

African Literature in the Age of Globalization: Origin, Evolution and Assessment.

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ABSTRACT: As any other continent of the world, the African continent has a literature. This literature which stems from the earlier times consists in telling and communicating important facts and information to the society. This means that African literature falls within the group of art where African artists reflect the socio-political facts of the nation. Indeed, for a meaningful national ideal, a group of committed writers, known as the voice of voiceless people align themselves with the struggle for their fellow countrymen. This is because it was and is still certain that western colonialism has devastated Africa leaving enormous effects on its populations. In so doing, African writers have enlarged the scope of writings in a holistic perspective going from African traditional literature to modern African literature which was born in the educational systems imposed by colonialism. It matters to recall that the slave trade was the starting point of exploitation of Africans by Europeans, an opportunity where millions of Africans were robbed not only to populate Europe but also to work in favour of its continent. However, the end of the slave trade made place to European invasion and conquest which paved the way to European establishment in Africa. Hence, the colonial rule in Africa where African power was challenged and unhappily lost. Accordingly, this paper purports not only to revisit the long and complex history of African literature by showing its evolution but also to assess that literature focusing on African culture which has been perverted by a new faith resulting from the clash of cultures between Africa and Europe; that is to say aspects of colonial impact and actions that contributed to change Africans' behavior and endow them with a new identity.

Keywords: African literature, Age of Globalization, origin, evolution, assessment, and colonialism.

I. Introduction

The culture is at the intersection of any given people. As such, it implies a totality of traits and characters that are uncommon to a people for it differentiates them from other people. Such is the African culture taken as a whole complex which encompasses people's language, beliefs, work, laws, customs, habits, knowledge and any other values and capabilities likely to be acquired by a man as a member of community. Accordingly, commenting on the culture, Aziza holistically approaches the term when he (2001:31) pinpoints that:

Culture refers to the totality of the pattern of behavior of a particular group of people. It includes everything that makes them distinct from any other group of people for instance, their greeting habits, dressing, social norms and taboos, food, songs and dance patterns, rites of passages from birth, through marriage to death, traditional occupations, religions as well as philosophical beliefs.

This conception drives us to draw a parallel between culture and civilization since the latter denotes the way of life of a people. Therefore, it appears clearly that there can be no culture without people or society and no society without culture. Both terms stand as two facets of a same coin and as such they remain complementary and depend to each other. Above all, literature, being a fictitious representation of life within a society intertwines with culture, especially in the African context where aspects of culture were and are still manifest. Thus, it is in this atmosphere of interblending that this paper purports to scrutinize the African literature in the Age of globalization with the main question stated as follows: How is African literature appreciated in the age of globalization? Accordingly, the hypothesis sustaining this interrogation is that African literature doesn't remain static all along its history; what leads us to probe it from its outset. Therefore, to achieve this study we refer to historical and comparative approaches. While the historical approach will help us get back to the history of African literature for it involves understanding the events and experiences surrounding a given work, the comparative approach will help us in assessing African literature at the age of globalization. However, it is universally known that African literature is vast cultivated field although the immensity of what remains to be done.

Indeed, we are far from being pioneers in the study of African literature. A lot of studies had already been conducted on the issue. Thus, approaching this problematic, Wauthier demonstrates that most African fictional texts are written in French and English. Accordingly, in *l'Afrique des africains* (1977) he considers African literature "a fictional production implying the existence of "two africanas inherited from colonization, the English and French one". In addition, Arab, referring to this literature talks of a new form of literature far from being modern by European standards. Therefore, Arab (1982:12) confesses that "African literature is traditional in its form and content with a strong streak of social realism in its fiction and of romanticism in its poetry". On his side, Hadjoui Ghouti (2015) recognizes the role of oral tradition within modern literature. Accordingly, he believes that African oral tradition stands as the strength of modern literature with the use of French and English as languages of the colonizer. In the same vein, Epounda and Bokotiabato-Mokogna (2020) have revealed the place Chinua Achebe occupies in restoring African values which had been vanished or swept away by a new form of governance. As a matter of fact, it is merely oral literature which has been transcribed. Accordingly, they write:

In his writings, Achebe takes on the roles of social commentator and crusader through the conduit of orature to criticize the devaluation of cultural and societal norms. His later novels can be read imbued with the lamentation of the death of moral and social values in Nigerian society; the unspoken degradation of Nigerian immigrants in Europe and America, and the frequency with which corrupt practices have undermined the nation's development. (p. 247).

