

## ORAL TRADITION AND CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN FICTION: NEW WINE IN NEWER BOTTLES

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### ABSTRACT

The attempt in this essay is to highlight the creative use to which contemporary African writers have put the resources of oral tradition, and the critical implications of the crossbreeding. Three categories of fiction are designated for the investigation: cotemporary fiction with traditional content; traditional narratives in contemporary form, and contemporary fiction with traditional narrative styles. While the enhancements that oral features bring to contemporary African fiction are highlighted, it is also admitted that oral resources have been disastrously overdone by writers in whose inept opinion a work was 'African' to the extent of its elaborate dressing in traditional artefacts. The conclusion is that the traditional aesthetic reservoir is an inexhaustible mine awaiting the next ably prospecting contemporary writer.

**Keywords:** oral tradition, oral literature, contemporary African fiction, African writers, African Literature, Chinua Achebe *Arrow of God*, *Things Fall Apart*, Fagunwa, D.O. *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*, Ngugi wa thiong'o *A Mercedes Funeral*, Kontein Trinya Ngozika Okoye *Chibeze and the Lessons the Sun Taught Him*

The attempt in this essay is to highlight the creative use to which contemporary African writers have put the resources of oral tradition, and the critical implications of the formal cross-breeding; especially of the transcription and transmutation of oral literary features in the written mode. Increasingly, the influence of traditional oral forms on contemporary written African literature has been attracting critical interest. Earlier foreign observers like Dathorne stated, for instance, that the African novelist was "unique in the world" because he stood "close to first sources, to the roots of his tradition," unspoilt by his present age (34). Also, Harold Scheub states in his article, "A Review of African Oral Traditions and Literature," that "Vital to African literature is the relationship between the oral and written word" (1). Later Indigenous observers like Solomon Iyasere have shared the same view. In a frequently cited opening text in his essay, "Oral Tradition in the Criticism of African Literature," that Nigerian critic stated, for instance, that "The modern African writer is to his indigenous oral tradition as a snail is to its shell. Even in a foreign habitat, a snail never leaves its shell behind" (107). The connection between both forms seems so prominent that more recent observers like Elizabeth Gunner also find "a clear interaction between the deeply rooted oral tradition and the developing literary traditions" (*Encyclopædia Britannica*).

Three categories of fiction are considered under the present subject:

1) written works of fiction whose form is that of the cotemporary novel, but whose content, especially source materials, derive largely from the folk tradition, e.g. Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*;

2) written works of fiction whose form (with respect to style) is that of the oral narrative, and whose content is also folkloristic, e.g. D.O. Fagunwa's *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*; and

3) contemporary works whose form and content are those of the urban fiction, but whose narrative style is that of the oral literary tradition, e.g. Ngugi wa thiong'o's short story, "A Mercedes Funeral."

The choice of Chinua Achebe for the present investigation is informed by very obvious reasons: as "the most highly esteemed African writer in English" (Liukkonen); as "one of Africa's most well-known and influential contemporary writers" (Edsitement); as "perhaps the most well known African author" (Wilkerson); as a writer whose "feel for the African context has influenced his aesthetic of the novel as well as the technical aspects of his work" (Culross); as a writer whose "novels are arguably [sic] the most popular and most studied African literary works globally" (Ernest-Samuel 75). For regional balance to Achebe from West Africa, the prominent literary icon from East Africa, Ngugi wa thiong'o, also is imperative; and the choice of his short story is to display how even shorter forms of the written convention are part of the formal interactions under investigation. Fagunwa's work is sufficiently representative of its category and cannot be ignored.

"Folklore" and "oral tradition" are used in this essay as umbrella-terms for all the unwritten traditional expressions of culture, whereas "oral literature" is used to refer specifically to the aggregate of the *aesthetic* expressions existing as part of the general folklore. It is as one would say proverbially that a novel is a book, but all books are not novels; or that whereas one would find books in a library, everything in the library is not a book. In other words, oral tradition is not synonymous with oral literature, even though oral literature exists as part of the general folk tradition all aspects of which are not necessarily creative (Yale, "Definitions...").

