

AFRICAN POETICS IN AN EVOLUTIONARY WORLD OF CYBER TECHNOLOGY

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Abstract

This paper is a position paper that contributes to the search for the delineation of what African poetics represents, and it looks at the constituents of African poetics through an historical overview of the genre. The paper relies heavily on orality as a distinguishing feature of African poetic through a thorough assessment of the motivation that provides the raw materials for what is known as African literary tradition. Consequent, upon this discovery, the paper strives to create a plausible intersection between African oral literary tradition and the emerging technology popularly known as AI. This paper also looks at the operational modus of AI and comes up with a dialectics of whether the incorporation of AI into oral poetics negates the fact of its orality. The paper holds the position that the relationship that exists between AI and Oral poetics is a mutually beneficial one that will see AI reciting oral pieces through what is referred to as embodied AI. The paper adopts eclectic theoretical frameworks that properly elucidate on the core values of African poetics. These theoretical frameworks include evolutionary theory, performance theory and digital humanity. The paper concludes by making recommendations that will enhance this synergy.

Keywords: African poetics, evolutionary world and cyber technology

Introduction

The world is evolving in every area, so also is literature and African poetics. However, this evolution comes at a price, that is why this paper looks at the fate of African poetics and its challenges in the evolutionary world, particularly, in an emerging world of cyber

technology where much emphasis is on written forms. To people in climes where written literature is popular, the idea of oral literature denotes mystery - a form that is crude and artistically undeveloped.

This mindset makes it imperative to examine in detail the chore values of African poetics. African poetics dates to the pre-colonial past where it performed the role of entertainment and education. This is the art form that shapes poetry across the African continent. It is also important that we set clear boundaries for what constitutes African poetics in terms of form and content if it will contend favourably with its foreign counterpart.

The prejudice of Europeans is responsible for the image of Africa as totally without literary pretensions which Ruth Finnegan finds untrue. Worst more, are claims by Burton, quoted by Finnegan that "the savage custom of going naked has denuded the mind and destroyed all decorum in the language. Poetry there is none... there is no metre, no rhyme, nothing that interest or soothes the feelings, or arrest the passion"... (26). This assertion, which the emergence of African linguistic studies negates, lays credence to the genre of African poetics while the emergence of blank verse makes African poetics pass the test of lack of rhyme and metre.

In spite, of these prejudices, it is worthy of note that Africa possess very rich culture and language which need publicity through the medium of oral literature. Language particularly has a mutually beneficial relationship with oral poetics as Nkem Okoh succinctly depicts in his words 'we cannot have literature without language... literature nurtures the language of a people and, conversely, is itself preserved and perpetuated by the language" (9).

Closely related to this is the choice of the language of expression of African poetics, which is the European language. This has given room for Europeans to judge African poetics against the standards of their literature. This judgement is pre-emptive in the sense that African oral pieces are in the first instance composed in the native language of the poets before they are translated into English. Koelle attests to the

capacity of the African language to convey thoughts, feelings and ideas of Africans when he confesses to having “heard them [the blacks] deliver, in their own native tongue, stirring extempore speeches, adorned with beautiful imagery” (vii)

African poetics should be assertive in a manner that distinguishes it from the poetry of Europe and other continents. By doing that it will conform with the views of Nkem that “it is culturally unrealistic and methodologically naïve or unsound ... to view African genres in the light of the western” (25). That will amount to dressing flamboyantly in western artistic regalia.

It is for this reason that this paper proposes a reassessment of the concept of literature, by providing a more accurate definition of literature not necessarily bound by the fetters of western thinking. This definition should correspond to the prescription of Okot P’ bitek that it should be ‘dynamic, democratic and less rigid, one by which the term Literature will be used to represent all the creative works of man expressed in words’ (20). It is in reaction to the thoughts above that Jefferson and Robey express their views on the ‘fluidity’ or ‘diversity’ of literature in these words:

The modern definition of literature is an extremely narrow one,...one conclusion can be drawn...is to adopt the so called institutional definition of literature; that is to see it as essentially similar to any sort of social or cultural institution and therefore as changing its character and function as the society that produces it changes. Most literary theories do not adopt such a historicist attitude, but attempt instead to devise universal definitions of literature or related categories such as poetry, verbal art, etc. (8)

It is the view of this paper, that adopting this recommendation will be more rewarding and make room to accommodate the various idiosyncrasies of African poetics.

