

ORALITY AND LITERATURE: RETHINKING BALANCE IN THE QUESTION OF DEFINITION

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Abstract

This inquiry, anchored on the resistive postulations of postcolonial literary theory, contends that colonialism has continued through new relationships concerning the production and control of knowledge. Scholarship, particularly in literary Africa, has been hemmed in to view several concepts which lack universality from the eyes of the West. Literature as well as its very definition are, unfortunately, some of the controversial areas. Thus, if literary scholarship in Africa is inclined to associate literature inextricably with writing, is such an association logical or is it merely a consequence of the influence of the West? How does one account for the millions of people in pre-colonial Africa, Asia, Polynesia and even Europe who expertly 'practised' the art of literature with little or no knowledge of letters? In any case, does literature exist in the lines in black ink or is writing merely a method of documenting that which has been conceived from imagination? Does objective and logical thinking permit one to lay greater emphasis on the 'means' or on the 'substance' of literature? Is writing essential to the 'composition' or to the 'preservation' of literature? If literature - as the pioneer literary critic, Aristotle, has submitted in his *Poetics* - is produced primarily by means of language, then the question becomes: Is language reducible to words on paper or can it also be spoken? This investigation interrogates these questions with a view to furthering conversations and arguments surrounding the rigid definition of literature which limits the concept only to print; it also tries to clear the mist of understanding and prejudice surrounding oral narratives, even as it calls for balance in the question of definition of literature.

Keywords: Orality, Literature, Folk narratives, Literary criticism, Colonialism

Introduction

What, really, is Literature?

The disaster brought upon the Black African psyche during the period of the first confrontation with Europe comes with variegated traumatic effects. It can be argued that Black Africa has yet to fully regain belief in herself and do away with the complexes of the period of self-abasement and denigration. Even more than seven decades after colonialism, Black Africa still has neo-colonialism to contend with. The several manifestations of neo-colonialism are unrecognizably overwhelming and are usually hidden from an uncritical eye: they pop up in religion, dressing and grooming, social life – and, more worrisomely, in the academia.

The etymological implication of the word “literature”, as Nkem Okoh has boldly submitted in the “Preface” to his *Preface to Oral Literature*, has led some literary scholars into the blind alley of postulating an inextricable relationship between literature and writing; that is, literature is a phenomenon whose mode of being is clearly and exclusively in writing, thereby making African folk narratives (or more broadly, oral literature) to fall into the category of “literaturelessness” (iv), to use the very expression of Nkem Okoh. This inextricable connection between literature and writing presupposes that literature had its origin only when writing was invented. This view cannot be critically furthered for fear of lack of substance, since even the briefest reflection on the issue reveals that oral literature is an indigenous antecedent of written literature. In other words, it can be argued that oral literature is utilized as a structural prototype of its written counterpart.

Since folk narratives can sustain critical investigation as literature, then it would seem necessary that a broader understanding of literature becomes non-negotiable. Therefore, this inquiry ought to begin by reasonably interrogating the question: What, really, is literature?

Right from the era of Aristotle in 335 BCE when he published his seminal *Poetics*, attempts have been made by literary critics – and even creative writers – to nail down literature to a definition. However, after several centuries of making attempts, one is still safe right now to conclude that literature has yet to submit itself to a definition that is precise and all-encompassing. It is safer even to state that literature can only be described, not defined.

Terry Eagleton in his classical *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, for instance, has written that making a distinction between “fact” and “fiction” is one perspective from which a definition of literature can be pursued; fiction being, according to him, “writing which is not literally true” (1). However, a few lines down his arguments, he discovers a fault with this perspective because it “seems very unlikely to get us very far, not least because the distinction itself is often a questionable one” (1). He further argues that novels “and news report were neither clearly factual nor clearly fictional” (2).

Establishing a distinction between creativity and imagination is another angle from which a definition of literature has been pursued. The implication is that literature is opposed to other forms of writing because it is creative and imaginative. However, Eagleton has asked the question: “If literature is ‘creative’ and ‘imaginative’ writing, does this imply that history, philosophy and natural science are uncreative and unimaginative?” (2) And, of course, anyone who is in the know ought to understand that it is impossible to practise any form of academic scholarship without a certain level of creativity and imagination. This lane, therefore, leads us to a dead end in the quest for the search of a definition for literature.