Even though there sometimes exists a thin line between religious and recreational literature in traditional culture, the art forms are generally distinguished from the ritual others whose primary function is not entertainment. In the aesthetic repertoire of folk traditions could be found such forms as legends, myths, proverbs, riddles, tales, children's rhymes, songs and plays, which form the popular entertainments usually of non-literate cultures (Wikipedia contributors).

In contrast to written literature, this form is said to be 'oral' especially because it is actualized through action and words, and transmitted mainly by verbal means from generation to generation, notwithstanding the attendant characteristic preservation hazards of memory failure as well as the individual modifications and variations that usually result from transmitter to transmitter. It is understandable therefore that such global initiatives as the World Oral Literature Project, affiliated to the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, should begin processes for the preservation of "endangered oral literatures" (Yale, "Home").

Contemporary Africa fiction has received the most influence from the oral form especially through the imitation of extant and current oral literary styles and, in some cases, from the outright adoption and adaptation of materials from that source. In Chinua Achebe's novels, for example, we find transplanted materials that are not merely decorative in terms of providing an 'African' flavour to the narrative, but are enhancements to the thematic and structural construct of the novel. Mary Ellen B. Lewis accordingly observes, for instance, that Chinua Achebe's adoption of the rival-neighbour-meets-evil-fate tale in *Arrow of God* is "a paradigm for the recurrent theme of Ugoye's relationship with Matefi - the novel itself depicting culture conflict" (47).

Apart from that tale's stylistic and interpretive significance in the novel, the circumstances (or probably more properly, the *occasion*) for the tale's actual 'performance' by Ugoye amplify fundamental features of the oral narrative tradition in which *performance* (dancing, storytelling, etc.) is usually post-harvest, when the art forms most serve their recreational functions (Finnegan 373-4). Similarly, in *Arrow of God*, Ugoye would not tell the children any story as long as there were "unwashed utensils scattered around" (190).

When eventually Ugoye begins to narrate her tale, she starts with a traditional opening formula – "once upon a time." The tale itself is deliberately chosen to fit a specific emotional situation, and to satirically lampoon a particular social relationship – the domestic rivalries between herself and the senior wife, Matefi, in their polygamous home. Ugoye the narrator had to *search* her memory until she "found what she looked for" (190) – a suitable tale about a disliked rival junior wife's only son who forgets his flute on the farm, a farm at the threshold of the land of ghosts. He goes for it at night, in spite of understandable dissuasions. There at the farm, he plays his flute so skilfully and pleases the ghosts with his performance so well that he is rewarded. The senior wife, being jealous of the gifts that the rival junior wife's son had received from the ghosts, instructs her son the next day to ensure he also 'forgets' his flute on the farm. He does, and goes back at night for it. Unfortunately, his greedy impetus, unskilful playing and sourly behaviour, earn him the 'reward' of bruises from the affronted spirits.

As in the oral traditional context where such tales might function as narrative therapies to the teller or the participant-audience, the tale apparently serves a similar psychological function in the novel, to Ugoye the disenchanting junior wife who is identifiable with the character of similar status in the tale she tells. Structurally, thus, the tale provides a paradigm for the conflicts in the polygamous frameworks in that novel, as well as acts as a foreshadowing device for plotting the ultimate retributive fate of the 'antagonist': Matefi the envious, churlish and proud senior wife. Achebe thus also uses the tale to give depth and insight into the psyche of his character.

The multidimensional thematic and structural possibilities of a single oral literary material in contemporary fiction may be further illustrated by considering certain aspects of the narrating of that tale in the premiere 1964 edition of the novel; aspects which were revised out of the second edition. In the earlier edition, Obiageli the daughter, who also functions as part of the audience-participants, frightfully moves closer and closer to her mother at the mention of ghosts and the description of the eerie setting of the story. Like the typical active audience in oral narratives, the children *participate* when the narrator, their mother, simulates the nasal haw-haw-haw speech of the ghosts, with the accompanying

*dramatic gesture* of swaying the head, in typical oral literary fashion.