Therefore, the paper aims at contributing its quota to the growing clarion call for the delineation of African poetics by espousing on the concept of African poetics. This will reveal the intersection between African poetics and cyber technology and examine its role in preserving African poetics. This will show the transformative role cyber technology plays in reshaping African cultural and literary identities as an autonomous genre among continental literature worthy of serious attention, thereby refuting the negative prejudice of the west.

To achieve this, the paper examines the concept of African poetics, explores the relationship between African poetics and digital technology to assess the impact of social media on African poetics and examines the challenges posed by cyber technology on African literary tradition as well as evaluates the opportunities created by cyber technology.

Theoretical framework:

This paper adopts an eclectic theoretical framework because of the multi-faceted nature of the discourse involved. The first theoretical framework is the evolutionary theory which according to Jerry Coyne states that ‘ ‘life on earth evolved gradually beginning with one primitive specie – perhaps a self-replicating molecule – that lived more than 3.5 billion years ago; it then branched out over time, throwing off many new and diverse species. (3). It was further added that all life on earth share a common ancestor and changes over successive generations. It is primarily driven by natural selection, where organism better adapts to their environment are more likely to survive, reproduce and pass on their genetic traits. The theory is propounded by Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace. The paper adopts this theory for its capacity to help trace the origin of African poetics by juxtaposing African poetics with its western counterpart. The change over successive generation aligns with current contention that oral poetry be passed from generation to generation and by so doing make it adapt to the environment, thereby making it survive.

Secondly, the evolutionary theory is applied in this paper to examine how oral and written artistic traditions adapt, survive and change over time in response to cultural, social and environmental pressures. African poetry has evolved from predominantly, oral forms to written and digital forms. In the same way evolutionary theory has encouraged the passing of traits from one generation to another. Similarly, aspects such as proverbs, call-and-response are transmitted from artist to younger generation through cultural transmission. The theory is, however, deficient in the sense that it does not explain cultural meaning and also limited in its treatment of creativity and imagination, also the risk of its biological relativity is high. For these reasons, it can be concluded that evolution is insufficient on their own for understanding the richness of the cultural diversity of African poetics. This is particularly true when weighed against the view of Schechner that “art and life are not only separate, but of different order of reality. Life is primary, art is secondary” (1116).

As a result of the deficiencies stated above, the paper also adopted performance theory. According to the Richard Schechner a theatre art practitioner, “performance is not just an artistic or theatrical event, but a universal human behaviour that exist on a broad continuum” (143). Furthermore, proponents of the theory say, human identity and social norms are not fixed, but actively constructed through repeated actions, behaviour and rituals. It examines how everyday life = from social interaction to digital self-presentation functions as a dynamic performance rather than just the literal acting on a stage. The theory offers a lens through which to examine how identities, social norms, and power structures are enacted and negotiated through performative acts. Emerging from interdisciplinary roots in anthropology, sociology and theatre studies, the theory posits that everyday behaviour, cultural rituals and artistic expressions are

performances shaped by and shaping societal context. The key figure popularizing this theory are Richard Schechner and Judith Butler.

In a nutshell, in African poetics, performance theory shifts attention from the poem as a fixed text to poetry as a dynamic act of communication. It highlights the importance of oral tradition, audience interaction, cultural context, music, gesture and social function in creating poetic meaning. This aspect is very important because many African poetic traditions are deeply rooted in oral and performative practices. This theory, is however limited in its scope and applicability to African poetics because of its heavy reliance on western conceptual beliefs like text verse act that fails to capture the fluid communal and world – shaping realities of African verbal art.

Thus, the paper adopted digital humanity as another theoretical framework because poets use digital platforms like social media, spoken word platforms and digital audio to adapt traditional oral call and response mechanism for a global audience. Digital humanity as a theory is an umbrella term for theories, methodologies, and practices related to humanity scholarship that uses digital computers as an integrated part of its research activity. Ann Burdick and her co-authors provide a more inclusive definition by saying that digital humanity “asks what it means to be a human being in the networked information age and to participate in fluid communities of practice, asking and answering research questions that cannot be reduced to a single genre, medium discipline or institution... it is a global and transmedia approach to knowledge and meaning making (4).

Digital humanity is applied to African poetics in digital archives and repositories where praise poetry, folktales and epics are stored for easy accessibility. Also helpful in computational text analysis where digital humanity tools analyse poetic metre and rhythmic patterns. Lastly, it is helpful in geospatial mapping using Geographic Information System (GIS) to map the geographic spread and narrative evolution of travelling epic. Using this theory, therefore, explains the shift from close reading and listening to algorithm reading.

