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ROLE OF THE CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCE POET IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: THE DIKE CHUKWUMERIJE EXAMPLE

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ABSTRACT
Performance poetry in Africa has always been in the service of humanity. In spite of the massive cultural shift in Africa owing to the impact of colonialism and globalisation, oral poetry has remained resilient yet dynamic as it retains its place in most African societies. Contemporary oral poetry, also known as 'performance poetry' or popularly known as 'spokenword' or 'spokenword poetry', is the extant form of oral poetry which gains attention in public spaces and uses both primary and secondary oralities as its medium. Contemporary oral poetry has the unique advantage of reaching thousands of people at once and therefore could be used as a powerful tool for cultural reorientation and national development. Dike Chukwumerije is widely recognized for his outstanding oral poetry which mostly concerns national integration, social justice and national development. National development is not limited to infrastructure and physical facilities; it also includes the quality of education and orientation citizens of a given country receive. Anchored on the postcolonial literary theory and functionalist theory of oral literature, the paper focuses on two of Dike Chukwumerije's spoken word poems, "The Wall and The Bridge" and "They Say I Come From a Free Country", highlighting the role of the contemporary oral poet in national development from the preoccupation and performance of these poems.

Key words: Oral poetry, orality, national development, orientation, Dike Chukwumerije

Introduction

Contemporary oral poetry is also commonly known as 'spoken word' or 'performance poetry', which is also a modern day realisation of traditional oral poetry. Oral poetry itself is an offshoot of the oral tradition or oral literature or orature. Liz Gunner asserts that, "the continent of Africa can be viewed as a site of enormous, long and ongoing creativity in relation to orality as a vector for the production of social life, religious beliefs and reconstituting of society and ideology" (67). Oral poetry is a verbal art that has always been in the service of the African man from time immemorial. The use of oral poetry can hardly be divorced from its context (Ojaide, 109; Yadok & Irmiya, 110). As such there are poems for work, hunting, rituals, seasons, birth, death, festivals and so on. Oral poetry cannot be fully understood without a comprehension of oral literature.

According to Ruth Finnegan, "oral literature is a type of literature characterized by particular features to do with performance, transmission and social context which has various implications on culture norms, values, identity, tradition, history and politics of a people" (5). Lending credence to Finnegan's assertion, Peace Longdet affirms that oral literature shares with written literature the use of heightened expressions in various genres but it is set apart by being actualised only in performance and by the fact that the performer can improvise so that the oral text constitutes an event. Longdet adds that, "most simply, oral literature refers to any form of verbal art which is transmitted orally or

delivered by word of mouth" (124). Many scholars of oral literature agree that the spoken form, the sung form and the performance form of orature correspond to the prose, poetry, and drama genres of written literature respectively. The African continent obviously manifests a vast repertoire of verbal arts, earning the reputation of the oral continent per excellence (Gunner, 67; Irele, 79; Longdet 122).

The art of orally transmitting ideologies aesthetically is known as orality. Walter Ong, cited in Ola-Koyi, makes a distinction between what he terms 'primary orality' and 'secondary orality' in the sense that primary orality refers to oral arts "totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print." By contrast, secondary orality refers to "present day, high-technology culture, in which a new orality is sustained by telephone, radio, television and other electronic devices" (377). With the advent of digital technology and the social media, orature has demonstrated its dynamism, resilience and adaptability in that it still survives in the present day. In modern scholarship, secondary orality is otherwise known as media orature, digital orature, or cybernetic orature.

Traditional oral poetry typically utilizes a language for its composition and expression. As such, oral poems are mostly understood in the languages with which they are composed and the functions which these poems serve. In this regards, the Oriki (a sort of praise poem) in the Yoruba tradition can hardly be comprehended outside the Yoruba language and culture. However, with the assailing forces of globalisation and language encroachment, oral poetry has found a way of surviving in different languages yet maintaining its societal function of orientation, moral development and education. Liz Gunner avers that "the evidence from contemporary studies shows that many oral genres are resilient and adaptable to intense changes that have accompanied modern technology, urban living, and often difficult and oppressive industrial conditions" (71). It is therefore important to state that today's oral poet who maintains the spirit of an African tradition using a foreign language in a physical or virtual medium to transmit cultural values should be termed as a 'contemporary oral poet.'

