. "…Ogba myths and legends are literature and also linked with global dynamics of myth and legend such as historicity, narrative, entertainment and other literary devices employed in the narrative such as the use of language, characters, plot/theme, setting, etc. (Ohia 2018, p.3).

In Ogba, the oral traditions are story-telling events, which present fictions with some historical data to prove their authenticity. The Ogba oral traditions portray the dynamics of lively and theoretical art form with some characteristics or feature of literature. The oral traditional story is purportedly real but with a questionable veracity because of the transience of oral communication. The following genres of oral literature are embedded in Ogba oral traditional stories and they includes: proverb *elu*, folktale *atita a*, folksong *ebo-owu*, riddle *eeghno* tongue-twister *okwu itabi ire*, dances *igba-egwu*, festival *iri-egwu*, etc. all these genres of oral literature in Ogba involve the art of story-telling in consonance with Egudu's (1973) assertion of Igbo art of story-telling thus: "in traditional Igbo homes, story-telling is an art commonly performed and enjoyed by both parents and children. Usually after dinner, men and women regale one another until they are carried off by sleep" (p.13). In line with oral literary demand, every oral tradition in Ogba is performed in an occasion. Occasionality of use is an integral feature of oral literature. Every occasion determines the type of performance. The songs, dances, myths, dirges, folktales, legends are composed and performed in a particular occasion.

Oral pieces are not composed in the study and later transmitted through the impersonal and detached medium of print, but to be directly involved in the occasions of their actual utterance; it is designed for and arises from particular situations like funerals, weddings, celebrations of victory, soothing a baby, accompany work and so on (Finnegan 1977, p.12).
Therefore, this paper attempts a survey of the pattern of influence of African's oral traditions using Ogba oral tradition to situate them. There is no gain saying the fact that many African writers utilise the oral tradition of their environments in their novels in a bid to deviate or depart from the norms of western literature. This has necessitated Chinweizu et al (1980) to write that "Eurocentric critics like Adrian Roscoe and John Povey claim (rather falsely) that African oral narrative has a negative influence on the African novel because of the limitations of the oral medium" (p.26). Unmindful of this claim, innovative African writers, of the novel rely heavily on the use of the narrative of African oral traditions for structure, themes and style. Such writers include Ghana's Ayi Kwei Armah, Ama Ata Aidoo, and Kofi Awoonor; Nigeria's Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Kenya's Ngugi Wa Thiong'o whose *Devil on the Cross* is heavily influenced by Africa's oral antecedents.

Oral Tradition in African Literature

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Oral traditions form an integral part of the culture of any group of people. They are also the beliefs and customs which define a community or a people's lifestyle that dictates their code of conduct. Oral traditions are verbally transmitted. The invention of the print media has not eroded the oral literature; for the inability to get everything in print due to illiteracy and poverty has necessitated the oral transmission of the customs, beliefs and expectations of a race to the young by the elders of a community. Inferentially, therefore oral traditions embody the people's total way of life.
Oral tradition is the aggregate of customs, of beliefs and practices that were not originally committed to writing but contributed to the cultural continuity of a social group and helps to shape its view (encyclopedia Britannica, p.559).

Africa is replete with diverse culture; more importantly, this culture is reflected in oral traditions. The oral traditions of Ogba people reflect that of the Ogba society. The songs sung at play, work, war and funeral; the stories told besides the fire in the hearts of mothers, or outdoors in the moon, cloaked nights, the riddles swapped and competed for, masquerade displays that draw together whole communities in a theatrical frenzy; festivals of the new yam, dramatic enactment at funerals, etc. are all part of the oral tradition of Ogba people. "The application of proverbs in speeches and oratorical saying, are all literature: but oral literature (Chukwuma 1994, p.vi).

The oral traditions of the Ogba people manifest their culture, lifestyle and belief. The people believe in customs and traditions. Thus, they analyse the nature of man, his peculiar environment and world; which is made up of three worlds: The world of the living, dead and unborn. The Ogba people are guided in the belief of their gods and dead ancestors. Every year a celebration and sacrifice are made to the gods. They believe in nature, admire and worship it. Nature includes lakes, hills, earth, trees, waters, air, rivers and the sea.

Meetings are held in celebrations; proverbs, riddles and jokes are exchanged in the meetings. All these are uttered in Ogba language. The gathering of the elders is replete with meaning as observed by Ohia (2021) that "Diverse as the Ogba people may be as found in the four major units of Egni, Igburu and Usomini and Omoku, there is an observable unity manifested in the universal credibility of certain core belief systems throughout the Ogba ethnic nationality" (p.11).In a gathering for chieftaincy coronation and funeral, the proverbs are accompanies with songs that are rendered simultaneously with their unique features. This accounts for why George (1989) describes literature as "a pleasurable use of word for knowledge, information and entertainment" (p.79).