In spite, of this broad spectrum of digital humanity's coverage, it is insufficient as a standalone theory for espousing a topic like 'African poetics in an evolutionary world of cyber technology' because it relies on computational models and data relation rooted in western frameworks. As a result of the inherent deficiencies of the three theories, this paper decided to use all of them in order for one to bridge the gap created by another to enhance a thorough assessment of the topic.

Literature Review

African Poetics

There are several calls for the delineation of African literature that carries the full weight of the African experience both in language, style and orientation. For this reason, many African writers advocate a shift from dependence on European patterns. In this direction, Ngugi Wa Thiongo is one of the leading advocates of the use of African language in African literature. For instance, after a distinguished career of several novel and plays in English language, switched to his native Kenyan Gikuyu language.

Thus, there is a clarion call for the use of African language in African literary tradition if the intent, feeling and thought of African artists is to be fully realised. The most recent advocate in this direction is Obiajunwa Wali. This thought of his in a paper titled "The Dead End of African Literatures" captures this view succinctly" 'An African writer who thinks and feels in his own language must write in that language' (283). This is because language is the expressive mode of a people's culture. Language is part of that culture and not to perform or write in that language, amounts to using alien culture. His position becomes clearer when he posits that "Literature after all, is the exploitation of the possibilities of language" (283). Adding, further, he says that "It is

the African languages that are in crying need of this kind of development, not the over worked French and English” (283).

This view explains the important place of language in African literary tradition. According to Owuru ‘African languages, therefore, should not be denied of this opportunity under any guise because it is the exploitation of such opportunities by French and English that develops the language to the stage it is today’ (11). There are, however, arguments about the proliferation of Africa language being the reason for favouring English above the African languages. This argument does not hold water because most native African language do not have less than one million speakers – an asset for any language to be fully exploited. This is particularly true if this view is seen in the light of the survey of African languages by Harvard University. According to them ‘... there are at least 75 languages in Africa which have more than one million speakers. For if the works are meant for the people, then its realisation in African language will yield the much-desired result.

Furthermore, the erroneous belief that African language is underdeveloped, because to the western scholar, it has no orthography as such cannot preserve the culture of the people is a force and baseless belief. The comments of Andrzejewski et al below buttresses this point:

All languages, written or unwritten, have vast vocabularies, rich in Abstract concept as well as in the specialized terms related to the needs of the societies which they function ... For the purpose of ordinary communication in their own environment and or artistic expression, unwritten language are just as adequate as the written ones, and they all use similar devices especially in poetry: metaphoric and metonymic diction, allusiveness and symbolism are just as common in oral literature as in written one. (32)

Probing the language issue further, the position Achebe is worth mentioning when he added his voice in 1964 through a rhetorical question thus ‘is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else’s? (287). However, Achebe’s

subsequent comment reveals a feeling of defeat and surrender when he said 'I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience... (288). This is responsible for the clarion call to Achebe and like-minded African writers in his view that 'what we would like future conferences on African literature to devote time to, is the all-important problem of African writing in African languages, and all its implication for the development of a truly African sensibility' (299).

Wole Soyinka's views on the language issue is more liberal in the sense that he believes that 'the language of African literature should be a dynamic synthesis of indigenous oral traditional, mythological archetypes, and western literary forms'(1) According to Bosede et al he advocated for 'the creative appropriation of colonial languages like English to serve distinctly African worldviews' (1). It no wonder therefore, that Soyinka uses the language with dexterity in the poems 'Telephone Conversation' 'Idanre' and 'Abiku' to explore the themes of social justice, and African mythology drawing on Yoruba tradition. From the forgoing, it is apparent that oral literature repudiates every negative and misleading conception of western critics.

The earlier view by Wali of literature as "the exploitation of the possibilities of language" (283), needs to extend to cover the possibility of style and orientation of African poetics. This is because in spite of the diverse cultures, languages and literary traditions that exist in Africa, they are united and distinguished by common characteristics that are similar to all Africans, poetics. These features espoused in Finnegan's Oral Literature in Africa are orality, performance, communal experience, cultural memory and audience engagement, whereas other literary traditions, often focus more on the individual author and the written text.