Contemporary oral poetry has become a popular form of orality as it is increasingly being witnessed in urban spaces while attracting massive attention on social media platforms, thus further widening its reach among the populace. There is an increase of contemporary oral poetry/spoken word houses and events in Nigeria like poetry slams. For example, in Jos, Nigeria, there poetry clubs like E.B Sword, J-Town Shakatawa and COAL. In Abuja there is the Abuja Literary Society (ALS) which has a spoken word arm; and there is the Poetry Court in Lagos. Some of the popular contemporary oral poets in Nigeria include Dike Chuwumerije, Bash Amuneni, Rudolph Adidi, Wana Wana, Patience Andrew, Daisy Odey, Decipher Moore, David Onotu, and Mandela Josiah, to name a few.

Despite the growing composition and performance of contemporary oral poetry, Tanure Ojaide argues that, "modern/contemporary poetry meant for poetry slams and jams tends to rely mainly on voice manipulation and not what is essentially figurative language" (111). However, a closer look at many contemporary oral poems reveals that figurative qualities of poems are also readily obtainable as F.B.O Akporobaro states that, "most of the qualities which define the literary values of written literature are also the very ones which are present in oral literary expressions." Admittedly, there are unskilled contemporary oral poets in as much as the unskilled page poets abound. Nonetheless, the relevance of the contemporary oral poet not just an entertainer but also as an agent of change and cultural orientation cannot be overemphasized, especially the poet's contribution to peaceful co-existence and national development.

Dike Chukwumerije is one outstanding example of a contemporary oral poet who maximizes the potential within his means to deliberately tailor his art for the sustenance of national integration, national identity, brotherhood, tolerance, and harmonious relationships. This is imperative in the face of the growing tensions, agitations, mutual suspicion, tribalism, nepotism, insecurity and corruption that is threatening the unity of Nigeria as a country. Dike Chuwumerije has organised marathon oral poems that were presented in major cities of Nigeria including Lagos, Enugu, Abuja, Jos, Kaduna, Benin, Maiduguri, among others. Additionally, Dike has performed in National and global events and some of his poems are widely shared across social media platforms, giving him a global visibility while retaining his identity as a Nigerian.

This paper therefore examines two of Dike Chukwumerije's oral poems, "The Wall and The Bridge" and "They Say I Come From a Free Country", highlighting the role of the contemporary oral poet in combating social injustice, mutual distrust, and insecurity while at the same time fostering national cohesion and development.

Theoretical Framework

The thought in this paper hangs on two theories; the postcolonial literary theory and the theory of functionalism in oral literature.

Postcolonialism has everything to do with the effects and aftereffects of colonialism. Colonialism brought about the delineation of African territories into countries as we know them today. Therefore, our sense of nationhood is a function of the colonialism. Furthermore, colonialism has also led to massive language and cultural erosion in most African societies. Colonialism's minimal effect brought about the notion of dual consciousness in which Ann Dobbie iterates that, "the interaction of cultures creates blended ones, mixtures of native and colonial, a process called hybridity" (210). The postcolonial theory therefore arrived as a fitting way of understanding the condition of the postcolonial. In their seminal work on postcolonial criticism, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice of Postcolonial Criticism* (1989), Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tifflin outline four critical models of postcolonial literatures namely: national and regional models; race based models; comparative models of varying complexity; and more comprehensive comparative models (14-34). However, this paper is hinged on the national and regional model which accounts for shared culture and experiences of a people within the same region or nation as well as their peculiar problems and challenges. Their literatures, including oral compositions, are usually considered in relation to their social and political history and they serve as a source for creating national identity. Dike Chuwumerije's oral poems mostly have a national outlook.