It can be noticed from this review that the African literature was at the center of these studies. Critics approached some aspects of this literature but in an unexhausted manner. Therefore, to answer the question raised above, we have found it germane to divide the work into three main parts known as: origin of African literature, evolution of African literature and assessment of this literature.

II. Origin of African literature

The expression 'African literature' is so complex that defining it may require much effort. According to most westerners, African literature refers to poetry, plays, and narratives written by Africans in colonial languages. This perception is doubtful for Africans who are rooted in their tradition, with orality as a hallmark in African literature. Therefore, talking of the birth of this literature sends us back to the existence of African people. Historically speaking, humans first evolved in Africa, and much of human evolution occurred on that continent. Consequently, the fossils of early humans who lived between 6 and 2 million years ago come entirely from Africa. This presupposes the existence of the Africans who lived together with a culture as there can be no people without a culture. It is undoubtedly known that a people's culture is as old as the people himself for culture is defined as the way of life of a people. Since the earliest Africans can be traced back to at least the

fourth century AD, the African literature also would not be except. As one can realize, African literature merges into two trends where we have on one side traditional literature, the oldest form from the earliest African inhabitants and the modern African literature on the other side, from colonial invasion.

In this part, mention is to be put on the very first period of this literature, which is precolonial literature taken as any work produced before the invasion of westerners in Africa. To this effect, it matters to recall that this literature draws its roots in oral traditions which reveal the culture, events, achievements and rulers of Africa from this time. Indeed, precolonial period shapes a style of literature painting the harmonious life of people before the era of the European settlement in Africa. This life is openly traced back and presented by writers such as Ngugi Wa Thiongo in *The River Between*, Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, Okot p'Biteck in *Song of Lawino*, Ayi Kwei Armah in *Healers*, Kofi Awoonor in *Guardian of the Sacred Worl: Ewe Poetry*, and many others. These works referring to as forms of art in their literary compositions stand as a response to westerners for their ignorance to African culture. Subsequently, the use of these elements of oral tradition by African writers is beneficial for Africans for the achievement of two crucial purposes: showing their commitment and affirming an African identity that has been denied by westerners.

Indeed, oral traditions or forms are taken as the primary wherewithal of preserving and transmitting knowledge across generations. In other words, Africans use them to transfer history, moral and social values and culture from one generation to the next. They deserve to be not only recalled timelessly but also analyzed regarding the people's cultural experiences. Throughout their implementation we understand the people's attitudes to inevitable phenomena and the depiction of Africans way of life serving at the same time as depository of their beliefs. In this connection, writing on the impact of oral traditions or forms of art in African communities, Bodunde (1992:2) observes that "*the influence which the various elements of oral traditions exert on modern African writing especially poetry is indeed tremendous. In fact...*

traditions can be attributed to the writers' recognition of the functions which verbal art forms perform in the society". More importantly, these elements of oral traditions including folktales, myths, legends, riddles, proverbs and many others educate, socialize, divert or entertain people while explaining the source of existence.

III. Results and discussion

It is agreed that oral literature is often recited or sung, and myth, referring to the old story that meticulously attempts to explain the origin of people manifests likewise. In fact, set in earliest times and presented as events that happened in the past myths exist in every African community. Naturally, through myths African people are told the stories of primogenitors, the beginning of the world as well as the universal concerns of mankind throughout history such as birth, death, afterlife, the whys and wherefores of some natural happenings which are seem enigmatic or difficult to understand. In this connection, Akporobaro's conception of myth stands meaningful when he (2006:46) defines myth as "a kind of story or rudimentary narrative sequence, normally traditional and anonymous, through which a given culture ratifies its social customs or accounts for the origin of human and natural phenomena, usually in supernatural or boldly imaginative terms". Accordingly, myth can be considered as unreal with unspecified time despite its literary or fictional aspect. According to Bascom (1965) and Finnegan (1976) in *Oral Literature in Africa*, myths are considered a "*these prose narratives which in the society where they were told are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past is myth. They are accepted on faith, taught to be believed and they can be quoted as authority in answer to ignorance, doubt, or disbelief*". From this view, myths are to be consumed as such without any form of questioning, and bearing a reliable source of people's answers on African cosmology. Myths are the embodiments of dogma; they are usually sacred; and they are often associated with theology and ritual. Their main character are animals, deities, or cultural heroes, whose actions are set in an earlier world, when earth was different from what it is today, or in another world such as the sky or underworld.