The feature of orality of African poetry, does not exclude it from the perception of literariness as erroneously suggested by some

scholars. Even in climes where emphasis is on written tradition, most literature are conceived of first as oral composition before they are reduced into writing. The major consideration, therefore, should be that literature is an artistic means of expression. Accordingly, Nkem has opined that only an impetuous critic or literary quack will dare deny Homer's allied and the Odyssey the status of literature due to their "humble" oral beginnings". Finnegan's comment on this issue of oral literature qualifying to be classified as literature lays to rest any deceptive, opinion when she says ... there is no good reason to deny the title of "literature" to corresponding African forms just because they are oral (25).

The importance of performance is another important characteristic of literature that needs to be given adequate attention. The prime place of performance in oral literature justifies the assertion that oral literature is synonymous with performance. According to Nkem the intangibility of oral literature means that any given piece remains there, or somewhere that is, until it is verbally actualised or performed"

The importance of performance cannot be over emphasised because performance can either mar or make an oral piece. An effective performance has the tendency to captivate audience, and to achieve a good performance the narrator uses extra-literary devices like facial expressions, bodily gestures, vocal pyrotechnics, mime, song and dance.

These non-verbal cues mentioned above as well as communal experience and cultural memory enables the artist to progressively engage his audience in the performance in a way that motivates and integrates them fully into the spirit of his narrative endeavours. Thus, the artist easily achieves more through the deployment of such non-verbal cues while the writer laboriously incorporates it into his text. Accordingly, Nkem asserts that ... "it is an artist's successful articulation, heightening or harnessing of his improvisational abilities (with other) internal dynamic of oral literature that largely determines the

emotional impact of a performance thus a competent performance can linger on in the mind of the audience, while a mediocre performance forgotten just as soon as it is performed.

Evolution And African Poetics

Before written records, poetry across the African continent existed as an oral art form tied to everyday life, ritual, and storytelling. Over the years, African poetry has evolved organically, transitioning from deep-rooted, communal oral traditions into written generations of post-colonial and contemporary verse. This evolution reflects the continent's dynamic cultural landscape. By honouring tradition and still embracing modernity, African poets continue to push boundaries and inspire audience worldwide. These boundaries as will become apparent later in this paper is the reason for the mutually beneficial symbiotic relationship between African poetics and the emerging world of cyber technology.

Determining the historical development of African poetry will go a long way to help in the assessment of the progress made in the genre. In the light of the above, it is imperative to look at the socio-political, and economic considerations that provides the motivation for the African poet. The dynamic nature of these considerations is responsible for the changing style and thematic preoccupation of African poetry. These changes treated as phases in the evolution of African poetry are treated below.

In a paper titled 'Evolutionary Trends of Modern African Poetry: A Critical Overview by Onwumere et al the came up with a classification of generation of African poetry. This classification provides the basis for this discussion on phases of African poetry. The first-generation poets who wrote in the pre independence era promoted the aesthetic values and decorum of the black race. As a result, their poetry were more nationalistic in orientation. Due to the nationalistic

feeling, they were not much concerned with stylistic embellishment. This was what Nkosi meant when he observed that they were actually 'not simply interested in the technicalities of the art of versification' (18). The common enemy that needed to be dealt with, as Nwoga noted, was 'colonialisation and the poor opinion that the rest of the world appeared to have about the abilities of the black man' (22). For this reason, all their energy was channelled towards its realisation. This is the view that Nwoga stressed in these lines '... gaining recognition for the qualities of the Blackman, of achieving political independence of their country from colonial rule, of forming the minds of their countrymen for a new Africa' (23). It can be gleaned from the above, that the danger of colonialism and its attendant consequences were responsible for this radical approach of the first-generation poets as can also be deduced from this view by Gikandi when he observed colonialism as being '...conceived as the unwilling evacuation of Africans from the movement of time' (56). Also, Walter Rodney describes it as being 'removed from history' (246).

The second generation of poets represent the second face in the evolution of African poetry. They experimented with new styles, introducing new dictions with local connotations and as Nwoga puts it "diction become less poetic and less universal as the poet now feels free to use words with his own connotation" (143). Thematically, they developed themes that were more private, experimenting with themes of life and death, joy and pain as found in Kwesi Brew's 'The Executioner's Dream'. This shift to individualistic thematic preoccupation can also be seen in the poetry of J.P. Clark. For instance, in 'Streamside Exchange', he demonstrated this by using his riverine terrain of the Niger Delta to show the lost moments of his childhood innocence, and his emotional attachment to his loved ones and nostalgic celebration of his ancestral origin.