The functionalist theory of oral literature on the other hand is derived from the works of British anthropologists, who emphasize the importance of looking at the society as a system wherein social institutions are integrated and each part operate in its way, hence making the whole function as it should (Longdet, 141). In this regards, the oral poet's absence creates a vacuum in the holistic picture of the societal system just as the absence of bards and griots could be felt in primitive societies. Commenting on the functionalism in oral poetry, Yadok & Irmiya posit that, "the beneficial effect of what counts most in the final analysis is the impact of any oral literary presentation on an audience; and whether that effect brings about moral, cultural, social or political transformation" (111). The functionalist believes that oral traditions are not just for entertainment but a behavioural motive lies behind every oral literary delivery.

Who is Dike Chukwumerije?

Dike Chukwumerije is a lawyer, a writer and a contemporary oral poet who prefers to be called a 'spoken word artist' or a 'performance poet'. Born in Surelere, Lagos, Dike had his primary and secondary education in Lagos before he moved to Abuja where he obtained a degree in Law at the University of Abuja. Dike also has a master's degree in Law and Development from SOAS University of London. His creativity was heavily influenced by his older brother, Che Chukwumerije who was an avid poet and a musician, as well as his mother, father, and one of his friends, Onesi Dominic.

Dike Chukwumerije has eight published books to his credit including *Urichindere*, a novel, which won the 2013 Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) Prize for Prose Fiction. Dike's enterprise in contemporary oral poetry started when he won the ALS Poetry Slam in Abuja. Since then, Dike has won several grand slams in Nigeria including the maiden edition of the African Poet (Nigeria) Grand Slam competition. Apart from organising open mic and poetry slams, Dike Chukwumerije has, since 2013, hosted and directed the annual Night of Spoken Word (NWS) performance poetry event in which many contemporary oral poets are featured. In addition to live performances, Dike has also produced poetry audios and videos that have been widely circulated in digital formats.

Among his most popular lengthy oral performances are "Let's Be Honest", "Man-made gods", and "Made in Nigeria". "Made in Nigeria" poetry show has been performed in about 15 major cities in Nigeria including Lagos, Benin, Abuja, Jos, Kaduna, among others. Dike is an artist who fuses entertainment and a call for national consciousness. At the 23rd Nigeria Economic Summit, in October 2017, Dike's rendition of his poem, "The Wall and the Bridge" gained public attention as it focused on the need for national re-orientation and a re-awakening of social consciousness. Subsequently, on the 1st of May, 2018, Nigeria's Vice President, Prof. Yemi Osinbajo recited Dike Chukwumerije's poem, "The Revolution has no tribe" during his remarks on how Nigerians are shaping the future. Dike Chuwumerije has also been on several platforms and has shared the stage with Wole Soyinka at the 5th Lafarge Africa National Literacy Competition in Lagos on the 15th November, 2018.

Dike Chukwumerije is currently rated as Nigeria's most prolific contemporary oral poet

(www.tokinpen.wordpress.com; www.vanguardngr.com; www.greeninstitute.ng). Dike's poems come alive because they do not appeal to one's imagination but also to one's audio-visual senses. As such, he stands as one phenomenal poet that meaningfully contributes to the citizens' mental development outside the perimeters of formal learning. His poems do not just entertain, they enlighten lay people, expose evils perpetuated by the greedy, and the promote tolerance and understanding.