Northrop Frye is another cerebral literary critic who has attempted to walk the talk in the search for a definition of literature. In his *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye presents his view on the definition of literature, and concluded by saying that:

We have no real standards to distinguish a verbal structure that is literary from one that is not, and no idea what to do with the vast penumbra of books that may be claimed for literature

because they are written with “style” or are useful as “background,” or have simply got into a university course of “great books”. We then discover that we have no word corresponding to “poem” in poetry or “play” in drama, to describe a work of literary art. (9)

How far this vain quest for a definition of literature has taken scholars suggests that literature is enigmatic, slippery and seems unable to yield itself to a definition. In fact, in *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Terry Eagleton has written about John E. Mills who had argued that literature operates rather like the word “weed” because “weeds are not particular kinds of plant, but just any kind of plant which for some reason or another, a gardener does not want around”. (9)

Consequently, if a definition even of literature itself that is precise and all-encompassing is yet to be achieved in literary scholarship, one then wonders why literature should be inextricably tied to writing. This connection has even received a boost from some African critics of literature. This manner of followership is blind, and ought to be objectively called out for what it is: intellectual colonialism. And as one would expect, the issue has provoked multitude of responses and commentaries from many African literary critics.

The Nobel laureate, Wole Soyinka, in his “The Crisis of Consciousness in Modern African Literature” (in *Myth, Literature and the African World*) has reacted against that form of colonialism, and he writes that:

We black Africans have been blandly invited to submit ourselves to a second epoch of colonization – this time by a universal-humanoid abstraction defined and conducted by individuals whose theories and prescriptions are derived from the apprehension of *their* world and their history, their social neuroses and their value systems (Quoted in Miller’s ‘Reading through Western Eyes’ in Tejumola’s *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*). (444)

Wole Soyinka is not alone in the condemnation of the hegemonic tendency of colonial forces. Chinua Achebe equally denounces Western critics who claim arrogantly to understand Africa better than Africans, and he enjoins them to adopt a new humility that is a prerequisite for learning. In his "Colonialist Criticism" (in *Morning yet on Creation Day*), Achebe goes as far as suggesting that he:

...should like to see the word *universal* banned altogether from discussions of African literature until such time as people cease to use it as a synonym for the narrow, self-serving parochialism of Europe, until their horizon extends to include all the world.
(9)

These reactions from African literary critics are salutary. However, the most powerful analysis of the system of literature that gave rise to Soyinka and Achebe's reactions probably came from an African philosopher, Paulin Hountondji. In "Reading through Western Eyes," Miller Christopher summarises Hountondji's findings as published in *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, edited by Tejumola Olaniyan, thusly:

In critique of the market dynamics that control the relation between Western academics and the African world, Hountondji shows how the division of labour has been unequal, with the highly valued role of theorizer belonging almost exclusively to Westerners, while Africans are confined to the gathering of raw information. Africa provides materials (like palm oil or literary texts), which European institutes process into finished commodities (like palmolive soap or works of criticism of African literature) (445)

The series of reactionary quotations from African literary critics against the hegemony of the West shows that there is a certain imbalance at the level of theory in literary studies, an imbalance that is being exploited by the combined forces of colonialism to condemn everything black or African and to encourage Africans to read literature only through the narrow eyes of Europe and America. Objectivity, which of

course should be the watchword in the academia demands that a more pragmatic approach be adopted in literary studies, rather than the study being done from the limited perspective of the West. In other words, it needs to be highlighted that the approach of the West to the study of literature is one - and clearly one - of the several approaches through which literary studies could be made. The West, for instance, barely knows enough of Africa and other regions of the world to appropriate to itself the exclusive role of the “theoriser” (Miller 445) and then set its limited understanding as a criterion for the identification of literary works universally. This proud appropriation of the exclusive role of “theoriser” has led some to look at African literature as mere “passive client of Western readership and criticism” (Miller 445) without conceptualising (of which folk narratives or more broadly oral literature constitute a major but neglected part) using models that are proposed by Africans.