The proverbs are used to spice the words for better understanding, information and clear meaning of the oral traditional narrative. Examples:
a) Ezni bu uzo dna ba ga la uru, nde ozo me mrawhne – when the pig in front falls into a pit, others behind take caution.
b) Ede eyni labu je alu ogwnu ehia la eje eri ariri – when two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers.

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c) Eka siri ikne ku nkwa, ome dna udna – if a strong hand beats the drum, it will sound louder.

The use of proverbs in the oral traditional narrative places it in the realm of the African oral literature. This may be followed by the beating of drums, songs and dances to entertain the audience. This song may be rendered when it is a chieftaincy coronation or any other celebration of attainment of a feat.

a) L: Ugno le ugno – Eagle looks at Eagle
R: Ele je agwu – Let us visit the tiger
L: Ka ye le je agwu la obi – Let us visit the tiger at his residence
R: Ele je agwu – Let us visit the tiger

b) L: Oyne la abnani agwu so nbna – Who is threatening tiger? Tiger hates threat.
R: Oyne la abnani agwu nbna – Who is threatening tiger?
L: Nye, Nye agwu so nbna – Yes, yes, tiger hates threat
R: Oyne la abnani agwu nbna – Who is threatening tiger?

c) L: Ndnandna ama la oyna, ndnandna ama la oyna, nwnaeze la la – Ant is not caught by a trap, ant is not caught by a trap, the son of the king has escaped.
R: *Ndnadna amala oyna* – Ant is not caught by a trap.

Generally, the oral traditions of Ogba people explicate the history and literature of the people and make them to come together to understand their rich culture and heritage. They reflect their lifestyle and in unity. Songs and dances form an integral part of the oral traditions. The songs rendered in a harmonious tone bring them together in peace and joy while the proverbs, wise sayings, folktales, myths teach their history and literature.

Oral Tradition in Ogba Cosmology

Cosmology is the study of the universe in its totality; and by extension, humanity's place in it. Cosmology is often an important aspect of the creation myths of religions that seek to explain the existence and nature of reality. The knowledge of the Supreme Being, Chuku-Abiama (God, the owner of the universe) by Ogba people has greatly influenced their culture and religion, and has reflected in their religious worship, history, mythology and funeral rites.

It is believed that God established the laws of nature to govern the world and that He sustains, keeps and upholds the things He has created. For this reason, Ogba people feel that the world and the universe have no end and will never end. In Ogba cosmology, the universe is divided into two: the visible and invisible parts (the heaven or sky represents the spirits and the unborn). The sky is invisible part as well as the underworld that is below the earth, while the earth is the visible part. Ogba people believe in the link between earth and heaven. According to Ohia (2017) "it is considered in Ogba cosmology that the universe is orderly and operates at several levels. There is order in the laws of nature, moral order among people, religious order and mystical order because God controls nature" (p.216). The whole world in Ogba cosmology exists for man's sakes, therefore, Ogba people look for the usefulness of the universe to man – what the world can do for man and how man can use the world for his own good.

Literarily, in Ogba oral tradition, there are spirits that populate the universe and they have a status between God and man. These are often spoken of in human terms and invested with

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human characteristics such as thinking, speaking, intelligence and possession of power. These spirits are created by God and are subordinate to Him and dependent on Him. The spirits comprise nature and human spirits. Nature spirits are those that Ogba people associate specifically with nature, objects and forces. They include sky and earth spirits that are personified as living, intelligent beings of the invisible world. Human spirits are those that once were ordinary men, women and children who have direct physical kinship with people. Many of the human spirits appear in legends, myths, folktales, songs and others. It is these spirits that African writers adopt in their novels, plays and poems. According to Mbiti (1975), "By bringing spirits so much into oral literature, art forms and ceremonies, people familiarise themselves with the spirits and therefore remove much of the fear that they might otherwise feel for these invisible and ubiquitous beings (p.74). Apart from enlightenment on what spirits can do, spirits have become the scapegoat for people's troubles. Wicked spirits as characters in literature are nearly always associated with death, and death is often regarded as a spirit. In tragic and tragi-comedic plays, the spirits attack and kill human characters. Ogba people are deeply aware of the spirit world, and the awareness shapes their conception of God and the universe and affects their outlook and experiences in life.