By such incorporations, Achebe not only achieves structural narrative advantages but also garnishes his fiction with the flavours of the oral form. As for Ugoye the narrator in the novel, the tale also provides, as fiction psychologically does, an escape from reality; an escape into fantasy land of satisfaction and fulfilment - an ideal time and place where things were or are better.

Beyond serving as traditional embellishments to the written form, the resources of oral literature have also proved thematically profound. For example, an incorporated tale, myth, or dream may sometimes be structured to serve as a metaphor for real life, as an imaginative mirror in which the characters, and ultimately the reader and the outer society, might see themselves. In *Arrow of God*, for example, Ezeulu the chief priest has a dream in which he is helplessly unable to challenge the impudent feet that trespass the sanctum of his compound. Ultimately, the dream is a foreshadowing of Ezeulu's helplessness and inability to prevent the disintegration of the traditions of his forebears, of which he is the chief custodian (221-2). In Ngozika Okoye's most recent moralistic children's fiction, *Chibeze and the Lessons the Sun Taught Him*, we find the same attempt at exploiting traditional mythology to contemporary advantage in the employment of a dream that provides the paradigm for assessing Chibeze's happy denouement as he watches the sun "sink into the horizon," having completed its mystic mission to the protagonist, who thereafter rises up himself to "go" (70).

Chinua Achebe the world acclaimed novelist does not deny that his storytelling owes a debt to his traditional background of oral narratives; to a culture where children often sat around the fireplace or under the moonlight to hear sisters, mothers or grandmothers tell tales (Smith). Some of the influence from that past is the traditional linguistic patterns one finds in Achebe's novels, the most common instances being, as tireless student essays would repeat, the use of proverbs. Achebe argues that although "The prose of non-literate peoples is often presumed to consist of folktales, legends, proverbs and riddles," in the Igbo society, with which he was very familiar, "the finest examples of prose occur not in these forms but in oratory and even in the art of good conversation" where those elements, folktales, legends, proverbs and riddles, which are not *in themselves* the best examples of prose, are employed as functions of oratory and good conversation (quoted in Chinweizu et al., 263). This is the case in *Arrow of God* when, in the assembly of the Elders and Ndichie of Umuaro, Ezeulu and Nwaka each try to make their point by employing proverbs, legends, rhetorical questions and other accessories of the rhetorical art. Each also quotes oral history, his father's edition, to support his point. The better orator eventually carries the day, and emissaries are sent to Okperi (14-18). Another example is the speech of Ibe's kinsmen-ambassadors who visit to 'find out' from Ezeulu their 'great in-law' why their kinsman was beaten up and carried off (12).

These language events are, to use Achebe's own words, "in character" ("The African Writer..." 62). It is an oral literary technique of characterization through speech – a character's own speech. In *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*, Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike observe, for example, that in African oral art, character depiction is also achieved through "the use of symbols, appropriate names that sum up a character or give a clue to his behaviour," and by the use of "historical sketches that give either the genealogy of the character or an account of his past deeds, or of significant incidents in his life" (272). In the opening page of *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Achebe employs this technique in the characterization of Okonkwo through reference to his past deeds – his past achievement as the great wrestler who had floored the ex-wrestling champion, who himself is characterised through a praise-name: "Amalinze the cat... whose back would never touch the ground."

In spite of the many creative possibilities they present, not in every work have these resources been explored to the same success in modern African art. They have served some writers merely as tags in the attempt to force an African identity on the works. Nonetheless, whether as inept decorations or aesthetic distortions, folk traditional elements have served the further advantage of providing contemporary writers and readers with varieties. Simply stated, the functions of oral features in contemporary fiction are as multiple as the forms themselves could be.

In the second category of fictions with content that is almost entirely folkloristic, as in the works of Amos Tutuola and Fagunwa, or as in a more universally familiar allegorical fable like *Animal Farm*, the folk traditional elements serve as metaphorical mirrors of a different kind; as deliberately distorted perceptions of real life. They also serve to heighten the sense of the exotic, as does the enchanted atmosphere of the ghostly tale in Achebe's *Arrow of God*. Kotzin has well observed that the references and allusions to fairy tales in novels do "suggest to us that it is not by chance that the novels' characters, settings, plots, and incidents are often similar to those of fairy tales"; that even when the novels might be predominantly realistic, they are made "partially unreal, strange, and romantic" by that content (15). Such incorporations, therefore, serve the writer as a device for creating the atmosphere of the fantastical, and for preparing his reader for events that are not subject to the laws of real life. By that process, Fagunwa achieves the same effect in *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*, and makes the defiance of spatio-temporal laws plausible within the context of the work.