This form of intellectual colonialism should be fought against very vehemently. Already, as Miller has pointed out in his “Reading through Western Eyes” (in Olaniyan’s *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*), decolonization is taking place. According to him,:

All of the disciplines of the humanities are in the process of decolonization, and the process moves forward, it becomes both possible and imperative for readers to supplant Eurocentrism with Afrocentrism, while remaining attentive to eccentric strategies that operate in new, over determined spaces. (445)

Oral Literature as Literature

As implied before, some literary scholars do not see any connection between oral narratives and written literature, and they are convinced that folk narratives are not literature. However, it can be proven that folk narratives are the antecedent prototypes of modern, written literature. In fact, like many other critics of literature, Emmanuel Obiechina agrees with this fact. In his *Studies on the Nigerian Novel*, he had observed that:

Every Nigerian who tells or writes a story today in whatever language is reflecting consciously or unconsciously something of his past, something of his people's or community's oral heritage. Oral literature and written literature in indigenous languages constitute Nigerian literature. Literature in non-Nigerian languages is only a development and not the origin of Nigerian literature. (32)

Most African writers are aware of this fact and are not oblivious of the debt of gratitude that they owe to their cultural, oral past for whatever they are able to achieve in modern, written literature. In her "Feminism with a Small 'f'" (In Olaniyan's *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*), Flora Nwapa may have been speaking for many African writers when she attributes her expertise in writing literature to oral narratives. Nwapa writes that:

I am not doing anything particularly clever. I am simply doing what my Big Mother was doing for free about thirty years ago. The only difference is that she told her stories in the moonlight, while I have to bang away at a typewriter I picked up from Woolworths in London. (552)

One could perhaps add that apart from the difference in method of rendition identified by Nwapa, another advantage she has over Big Mother is the size of her audience: because she writes her stories, Nwapa's stories are read by many persons, quite unlike the audience of the Big Mother.

It is not only literary artists who recognise this connection between oral narratives and modern, written literature, literary critics also know that literary works as we have them in their written forms cannot be distanced from their oral counterparts. This objective dimension of looking at literature highlights the immortality of folk narratives or, more generally, oral literature. In this regard, Emmanuel Obiechina (1994) in his *Ahijoku Lectures* entitled "Ncheteka: The Story, Memory and Continuity in Igbo Culture," asserts that folk narratives, even in the midst of "the modern kitchen with its electrical

stoves, its low wall of multiple-layered drawers and business-like deployment of space” (23), as opposed to “the art of telling folktales around mother’s cooking fire or mother’s little house after supper” – one of the contexts under which folk narratives reigned – still assert their immortality. Obiechina explains this connection even further by writing that:

I will concentrate on the intrusion of Igbo folklore into *Things Fall Apart* in the technique of narrative embedding which I regard as Achebe’s great gift to the African novel, his enrichments of its poetics. Just as Olaudah Equiano revolutionised black autobiography in the eighteenth century by extensively building the social context of his early life in Igboland, so Achebe has radically transformed the African novel by impregnating it with vital elements from Igbo oral story telling. (40)

In view of Obiechina’s plausible submissions above, one can therefore say without fear of contradiction that his view of the folk narratives achieves distinctness and indeed makes oral literature to forge a huge limp from their past into the future in modern, written literature.

Oral literature is the original literature of a people, and issues grappled in them date back to several hundreds of years. One of the gratifying features of the folk world is that oral literature or narratives existed side by side with them. The reason for this is obvious, and is reiterated in Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah*:

Because it is only the story {that} can continue beyond the war and warrior. It is the story that outlives the sound of war drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story {...} that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it we are blind. {...} It is the story that makes us different from cattle; it is the mark on the face that sets one people apart from their neighbour. (124)

Thus, Achebe opines above that a people's identity as well as their perception of the human reality are inextricably embedded in their oral literature. It forms part and parcel of a people's tradition that stretches back into the mists of their past in one long, unbroken chain of which the last link can be very difficult to be known. In fact, the more critical one looks at it, the more certain it becomes to see that oral literature - like its written counterpart - cannot yield itself to a definition.

Frank Kidson (1980) is quoted in Fred Wood's *The Observer's Book of Folk Song in Britain*, albeit in the context of folk song, as saying that "it is folk {narrative} that appeal to the bedrock temperament of the people" (10). This view of folk narratives focuses on their continuous appeal and timelessness, irrespective of whether the narratives are about long-dead customs, or abuse shepherdeses and their swains or about the tortoise and its numerous exploits, or about humans and their encounter with spirit beings; they still retain their freshness, their immediacy and their basic attraction. Fred Wood himself has rightly posited that "the well-known stories of the ballads can hold a modern audience as enthralled as an eighteenth century one, and this largely because they deal with basic human emotions, stripped of all decorations, raw and direct" (10).