The belief in spirits brought in many taboos in Ogba. It is a taboo for any person (native or stranger) to fell any big tree in the land because the spirits dwell in them and such action will portend danger from the anger of the gods. They also believe in the Rivers goddess (mami-water) known as Erisi-Omoku that provides wealth to her adherents. The Ogba people believe that weather is controlled by some spirit. The heaven and earth (Elu La Ali) are also revered and invited for a remedial action against any offender of the natural laws. Elu La Ali is believed to cause rainfall that the people leveraged on for their farming and fruitful harvest. All of these aspects are enshrined in African oral literature hence this paper emphasizes on a literary analysis of oral tradition in Ogba cosmology. Similarly, the traders have their gods of trade and commence known as Iyne-Ma-Ahia which means the god that keeps watch over the market people. The market men and women earn their living thought the trading business.
With the beliefs in the gods, Ogba people set aside days for masquerade and new yam festivals to celebrate the gods; and in these activities, songs and dances are performed. The Ogba people strongly believe that protection and wealth come from the gods who are intermediaries to the Almighty God Chuku-Abiama. Without tradition and sacrifice to the gods, the lives of the people are incomplete. One of such festivals in Ogba is Nchaka festival that is celebrated annually. In it, the eldest man in a family is escorted to the Rivers side in the day of the festival to throwaway the "fire" of evil, hardship, suffering, problems, poverty, and so on. The performance from the home to the riverside is purely a dramatic piece in the oral milieu. The procession from the house is explicated thus:
L: Tua njo li, Nchaka gbu oyne amisu oyne mgbasi la oyne njire njire – Tua evil depart, Nchaka kill a witch, wizard and all evil men and women
R: Tua njo li, Nchaka gbu oyne ojo – Tua evil depart, Nchaka kill all evil persons
L: Tua njo li, Nchaka gbu oyne acho wo ndu ka madu ibne a – Tua evil depart, Nchaka kill the persons who are against the lives of others
R: Tua njo li, Nchaka gbu oyne whne ka madu ibne a aboni oma – Tua evil depart, Nchaka kill the persons who are against the progress of others

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It is glaring to note that in the incantations made during Nchaka festival; there are linguistic features that place them in the realm of literature. The Nchaka spirit for instance possesses the power to revenge evil on all evil doers in the land. Nchaka incantations portray the dynamics of lively and theoretical art form in the Ogba people's perception of the potency of the Nchaka spirit. It is also clear the incantations are divided into two parts; the verse and refrain. While the leader takes the verse, the participants pick up the refrain to create a fundamental duality as emphasised by Chukwuma (1994) that: "verse itself is a structure of repetition…. The fundamental duality and the relationship of the parts of the whole offer a logic that is amenable to easy understanding and retention (Pp.148-149).

2. CONCLUSION

This paper has analysed Ogba-oral tradition to bring out the literary values. The fact that the oral tradition which is oral literature in practice uses the native Ogba language makes it unique to ensure a more adequate reach to the audience. Language use in the novel is striking for its refreshing quietness. The reader is transported by the language to a world of axiomatic phrases, with philosophies, feeding the intellect while at the same time conjuring up image and creating analogies of such attractions. African (Ogba) oral tradition particularly, the story-telling part used the mother tongue in the narration of events. The use of the indigenous Ogba language in the narrative makes the people feel at home and also see themselves as people of the same culture and tradition.

The oral tradition especially the celebration of festivals has a central message. The central message is peace, love and unity, therefore, the Ogba people while celebrating the *Nchaka* and masquerade festivals are celebrating peace, love and unity among the entire Ogba communities. Language of oral tradition is very vital because African literature, especially the oral literature posses a peculiar language that transmits her culture to the world. "For audience's reaction to a work of literature depends solely on the way the literary artist establishes a satisfying degree of adequacy between the imaginative content of his creation and its linguistic medium" (Irele 1981, P.43). This implies that language as part of culture is paramount to the understanding of any literary work. Language should be used by the artist in such a way as to reflect experience, peculiarity and imaginations the audience is familiar with. "Language, any language has a dual character; it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture" (Ngugi 1986, p.13).

Literature is the avenue through which language communicates, transmits its messages to the world.
Written literature and African oral literature *(orature)* are the main means by which a particular language transmits images to the world. Okoh (1995) expresses that "language can be described as that essence of literature, the means through which literature is realised" (p.179). This completely underscores the oral tradition in literature. Though most African writings are done in English, they are thoroughly done the African way with African views. The language of the African literature mainly reflects the African realties.

Recommendations

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Having explicated the literary analysis of oral tradition in Ogba cosmology and by extension other African cosmologies, it is expedient that African writers should evolve literary conventions peculiar to traditional African societies to relate to African realities. Therefore, writers should involve the African method of story-telling African mode of plot development, manner of speech (word order, imagery involvement of local colour) devoid of Eurocentric colouration to make their works distinctively African.

This is because the songs, proverbs, ritual activities in the oral traditions are all done with the use of the indigenous language. Only through this can we appreciate the oral traditions as the literature of African peoples.

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