More elaborately than had been cited in Achebe's works, one finds the use of oral literary techniques of characterization in Fagunwa's *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*. For example, the hero's praise name, "Compound of Spells," gives us a particular mystical view of him as well as expectations of the supernatural; expectations that are ultimately not disappointed. Similarly, some of the emissaries to Mount Lamgbodo are characterized by praise names such as "Kako-who-wields-a-Leopard-Club" or "Kako, wielder of the Leopard Club," and "Oluhun-iyo the Voice of Flavours," who is "the finest singer and the best drummer." The names thus function not merely as labels of identification; they project the characters more vividly than otherwise.

Besides its oral tools of characterization, *The Forest of a Thousand Deamons* also employs an oral narrative style demonstrated primarily by the clear speaking voice of a storyteller, not just a first-person participant narrator, as we might speak of the typical novel. By that narrative choice, Fagunwa's fiction

feels more like an address to a listening ear than to a reading eye. As in the oral narrative, there is also an immediate 'audience' in the novel, which is urged to participate in the initial opening glee – a dance. The narrator himself is as conscious of a definite narrative mission as his audience is conscious and definite in their expectation of a narrative event.

As in the traditional context where oral performances sometimes take place post-harvest by the fireside, with food and/or drinks for entertainment, in the third chapter of Fagunwa's work we 'hear' the secondary narrator stating that he has prepared "four baskets of *eko* and ladled meat into dishes" for his audience (35). In chapter four, as in the oral narrative, we find typical *audience participation*, as well as the storyteller's improvisations and private aesthetic deviations from the main narrative, as he spurs the audience, to increase their participation.

True to the cultural context of the narrative, especially with reference to the narrator's immediate (Yoruba) audience, the sequence of the plot is aided by traditional linguistic devices. For example, the narrator states:

For there is truth in this saying of our elders –  
the aggressive man dies the death of war,  
the swimmer dies the death of water,  
the vainglorious dies the death of women;  
it is the trade of the cutlass that breaks its teeth ...

A clear year ate my return from the first adventure. I once again took my gun one night and set my head on the road to the forest of Irunmale... (36).

Fagunwa further uses traditional beliefs and rituals to achieve foreshadowing, as when the ritual offering of kola nuts, the stubbing of a left (maternal) foot with its negative omens, and the close flight of an owl across the narrator's path, all add up to emphasize the prognostications of gloom.

The overwhelming foreboding atmosphere of the work is the result of the totality of folkloristic elements: myths, legends, belief systems, magic (or spells), etc., which also give the work its special local colouring. Because the content, with its narrative style, comes straight from the soil, the story has a more communal appeal, especially also because of the form's characteristic simplicity and familiarity.

It should be noted, however, that unskilled attempts at such incorporation of oral literary materials into fiction could reduce a work into a mere string of folkloristic episodes. Raymond J. Clark notes, on the other hand, that, with the proficient poet, oral resources "take on a new significance and originality" (46).

Even when, by the standards of its own form, a work of fiction may be commended in its use of oral literary materials, it is still defined by the characteristic limitations of script in capturing verbal aesthetics (Trinya 241). For example, in Fagunwa's version of the Ungrateful-Victim story, about the man, the leopard, and the fox (124-130), the narrator states, "With tears in his eyes the man presented his case...," then the fox "gave the man a most unpleasant look and replied to the man in a hardened voice and said, 'You man, do you know....'" On another occasion, the leopard is said to have pointed at the iron cage. In all these instances, the best attempt of the author at presenting the non-verbal elements of the performance is through the use of interlocutory formulas like "he said," "replied... in a hardened voice,"

etc., whereas in an actual oral event, a reported speech like “replied to the man in a hardened voice” might have been unnecessary or otherwise done in direct speech, with an actual “hardened voice” that simulates that character. Also, the narrator could have pointed a hand where a character is said to have pointed in a direction. Unfortunately, all those metalinguistic narrative nuances are impersonally frozen into the ink and paper of the printed text; they remain the writer’s well-intentioned but impotent attempts at accommodating oral-aural effects in the visual medium of the script. The reader-audience gets only the castrated verbal (without the vital non-verbal) elements of the performance, because the transmutation into written form takes away the dramatic qualities that make oral narratives appealing.