The Role of the Contemporary Oral Poet in National Development

Development, put simply, refers to a process of systematic growth or directed change. It can, then, be deduced that national development implies a process of collective or national systemic growth. Also, for a nation to achieve national development, all its sectors must make meaningful contributions. Thus, a developed nation has all is sectors, e.g transport, defence, economy, entertainment, agriculture, and education, progressing at significant rates such that the growth of one sector affects the other. Both orature and literature have a long history in fashioning out a people's identity and even their ideology. In corroboration, Isa and Hassan maintain that the artists use their art (verbal and written) "to carry the weight of literary creation of socio-cultural experience that is entirely Nigerian. They do this to project the image of the nation, correct social ills and advance the cause of the generality of Nigerians and to promote national unity, integration and development" (67).

As mentioned earlier, the contemporary oral poet has the unique advantage of entertaining both live and virtual audiences at the same time or different times using a foreign language or a mixture or both local and foreign language to convey the burden of a people's socio-cultural experience. The contemporary oral poet also harnesses the potential of digital technology in the production, processing, retrieving and sharing of verbal arts in such a way that it could be economically beneficial to him, gives him more visibility and, most importantly, enables him to transmit cultural values and ideals to his audience.

Dike Chuwumerije's poems, "The Wall and the Bridge" and "They Say I Come From a Free Country", in this paper, are sampled among his myriad oral performances to highlight the role of the contemporary oral poet in national development, chiefly by introspecting the collective consciousness of Nigerians and correcting negative stereotypes that inhibit national progress. Dike's poems are mainly crafted in accessible language such that some critics argue that his poems are 'spoken words' and not 'poetry', but Tanure Ojaide also says, "what makes good poetry is not its difficulty or obscurity but its expressive mode anchored in figurative language" (111) and, as we will soon find out, Dike Chukwumerije's oral poems do not fall short of Ojaide's prescription.

Both poems that will be looked at are videos accessed via YouTube and were published in 2018. However, "They Say I Come From a Free Country" was a live performance presented during one of his annual Night of Spoken Words (NWS) events in Abuja which was video-recorded and uploaded to a YouTube Channel from where it was republished on several YouTube Channels. Without being recorded it stands as an example of primary orality in which both the poet and his audience share the same space. The particular rendition of "The Wall and The Bridge" chosen for this paper involved a performance of the poets and different actors in different settings playing out the spoken words. This particular production by Ajifa Atuluku involved editing, background music and use of graphics. As such is an example of Ong's secondary orality more commonly known now as digital orature or cybernetic orature.

In "The Wall and the Bridge", the poet sits on a chair and in a flat tone he gently delivers his poem. During the 3 minutes and 18 seconds poem, his voice becomes louder as the poem develops and the accompanying tensions and actions rise higher. Towards the end of the delivery the poet becomes melancholic and the tension is relieved. For the purpose of this analysis, the digital time stamp will be used to locate some of the words that are spoken in the poem although what is visualized may not be adequately represented. The first few words of the poem go thus:

> If a white man turned and called me Nigger
> My blood will boil in righteous anger
> For the evil of discrimination is clearly established
> When a white man treats me like rubbish (0:10 – 0:23)

It is noteworthy that that "wall" and "bridge" are metaphorically used in the poem to connote 'division/discrimination' and 'connection/brotherliness' respectively. Hence, the wall created by the white man here is racism which denies that black man the right to be human. The poet, using the phrase, "righteous anger" makes an allusion to an occasion in the Bible where Jesus had to angrily chase out prostitutes and gamblers in the temple of

worship. The poet's reaction then demonstrates a natural reaction to social injustice. As the poem progresses, the poet uses the same analogy but brings it closer to the national reality in Nigeria:

> If those who were settlers but now indigenes
> Say those who are settlers can't become indigenes
> While the constitution says we are all citizens
> Local Governments keep issuing certificates of origin (0:51- 1:04)

The indigene versus settler dichotomy is responsible for civil disturbances in many places in Nigeria. Most of the crises in Jos, Plateau State, for example boil down to arguments over indigeneship whereas the constitution clearly makes provision for citizenship, guaranteeing all citizens the right to live, work, vote and be voted for anywhere in the country without recourse to one's place of birth or origin. The Igbos and Fulanis whose presence is felt in almost every Local Government in Nigeria are mostly barred from accessing citizenship rights in many places outside their own states.