An attempt at a definition of folk song in 1954 by the International Music Council can bring to the fore the fact that written works of literary art have oral literature as their antecedent prototype. *The Observer's Book of Folk Song in Britain* has this definition:

Folk music is the product of a musical tradition that has been evolved through the process of oral transmission. The factors that shape the tradition are: (i) continuity which links the present with the past; (ii) variation which springs from the creative impulse of the individual or the group; and (iii) selection by the community, which determines the form or forms in which the music survives. (10-11)

The above definition of folk song by the International Music Council can, to a very large extent, be applied to oral literature in general. This,

of course, is a global attempt at description and not necessarily one which precisely meets the requirements and descriptions of individual countries or regions. This description may be acceptable as perhaps one is unlikely to get any closer to one definition that is precise and all-encompassing. In this research, one point which will always surface and re-surface is that in our approach to oral literature, the wider one throws the net of definition, the farther one will be at grabbing the concept. One fact, however, is factual: oral literature evolved from rudimentary beginnings by a people uninfluenced by popular art which may have originated with an individual or group composer, and which subsequently has been absorbed as a structural basis for the modern and written literary tradition.

Origin and Meaning in Oral Literature

This research so far has attempted, although implicitly, to show that oral literature forms part and parcel of great traditions that stretch back into the mists of the past in one long, unbroken chain, of which the last link is now very difficult to be known. It is not dangerous to state that oral literature came into being when man first learned how to communicate.

In *The Observer's Book of Folk Song in Britain*, Fred Woods quotes Cecil Sharp as saying in his *English Folk Songs: Some Conclusions* that "folk songs {and oral narratives, by implication} have been composed by the common people, in contradistinction to the... otherwise, which has been composed by the educated" (9). This assumption could be well in its own way until one picks up the word "educated" for critical examination. Implied in Cecily's conclusion is an imbalance in comparison. Should one willingly accept that folk narratives were created by "illiterate" peasants? What are the criteria for determining one who is educated and one who is not? Is formal education the only acceptable form of education? Cecily's conclusion is obviously oblivious of the fact that folk narratives take place in a tradition as a valid means of educating the young ones. In his "Igbo Traditional Poetry and Family

Relationship” (in D.I. Nwoga’s *Literature and Modern West African Culture*), R.N. Egudu highlights the educative purpose of folk narratives, stating that:

In traditional Igbo society, literature is always generally a purposeful affair, in the sense that it is not meant merely to satisfy some aesthetic craving or to engender intellectual appeal. The purpose ranges from ritual, through demonstration of accepted values, to simple moral or ethical education. In these dimensions of the purpose, emphasis is consistently placed on the relationship between man and man, which, if it is healthy, becomes instrumental to the growth of a harmonious society. (36)

In view of Egudu’s powerful submissions above, one then wonders what more education could be better than that which is “instrumental to the growth of a harmonious society.” Can one who is not “educated” be able to offer education to others? These clearly show that the creators of folk narratives are thoroughly educated in a sense that is different from the kind of formal education that most persons are familiar with. Naturally, the question of meaning almost always arises whenever works of literary art are talked about. Although some literary scholars opine that this ought not to be the first question to be asked about literature, the fact remains that it must arise, the time notwithstanding. Most studies of oral literature have ultimately been driven by the search for meaning. Since storytellers were seen as bearers of tradition, whose role it was to faithfully reproduce in an unusually lively manner, stories they have learnt, then it must follow that a quest for the understanding of oral literature is a quest to understand what it embodies: a people’s tradition and perception of the human reality.

In the 19th century, theories of meaning were linked to the question of origins and often conceived within paradigms of progress: the Grimms believed that the meaning of Indo-European folk narratives was linked to the Indo-European past; solar mythologists held that myths and folk tales developed out of early man’s explanation of natural phenomena; and British anthropologists, adopting the

evolutionary theories of the day that all societies pass through the same stages of culture at different historical moments, concluded that folk narratives were survivals of primitive myths. Following psychoanalytic interpretation in the tradition of Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud the 20th century, however, psychoanalysts have claimed to uncover meanings of folk narratives in the unconscious desire of individuals, often in the correlation between dreams, fairy tales and myths. This pattern of psychoanalytic interpretation of folk narratives began with Sigmund Freud's essay entitled "The Occurrence in Dreams of Material from Fairy Tales." In the essay, a patient's dream contains motifs from *Little Red Riding Hood* and "The Wolf and the Seven kids." This view was later supported by Karl Abraham who opines that the dream is the myth of the individual. Thus, solar mythologists see nature symbolism in myths and folk narratives, Freudian psychoanalytic readings see symbolism in sexual nature and Carl Jung, rejecting the narrow emphasis on sexual symbolism, favours he later calls the "collective unconscious."