In *The River Between*, for instance, on behalf of Murungu, Ngugi (1965:2) writes: “*This land I give to you, O man and woman. It is yours to rule and till, you and your posterity*”. Indeed, this is part of myth where the author tells how Murungu, the creator grants the land to Gikuyu and Mumbi, being father and mother of Kenyan nation. Therefore, from this myth, readers come to know that the latter did not buy the land but it was granted to them by the Creator himself. This means that there is a kind of religious nexus between Kenyan people and their land since it is from God. Hence, depriving Kenyan people from this land would mean taking away their lives from them and in other words this would resemble “wagging war against God”.

As we can realize, in this myth the land plays a crucial role in a nation and the right to rule and till Kenyan land had been given to Gikuyu and Mumbi and their posterity only. Therefore, Ngugi promotes the value of land for the livelihood of Africans in general and that of Kenyans in particular depends on it. In this context, the land becomes very symbolic to Africans and what has been taken away from them through colonialism is to be blamed. In this connection, Confidence Gbolo Sanka et al (2014:10) surveying Ngugi’s writings on the importance of oral traditions believe that “*in a society where capitalism is allowed to take root and where the wealth of the whole nation is concentrated in the hands of few politicians and the elite group, it is the land that becomes the only means of livelihood for the masses*”. This fictitious aspect becomes tangible under other skies. In fact, approaching this theme of land, Kenyatta (1979:21) underlines its importance vis-à-vis Kenyan people in the following terms:

Communion with the ancestral spirits is perpetuated through contact with the soil in which the ancestors of the tribe lie buried. The Gikuyu consider the earth as the ‘mother’ of the tribe, for the reason that the mother bears her burden for about eight or nine months while the child is in her womb...But it is the soil that feeds the child through a lifetime; and again after death it is the soil that nurses the spirit of the dead.

Naturally, from myth we come to learn that land is the mother of the tribe. In other words, people come from the earth and during the man’s journey on earth he feeds from earth and will go back to the earth everlastingly. In Nigeria likewise, especially in Yoruba there is myth based on the origin of mankind. In fact, it is believed that an ancestor called Oduduwa came from heaven to the earth through a chain, with a bag of sand and a pigeon in hand. He began the work of creation and expansion of the earth with the help of the pigeon at a spot that became known today as *Ile Ife*, meaning “the place where the land began to expand”. Hence, in this myth, *Ile Ife* is seen as the origin of mankind. Myths are counted as one of the forms which help people, mostly new generations to know about the past. However, proverbs also as one form of oral tradition are helpful in African society and as such need to be mentioned.

Proverbs are traditional sayings that express truths based on common sense or experience. To be clear, Cuddon (1977:706) defines a proverb as “*a short pithy saying which embodies general truth. It is related in form and content to the maxim and the aphorism. Common to most nations and peoples, it is a form of expression of great antiquity*”. But proverbs differ from ordinary speech and used in different contexts. In the African society, they are used not only to impart important life lessons, moral values and cultural traditions to younger generations, but also to warn, to rebuke, to blame or shame another person in complaisance. We can find proverbs in either free conversations, mainly between older people and youth or in writers throughout their productions. In a common proverb like “*A short man hangs his bag where his hand reach it*”, we are advised not to stretch our finances in order to compete with others who have advantage in life. Such a proverb is profitable to whoever reads and applies it.

On the other side, African writers also use proverbs to convey their ideas. Ngugi Wa Thiongo is one of them. Indeed, in his *Petals of Blood*, the author writes: “*No elephant is unable to carry his task, however big and weightful* (p.180). This is another way for the author to explain through the MP the load of work that he has to complete as a Member of Parliament and Minister. The least we can keep in mind is that whatever circumstances, proverbs express intellectual and emotional attitudes: disappointment, sympathy, intention, acceptance, as well as moral attitudes: approval, disapproval, appreciation, apology or regret including

congratulations, offers, suggestions, requirements or warnings often uttered by old people and writers in their literary works. Accordingly, Epounda and Bokotiabato Mokogna (2020:251) raising the essential character of proverbs write:

There are proverbs for every occasion, proverbs to suit every situation and to light up every experience. Every significant affirmation can be strengthened with a proverb; every customary value, belief, attitude or outlook can be supported with proverbs, social problems and personal difficulties can be settled by an appeal to the sanctioning proverbs. Even contradictory views can be sustained by an appeal to different proverbs.