Closely related to the man-made wall of indigeneship, is the wall of ethnicity, which is perhaps the most perilous paradox of the Nigerian society. While it mainly accounts for Nigeria's plurality and diversity of cultures, it is at the same time responsible for more than half of the socio-economic imbalances and crises in Nigeria. The poet gives an example, "If my brother passed JAMB but cannot go Uni because he is Tiv and not Kanuri and Unimaid has a Quota for its catchment area . . . ." (1:04 – 1:13). Toxic ethnicity is also the cause of the tacit ban on certain inter-tribal marriages owing to ethnic stereotypes. Once again, the poet establishes that tribalism and racism are identical twins as it can be gleaned from the words below:

> I don't get the logic of thinking it is different
> To be tribalistic and then to be racist;
> If you are happy to judge him just hearing his name
> Whatever you call it, my friend, it's the same (2:00 – 2:12)

Using, the apostrophe, the direct address to "you" and at the same time pointing to the viewer, the poet subtly admonishes the viewer to look inwards and judge himself whether he is also guilty of perpetuating ethnicism, racism or any other 'wall' that could impede national development. The poet then charges his audience to be courageous enough to surmount the walls that stand in the way of our collective progress, stating that no culture is older than humanity.

> Where there is no courage to cross this divide
> Where there is no faith to look deep inside
> And stop judging accents and surnames and dressing
> This fire we are quenching will only keep burning
> Which nation can stand dividing its people?
> How can one build on foundation so brittle?
> If we can not see ourselves in each other
> This journey ends here, we are going no further
> For when God made man, he gave him no facial marks
> He did not make Gbagyi, Okun or Angas
> As sure as a black man is just like a white man
> No culture is older than being human (2:00 – 2:53)

On a final note, on this poem, Dike Chukwumerije pauses to drop the last dose of truth, which is the kernel of the poem. That is, both "the wall and the bridge" are products of man's ingenuity and that building "walls" in a multi-ethnic society like Nigeria negatively affects national development whereas building "bridges" quenches tensions and accelerates collective progress. He says:

> This is the truth! Until we accept it
> Our nation will stumble on its broken feet
> The same things can bind us that drive us apart
> For the wall and bridge are both in the heart (2:55 – 3:18)

In the other poem, "They Say I Come from a Free Country", Dike Chukwumerije stands in front of a microphone with his hands folded behind his back wearing a black T-Shirt with the inscription, "THE REVOLUTION HAS NO TRIBE". He begins the poem prosaically from the point of Nigeria's independence, and then reels out the ethnic groups of each successive President or head of State Nigeria has ever had up until 2015 when President Muhammadu Buhari was elected. Here's an excerpt of the beginning:

> Every time I ask, people tell me
> Nigeria became independent in nineteen-sixty
> And furthermore, to show she was truly free
> She became a republic in nineteen-sixty three (0:00 – 0:13)

It is curious to note that Dike has the element of rhyme as one of his stylistics devices. A cursory look at all the excerpts from his poems mentioned here will reveal that fact. The end rhyme in the words above bear witness to this. This feature has helped the author of this paper to break the poem into lines but because the poem is not written is would

rather be awkward to judge the poem on the strength of its lines which were formed arbitrarily by the author. Perhaps it is in this regard that Ruth Finnegan says, "On the surface, this rule of thumb makes it easy for a school child to differentiate quickly between prose and poetry. But while listening it is hard to distinguish as the two genres could be mixed." (1970: 25). Additionally, as a style in this poem, the poet conceals the names of all the Presidents, making reference to their native languages only. For example:

(laughs) But our first Head of State was Igbo
And the next, though a soldier, also, Igbo
Then Angas ruled followed by Hausa
And then came the turn of Yoruba (0:35 – 0:48)

Having reached the present from the first head of stead, the poet poses a fundamental question: "Leaving me with this troublesome thought, where in all this is my own President?"(1:22 – 1:25). Once again, the ethnicity narrative comes to the fore and, regrettably, it takes priority over nationalism. Therefore, the patriotic Nigerian who desires to explore the benefits of being a Nigerian feels out of place once he is out of a tribe.