Verisimilitude and Characterisation in Oral Literature

An implication has been made of the fact that the different forms of oral literature are 'twisted' human constructs that give a fictional account of life. They also constitute a people's self-definition of their identity. In these oral narratives, humans and spirit beings feature as characters. Very often, one encounters talking animals and characters doing things which are unusual in real life situations. This raises another very vital question: Are these animals representatives of speaking animals or do they represent talking humans? Suffice it to say that if these characters are really animals, then it must follow that the lessons embodied in the narratives are meant for animals, not humans. It equally means that these animals are explaining themselves in a way that can be comprehended by humans. However, one wonders: Are animals, the kind we encounter in oral narratives, capable of explaining themselves and their identities in such a way that can be comprehended by humans the way we do in these narratives? Even the briefest reflection on the subject shows that animals cannot explain themselves

in real life situation as we do in oral narratives. Since this is the case, then it is safe to conclude that those animals encountered in folk narratives are veiled or fictional human beings. In fact, Obiechina (1994) aptly calls them “humanized animals” (27). In this sense, the characters are - as D.U. Opata has taught - “fictional actors acting out human roles” (Unpublished lecture note). He further explains this complication in his “Gender and Canon Formation in Nigerian Literature in English: A Search for a Usable Past” (in *The Muse: A Journal of Creative and Critical Writing of the English Studies Association at Nsukka*, Volume 32):

This is why stories that feature the tortoise always strike deep cords within the human heart. There is, so to speak, always a lesson from which the tortoise can learn, but it never really learns. The stories about the deeds of the tortoise therefore act as parables of the human condition - man’s inability to free himself from the selfish acts, and man’s inability to learn from history. (12)

In the above quotation, Opata has - besides expressing the truth that characters in oral literature are veiled - been able to point out that those folk narratives are parables of the human condition. In other words, a parallel has been drawn between the non-human characters in the narratives and real human beings. The actions of these characters represent human events in history; that is to say, the animals and characters in oral literature are veiled actors and actresses outing out human roles.

The idea of veiled characters in oral literature ought not to be strange to any critic of literature since it cuts across all genres of literature: characters in literature are often veiled. That “animal” characters in oral narratives act out human roles explains the reasons for their human speech. Following this line of thought, therefore, all understanding of oral literature gives us an insight into the human condition.

Again, the question of verisimilitude always arises in literature, especially in folk narratives. This is because these narratives present a seemingly strange and unfamiliar setting and would therefore be difficult to be seen as the factual human world. However, armed with relevant literary devices, a creative artist can make the impossible in real life situation possible in literature. Human imaginations can be magnified or worked on using literary devices, hyperbole for example. In modern, written literature, creative works of romance present a seemingly strange environment because they have been worked on by literary devices utilized by the creative artist.

Thus far, this research has shown that oral narratives talk about human issues using veiled characters and settings modified by human imagination. For this reason, all understanding of folk narratives gives us an insight into the human condition, and into our very past since a literary work does not exist in a vacuum as the setting which inspires it gains entrance into the plot of the work.

The difficulty often encountered in oral narratives is largely because they are imagined, fabricated, thought out, created and invented. Since every form of imagination answers or gives an insight into a problematic situation as well as satisfies some form of intellectual curiosity, then it must follow that oral narratives capture life and give us an insight into it. Here is E.O. Apronti in his "The Writer in our Society" (in Nwoga's *Literature and Modern West African Culture*) lending credence to the matter, and even proceeding far afield:

What is certain is that the life of traditional oral literature is closely bound up with the life of man on our continent {and I would dare add, on our world}, with his rites of passage, occupational interests, religious beliefs, and social institutions. The modern African writer needs to do all that his traditional predecessor has done and even go beyond it. This is an era of rapid social change. (78).

At this level, the point has been clearly made: albeit worked upon by human imagination for the artistic purpose of defamiliarizing the

familiar, folk narratives furnish humans with a fictional account of life by reconstructing experiences for us.