The third generation or phase is characterized by themes of post-independence disillusionment, culture conflict and coup d'état. At this time poetry, became a tool for protest societal anomalies, since

it is a fact, that the writer is like the gat fly put in society to bring it back to the path of moral rectitude. The superficiality of independence itself, make it imperative for the African writer to change tactics and become a committed writer this conforms with the call by David Ker that ‘if it is necessary to throw bombs in order to change society, then the [African poet] must realize his obligation and throw as many bombs as possible; after all his safety may depend on it’ (4).

The superficiality of independence makes it imperative for the African writers to change tactics and become a committed writer to conform with the call by David Ker that “if it is necessary to throw bombs in order to change society, then the [African Poet] must realize his obligation to society and throw as many bombs as possible: after all his safety may depend on it” (4)

Another compelling reason why the African artist must change tactics is because of the superficiality of African independence stated earlier which is more like a change of baton. Expressing disappointment and disgust over the trend, Balogun asserts that “it is saddening and highly nauseating too; that the political independence acquired by these African states is a mockery of the true concept of independence ... (1). The poet therefore, tries to reveal these negative issues of post independent Africa in ways that raises a lot of dust. Ferdinand Asoo justifies the stance of the contemporary African poet by asserting that “what they strive to record now is the contemporary here and now, the highly vexatious issues that confront the emerging nations built on the ashes of colonialism (90). The post - colonial period, therefore, needs an aggressive approach by the poet to ensure the dethronement of the vices of this period.

Cyber Technology and the prospect of African poetics

The word cyber technology has been used academics and technologist to refer to the digital tools, networks and visual

environment built on information technology (IT) that enable the recording, storage, retrieval and transmission of information. Cyber technology is fundamentally transforming African poetics by bridging the gap between ancient oral tradition and digital platforms. Through social media, spoken word video, and digital archives, contemporary African poets are decentralising publishing, reaching global audience, and indigenizing cyber space with local languages and rhythm.

Cyber technology covers a wide spectrum of activities that include a collection of digital technologies, systems, networks, software and security measures used to create, process, store, transmit and protect information in cyber space. This conglomeration of activities that is captured by the words “cyber technology” has the capacity of transforming African poetics by giving it a new orientation and enhances its information and entertainment dissemination.

Despite these advantages of cyber technology, it is pertinent to note that in Africa, there some impediments hindering the effective intersection of oral African poetics and cyber technology; these challenges include Inadequate digital infrastructure, widespread copyright infringement, linguistic marginalization on computational tools and a lack of critical electronic literature scholarship.

Notwithstanding, these challenges, cyber technology is revolutionizing African poetics by creating decentralized publishing pipelines, digital archive for oral traditions and global audience for spoken – word performance.

Conclusion

This paper asserts the important place African poetics occupies among continental literature of the world by arguing that it should be given due recognition. This view is held strongly against the valid and logical arguments about African poetics possessing all the necessary ingredient of literariness. The paper repudiates the obnoxious views that its orality should deny it of classification as literature.

Having looked at its organic evolution through the years of its existence, it can be said that this is literature that is in motion = this transformation and its ability to adapt to varying conditions makes it possible for it to perform its function as a mirror of society. This in addition to the transmutation of its form and content, requires its delineation as a genre that needs serious attention.

This attention, is particularly, important now because of the intersection of African poetics with cyber technology. It is worthy of note that in the contemporary world of cyber culture, the world has become a global village where social media obviates the need for a physical audience a necessity for oral performance. Thus, the reassessment of African poetics undertaken in this paper, makes it possible for it to accommodate the new technology and further its reach.

Recommendation

Having made these assessments of African poetics in an evolutionary world the paper hereby make the following recommendation.

- That the documentation of African oral poetry be encouraged.
- The teaching of indigenous languages that carry unique forms and aesthetics be supported.
- That poets be encouraged to blend traditional forms with contemporary themes.
- That there should be support for experimentation with new poetic style while still maintaining cultural authenticity.
- Develop digital repositories for endangered oral poetics.
- Use social media, podcasts and online publishing platform to disseminate African poetry globally.
- Encourage writing and publishing African poetry in African languages alongside translations.

- Encourage institutional funding of multilingual literary projects.
- Expand academic studies on the evolution of African poetics in relation to globalization and changing identities.

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