Tightly knitted with ethnicity is the issue of religion, which, like ethnicity in Nigeria, is both a constructive and destructive tool. Religion has fuelled several crises in Nigeria. Many have killed and maimed in the name of religion. Still on the matter, in the poem, Dike continues:

Nobody asked when we were children,
Before we play, "are you a muslim"
We share a space that nobody claimed
But now you ask me to choose a side
When we were students nobody asked
If north and south could share a desk
If east and west could study together
But now you tell me that I am a stranger
Stranger? Yes! To these ways of thinking
Thinking that tribe is everything
The Niger and Benue, they meet in my hand
I am not an indigene, but this is my land (1:36 – 2:02)

The words above aptly underscore the situation that Nigeria has been grappling with since independence: Mainly, religious intolerance, ethnic chauvinism, and regional discrimination. These factors largely account for the underdevelopment of Nigeria as they hinder unity and progress. Ironically, as the poet recounts, these invisible lines of division are absent among children and students yet they manifest when one is expected to be wiser as an adult. But the poet takes a neutral, detribalized and more patriotic stand by saying:

This is my language, I speak nothing else;
My home is here, I know nothing else;
My tribe is my nation, I have nothing else;
And this is my country, I have nowhere else. (2:07 – 2:14)

Finally, the poet concludes on an optimistic note while admitting the presence of the ethnicity and discrimination. Here, the poet places his hope in the future having been disenchanted with the situations of the past and the present.

And so, while the flag of ethnicity still flutters
Over this land of two shining rivers
And the tribes take their turn to misgovern my country
I look to the future, for I am not yet free (2:51 – 3:04)

Of pertinence is the fact that, from the poems briefly analysed, the role of the contemporary oral poet should not be neglected or overlooked in the development of a nation like Nigeria especially when we consider its capacity to reach thousands or even millions of Nigerians within a short space of time. For example, Dike Chukwumerije's "The Wall and the Bridge" was presented before a live audience of at least a thousand people and was televised by national television stations which had live secondary audience of at least five million people and was further shared on the internet and social media handles to an uncountable number of viewers. The YouTube Channels where the author accessed the both of the analysed videos had a minimum of 20,000 views each as of time they were viewed. This means that when we have more contemporary oral poets consciously directing their art towards correcting societal ills and at the same time fostering national growth, Nigeria will become a better place.

Conclusion

While other professions seek to develop the physical world, the artist primarily aims for the unwiring and rewiring of the mind through cultural reorientation of the people with whom the artist shares a space. Achebe, cited in Adimora-Ezeigbo, instructs that the artist "should march right in front in the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done, for the writer (even oral artist) in the sensitive point in his community"(25). Oral artists' function, besides

entertainment, since primordial times, is also to edify his audience (Longdet and Deme, 315). Although globalisation has brought about new cultural influences and technology, vestiges of the oral tradition still exist even in the digital media and they still find expression such that they function in the society almost in the same way they had functioned in precolonial times. Isidore Okpweho declares that there has been an increasing tendency on the part of modern artists to identify with literary traditions in both content and technique to express their cultural experiences (83). Dike Chukwumerije, through his poems, fights to establish the consciously patriotic Nigerian caught in the clash between globalisation and ethnicity. He then becomes a vivid example of such artist who lend their artistic prowess to the unity, growth and development of Nigeria most especially at a time when mutual suspicion, enthnicity, religious intolerance, nepotism and the like have teamed up to assail one's faith in a country like Nigeria. Dike's contemporary oral poetry offers a broad ray of hope for Nigeria's development.

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