Apart from myths and proverbs, oral tradition is also manifested through folktales that we take profit to deal with shortly.

One of the most important and popular forms through which oral tradition is manifested is folktale. As a matter of fact, folktales are imaginative narratives constructed by people all along their existence, although much reputed in old times where they originated. Like proverbs which are adapted to any circumstance, folktales may be about human beings or any other creatures. They are fictional stories originating in popular culture passed down over years, mainly by older people to the young generation playing moral or didactic roles. Folktales is part of country life and the best time for their implementation is the moonlight night where everyone is back from his daily occupations. It matters to note that African earlier writers drew inspirations from folktale traditions about animals, immediate environment, legends, and daily situations to write their novels. Thus, *Forest of a Thousand Demons*, *The Palm Wine Drinkard* and *Things Fall Apart* respectively written by Amos Tutuola, D.O. Fagunwa and Chinua Achebe serve as evidence of the preceding wordings. Indeed, in one way or another, everybody participates in oral tradition. This is a true fact in the African context known as a communal experience. In this case, Agatucci's words are meaningful when he (1998:5) writes: "*oral African storytelling is essentially a communal participatory experience. Everyone in the most traditional African societies participate in formal or informal storytelling as interactive oral performance*". In the same vein, recognizing the influence of oral tradition in the works of female writers such as Bessie Head, MacKenzie (1989: 17) observes:

... She is writing from within a culture with no written history, where storytelling and the oral tradition generally are the means whereby the community explains itself. Contemporary village life displaces the oral tradition but is itself characterized by a milieu of informal gossip and tales.

Finally, folktales are of great significance as in the end of the story, the listeners go back home with a changing attitude for what they have listened to excoriates the vice and supports, appreciates or encourages the behavior. It is germane to note that a folktale always ends with an advice given to the audience. That is why parents should be accustomed to telling stories to their children for they help in the upbringing of these latters. Similarly, in an interview with Mike Ejeagha, Akporobaro (2006) presents the value of folktales in the following terms: "*Folktales are very important as they are used to educate our people. They are full of moral lessons and thus, I cannot conclude my tales without pointing out the moral lessons that they*

carry". Consequently, at the end, children who have listened to a tale should efficiently summarize it by saying what they have learnt from the tale.

Beyond every forms of oral tradition considered, other forms of no less important flourish the literary productions of many writers and are still topical in African societies. Some of them are legends, songs, and riddles that also embellish artistic works of Africans. Legends, set in the past refer to stories passed down orally from one generation to the next and based on heroes. In fact, legends tell stories of true happenings and people who actually lived in the history of a particular community. Truthfully, legends have universally inspired writers for their literary works since actions of famous leaders, kings and warriors of a given community are often

woven in legends. Songs also play a vital role in the daily life of Africans; this justifies their existence in literary works of African writers. In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Ikemefuna realized whether his mother was dead or alive through a song. Indeed, the young boy struck up the song in his mind and walked to its beat knowing that if the song ended on his right foot, his mother was alive and if it ended on his left, she was dead. Then, he (1958:42) intoned:

Eze elina, elina!
Sala
Ezeilikwa ya
Ikwaba akwa oligholi
Ebe Danda nechi eze
Ebe Uzuzu nele egwu
Sala

Likely, it ended on his right, so his mother was alive as well. Through this song Ikemefuna got news of the state of his mother but above all, songs have moral and educative values. Finally, riddles also being part of rhetorical form of oral literature contribute to the expansion or manifestation of oral tradition. Though enigmatic questions or descriptions, riddles are wrapped up in a figurative language with a view to adapt or initiate children into the culture of their own society and as such the process requires two contestants either as individuals or as groups.