Whereas an oral performer might modify a performance according to the *situation* of an audience, there is a rigid finality with the printed text. The oral-type narrator in written fiction cannot select his lexical items to suit the different situations of a reader-audience. He cannot laugh a little less, or aesthetically mellow down his mirth to suit the sober moods of that audience; neither can he respond to their gestures of approbation with an additional effort.

This recognition of the technical limitations of oral elements in the printed text has moved some writers to make the greater use of oral narrative techniques than of oral literary materials. Ngugi’s short story, “A Mercedes Funeral,” is a determined experiment in that respect. There is, in that short story, a narrator with an authorial voice who re-tells the tale of another narrator in the original narrator’s own voice, so that the effect is a predominant speaking voice against the background of an authorial voice. The authorial secondary narrator defines the venue of the narrative event: the Sonia Club. He also gives the specific setting for the performance: a “U-shaped formation of red-cushioned sofa seats” in typical imitation of the traditional crescent-setting for such performances where the audience sits or stands in a half-circle before the narrator. The usual *occasion* for such events, according to the ‘authorial’ narrator, is “Saturday or Sunday evenings after a game of golf or tennis” (113), like the post-harvest seasons for recreational events in traditional societies. As in the more traditional content of Fagunwa’s *The Forest of a Thousand Deemons*, this venue is also “famous... for roasted goat meats” (113).

The initial ellipsis at the start of the main story is supposed to indicate that the ‘authorial’ secondary narrator had not met the beginning of the original story he retells, hence the explainable absence of any traditional opening formula, such as “Once upon a time,” etc. However, the secondary narrator, from whose ‘lips’ we ‘hear’ the story, starts out equally in a way to arrest the interest of his audience:

“If you ever find yourself in Ilmorog, don’t fail to visit Ilmorog Bar and Restaurant: there you’re likely to meet somebody you were once at school with....”

Ruth Finnegan records an English translation of a Yoruba performance with a similar opening format:

What about a great fight that was fought at Ofa-  
Is there anyone here who witnessed a bit of it?

(70).

According to Abu Abarry, the oral narrator can, by directing “a remark to a member of the audience,” try to involve his audience in the action of his story, and “he sometimes arouses their

emotions, causing them to react to dramatic points like jokes, funny words, ridiculous exaggerations, or mimicry” (27). That is what Ngugi attempts in his short story. At various points, his narrator in “A Mercedes Funeral” tries to involve the immediate audience by addressing them directly, e.g. “a record year, *gentlemen*, a record year, that one” (114, my emphasis). The drinks he orders for his audience, and to which he constantly calls their attention, also serve a similar rhetorical function. For example, he says,

...the job which most thought they could execute with unique skill and efficiency was that of the Hon. M.P. of Ilmorog. See what I mean? [Then turning to those whose drinks were running out...] More beer gentlemen? [and turning around thereafter to the barmaid] Hey sister ...sister ... [and finally returning to himself] these barmaids! Baada ya kazi jiburundishe na Tusker (115).

The narrator goes from story, to listeners, to barmaids, back to listeners, and even switches linguistic codes to the common local language, without warning to the reader who is outside the narrator’s context, and so does not share in the advantages of the narrator’s kinesics. In apparent imitation of the living, active, oral narrative present, the storyteller adjusts his acts in relation to the narrative *situations* that arise, but his adjustments or changes are without the usual authorial interlocutory signposts that warn the reader ahead of a sudden change, like, “He turned to the barmaid and said...,” or “He suddenly paused and whispered to...” While their omission confuses the reader (not the listener), it allows the work a flow which is an attempt at capturing the unbroken verbal flow of the oral narrative. At the same time, it slows down the uninformed reader while he weaves between the lines trying to make sense of what is happening.