Simplicity and Oral Literature

Some researchers do not find oral narratives worthy of serious academic attention, convinced that they are meant for and should be narrated to juveniles. This neglect – not merely of oral literature, but also of the African culture that inspired it – has created a huge void which the West's limited conception of literature has been attempting in vain to fill. For this reason, it is still being debated, as has been shown earlier, that literature must be written, tracing the world to its Western origin which is inextricably tied to writing.

That having been said, however, the question that naturally arises is: Is oral literature really that simple for the consumption and comprehension of juveniles? A critical and objective analysis of oral literature reveals, as has been shown earlier, that they capture a people's perception of the human reality, a reality beyond the cognitive psychology of children. Oral narratives represent a people's attempt to narrate their identity and perception of reality to themselves and to the wider world. As Karen Armstrong has shown in *A Short History of Myth*, humans are "meaning-seeking creature" (2).

Emmanuel Obiechina (1994) has shown in the Ahiajoku Lecture entitled "Ncheteka: the Story, Memory, and Continuity in Igbo Culture" that the world is a universal garden where people bring their own seed to plant and tend on an indifferent soil. Every tree planted germinates and grows. Folk narratives are the seed a people plants in this universal garden. Some may forget that they have a tree of their own and will labour tirelessly to tend other people's tree. If this happens, their own tree would be over-ridden with weeds. Folk narratives are evidence to show that the people have seen the need to tend their tree. Stories are important because they are anchored in memory and so are eternal. They belong to time but have timeless quality. The power of folk narratives to instruct, remind, renew and

direct is not circumscribed by time. Folk narratives carry with them a memory of the people that own them.

Thus, the serious issues grappled with in oral literature are evidently too sophisticated for the intellectual capabilities of children because they demand a high level of intellection. The mental powers of juveniles will need quite a lot of growth time to be able to decipher them. Although presented in simple plot and language, oral narratives are complex. They are often difficult to explain because they are imagined, and every imagination answers or gives an insight to a problematic situation as well as provide a creative solution to physical challenges that confront man. Although they appear simple and may be understood by young ones, the issues deliberated upon in oral narratives are too lofty to be grasped by young ones. Oral literature has ideological embodiments and messages that are coded and presented in a language that is simplified. Although its overt purpose is to transmit culture and strategies of sense-making to the younger generation, yet, in the depth and complexities of its inner structures, the narratives have the effect of reaching the hearts of those whom simple logic would not have persuaded – a strategy whose design goes far beyond the declared surface intention. Obiechina further explains why this is possible in his “Ncheteka: The Story, Memory, and Continuity in Igbo Culture”:

Stories endure where unlinked words and sentences dissolve. Stories stimulate the affective domain and elicit definite emotive responses, whether of pleasure, sadness, pity, horror or revulsion. It is through such responses that the people experience a commonly shared sense of morality, of beauty, and of social propriety (26).

Findings and Recommendations

This research has highlighted that although oral literature has continued to exert significant influence on our contemporary, written culture of literature, it has continued to be neglected, underexposed, unfairly misunderstood and harshly underrated. Worse still, and as a result of colonial and postcolonial influences, many literary critics who

are supposed to constructively critique for the purpose of projecting African oral narratives have been educated to study literature through boundaries drawn by the limited eyes of the West; and they have yet to give oral narratives the critical attention that they deserve. For this reason, there is a mist of misunderstanding and prejudice surrounding oral literature today. It is even being debated if oral literature is more of sociology and anthropology than literature. Although presented in simple plots, the issues grappled with in oral narratives are serious and intellectually demanding. For this reason, there is a compelling need for oral narratives to be given the attention it requires in the literary tradition of African intellectual discourse

Conclusions

One cannot safely further the argument that literature came into being only at the time when letters and writing were discovered. By implication, therefore, the central argument in this paper is that it is only an impetuous literary critic or a literary quack who will dare deny Homer's classical *Illiad* or *Odyssey* the status of literature simply because they had an oral beginning. The same goes for the traditional English folk ballad, 'Barbara Allan' (which first came to print in 1740 by the Scottish poet, Allan Ramsay), and the traditional Scottish folk ballad, 'Sir Patrick Spens' (which was first printed in 1765 in Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*). These excellent works of creativity merely acquired the printed form after several generations of oral existence. The same goes for African oral narratives; they are the oral antecedents of our contemporary, written literature. They deserve serious intellectual attention, and ought to receive it.

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