If a man is born, grows up and dies, the African literature also as a science was born, has progressed but will not probably die unless the whole humanity extinguishes. This is to say that as long as the man exists, he will keep on thinking, having inspirations from his environment. In other words, African literature does not stand on the spot but it is rather evolutionary going from oral literature to written literature or from indigenous literature to Modern African literature with colonialism as foundation stone. As a matter of fact, colonialism took an aggressive policy towards indigenous culture and consequently urged a critical or revolutionary

reaction in the African writer; a new form of literature has emerged. In this connection, Ngugi Wa Thiongo's view (1975: XV) is significant when he writes:

This form of literature is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces that cannot be ignored, and then has grown against the glory background of European imperialism and changing manifestation, slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism.

To tell the truth, African literature is on progress or motion. Indeed, the oldest literary works which dated back from about the fourth century shifted into written African literature from the twentieth century with Chinua Achebe, the Father of Modern African Literature who won The Booker International Prize for his literary career in 2007. However, it is worthwhile noting that the Modern African Literature was born in the educational systems imposed by the colonial domination policy drawn from European culture rather than existing African realities. Thus, to show the evolutionary or evolving character of the African literature at the age of globalization, some significant or decisive stages of this literature should be observed: first of all, the pre-colonial African literature, a stage referring to the works produced by Africans before colonization. In this literature, most of works reflect on African culture before it was diluted by colonization. Put differently, this period preceded the area of the westerners' settlements in Africa and presented the harmonious life led by natives before their encounter with Europeans. This rural life is portrayed in *Things Fall Apart* written in 1958 by Chinua Achebe.

Then comes the African colonial period, relatively short (roughly 1870-1960) which had heavy, lasting and significant influence on economic, social, and political affairs leading to what Nkrumah called neocolonialism. The colonial period had been a form of political consciousness, a period during which the emergence of a

popular patriotic nationalism took place and the rising of the anti-colonialist policy in Africa. This period is thoroughly painted by Ngugi Wa Thiongo in his *A Grain of Wheat*, 1967. After colonial period we have the post-colonial period. The fiftieth and sixtieth were the age of African freedom as many countries threw off the yoke of European dominance. The continent was nurtured in radical political thought such as apartheid. The writers had come out of their silence and were alarmed to depict the political and social discomfort faced by Africans. One of them is the South African writer Ezekiel Mphahlele with novel entitled *Down Second Avenue*. Finally, the today literary period characterized by hopelessness. Indeed, in the age of globalization though started in the 1820s and in the late 19th century and early 20th century, writers critically paint with horror and despair the future of the young generation who instead of dreaming or struggling for a better Africa of tomorrow, they let themselves crept under European malicious practices which unhappily generate stagnation of the continent economy, therefore raising the rate of employment within nations. The cry of hopelessness can be heard in some African writings such as Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1966) and Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* written in 1968.

From the above analysis, we can affirm that the African literature has been revolutionary as it goes from period to period with the two last periods being a series of distinct waves of technological and institutional change. Actually, the today's issues are basically global requiring nothing less than concerted and planet wide action. The age of globalization with the use of colonial languages prompted the conversion and proliferation of an unprecedented written productions as they were previously oral. It is obvious to admit that in this age a new trend, known as modern African fiction had been implemented but an important part of African people remains in close contact with oral traditions and traditional cultures.

Taking into account the above outcome, we can say that the African literature lies on oral traditions and written form considered as two forms of expression with two different mediums of communication. In the African context, none of these two forms is to be singled out as they contribute to expand both African traditional values and the African today issues. However, this doesn't prevent us to underline that oral form transmits pure authenticity and evidence rather than written form; therefore most African people would trustfully resort to it if they want to remain faithful to their identity. Indeed, oral form represents a source for African people who must be aware of destiny which requires the background information helping them to face the today's problems and build the future.

IV. Conclusion

As a conclusion, it is germane to recall that this study centered around the problematic of African literature, especially on the view we can have on African literature in the age of globalization. It comes out from this analysis that African literature is as old as its people, dated back from the fourth century with oral traditions as primary wherewithal of preserving and transmitting knowledge across generations. It has been demonstrated that this literature has not been static but rather developed through periods: from precolonial period to the today period passing through colonial and post-colonial periods. To buttress our reasoning, the characteristics tied to each period has been indicated as well as literary productions devoted to each period. The least we can keep from this study is that African literature has a very long and tricky history with colonialism as a turning point of the continent history for the continent was under the pressure of foreign influence for years. In the age of globalization African literature navigates between two shores which influence each other or undergo reciprocal influence with much esteem for the first shore as it reflects the earlier form of expression used by African people.

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