The Troika of Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike have observed that in the traditional style of oral renditions, the audience are assumed to be participant-listeners. A written story patterned on that model, they therefore argue, should have a master-narrator who, through rhetorical devices, would encourage ‘audience participation’ (Chinweizu et al, 260-1). Ngugi evidently aims at that effect in his imitation of the unbroken oral narrative flow as well as in the abrupt addresses to the audience, without warning to the reader.

Audience participation within the story in “The Mercedes Funeral” is sparse, for the purpose, it is supposed, of maintaining the unbroken narrative flow. We however find a notable instance when one of the listeners remarks that Wahinya, the protagonist of the story, failed to get even a ride in the Mercedes of his dreams. That participant interjection interestingly becomes the cue which prompts the master-narrator to add further clarifying details to his story, in oral narrative style, for the benefit of his immediate listeners (122).

Even though songs, which are common components of oral narratives, are not prominent in this short story, there are lyrical and rhythmic sequences that perform the same function. For example, when the narrator tells of the renewed strength that his protagonist’s legs would acquire, and how light the sack of sugar would then feel on his back, he assumes an ecstatic euphony which appears to be an attempt at capturing the rhythm of the invigorated nimble limbs of which he speaks.

Trees, roots, branches and all flew into the sky high, high, no longer trees but feathers

carried by the wind. Fly away, bird, like one of the courtyard and come again to gather millet grains in the sand (121).

A more deliberate attempt at music may be seen in the use and repetition of idiophones and rhythmic lines; for example,

We sang and danced and wept.  
 Tomorrow. Cha. Cha. Cha. Uhuru. Cha. Cha. Cha.  
 We streamed into the streets of Kampala.  
 We linked hands and chanted:  
 Uhuru. Cha. Cha. Cha. [...]  
 All European jobs.  
 Uhuru. Cha. Cha. Cha. [...]  
 We could hardly wait for our turn.  
 Uhuru. Cha. Cha. Cha (126).

In spite of all the skilful attempts at capturing the flavour of the oral narrative, this short story still remains prose fiction. Unlike the oral narrative which usually has a chronological sequence and a linear plot, this short story has a number of flashbacks and even mild psychological probes. Also, because of the absence of the grotesqueries of fantastical oral narratives, the atmosphere of the story is not 'traditional' in the sense of Fagunwa's *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*. The essentially urban setting and language of narration give it an urban, novelistic appearance. The oral effect resides basically in the speaking voice of the story's narrator.

In conclusion, may it be said that in spite of the peculiar difficulties in representing a multi-dimensional oral form in a uni-dimensional print-form, folk literature has ample resources that could be explored by the creative writer of fiction. Studies of this kind not only reveal the debts of the written form to the oral, but also increase the possibility for the evaluation and interpretation of contemporary fiction. According to Lewis,

The study of the relationship of literature to folklore may bring analysts closer to separating the traditional from the adapted, the original from the traditional – revealing elements of an individual author's creativity (44).

While it is possible to speak so amiably of the creative and critical enhancements that oral features can and still bring to contemporary African fiction, as illustrated in the works of Chinua Achebe, Fagunwa and Ngugi, it must be admitted that oral resources have also been abused, especially by those in whose inept opinion a work is 'African' to the extent of how elaborately it is dressed in 'African' proverbs. In some of such cases, the folkloristic content has turned out like the repellent mask of overdone makeups behind which a plain woman labours to hide a disability. That having been said, folk tradition is still an unscathed and profound reservoir awaiting the next contemporary African or other writer.

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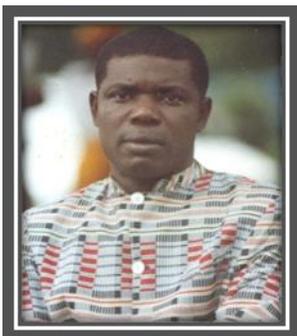
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