

**The African Verbal Art Artist**

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### Abstract

This paper probes three broad characteristics of the African verbal art artist, namely: the sources from which materials are derived for oral performance, the aesthetics of the artist's oral art, and the functional role of the same. Bias attention is paid to the verbal art artist among the Tivs in Nigeria in West Africa and particularly to the artist's art of oral poetry, although references to other art forms and other African peoples or places are made without being heavy-handed with the geographical zones of the continent. It is postulated that the sources where ideas are gotten to produce oral poetry are from personal and social experiences; the amusement provided by the artist through verbal art has a modicum of usefulness; and the utility of the art of the verbal artist also offers diversionary.

**Keywords:** verbal art, oral literature, literature, oral poetry, body performance, aestheticism, utilitarianism.

## Introduction

Verbal art is not the same as the normal or ordinary speech of human beings. Verbal art is deliberately and skillfully undertaken. Indeed, it is true that, even without the intention to be artful in speech, a human being can sometimes achieve oral artistry. But the 'verbal art' of the verbal artist is *always intentionally and artistically executed*, not in the act of speaking per se but in that of oral performance. (Body performance also has its place in the art of the verbal artist). Interestingly, in an article entitled, "Verbal Art as Performance", Richard Bauman makes no distinction between "performance" and "speaking". Hence, he lumps the two together, saying that "performance is a mode of language use, a way of speaking" (293). It is not unclear that Bauman is referring to ordinary speech, for he does not explain that he is using the term speaking in any kind of elastic sense, which is of course misleading. Nor is it nebulous that although "singing" is, figuratively, kin with "speaking" as oral communicative mediums, they are nonetheless independent of each other as human transmittal activities.

Further, verbal art is similar to oral literature, although there are important differences between them. While verbal art operates essentially within the domain of spoken or oral art, oral literature takes into account all the verbal art and non-verbal art of society. Anagrams, Parodies, Puns, Riddles, Tongue Twisters and so on are illustrative of verbal art, whereas Masquerades, Dances, Hand Drums, Flutes, Signal gongs and alike things when put to action are fine exemplars of non-verbal art and therefore of oral literature.

But the "verbal art" and "oral literature" labels are not without controversies. In a truly interventionist and authoritative book, *Oral Traditions and The Verbal Arts*, Ruth Finnegan has gone over a whole range of viewpoints that have prevailed regarding the existence and use of these terminologies with a fine-toothed comb. Likewise, she has related the merits and demerits which the designations offer and how the labels currently fare. Selectively, Finnegan, borrowing from W.R Bascom's article, writes that

the name verbal art was first used by W.R Bascom as fit and proper for folktales, myths, legends, proverbs, riddles, and other literary types (9), which is of course one of the gains of it, and that it is a less disputatious appellation though its deficiency is that at first sight verbal art means a restriction to words only.

As for oral literature, all the gainful views which Finnegan has assembled, an item of which is that oral literature “emphasises the ‘literary’ or artistic aspect” (9), show one overriding thing, that oral literature is broader in scope. Even so, again selectively, Finnegan holds that “some argue that it is self-contradictory (how can ‘literature’, etymologically implying writing, be *unwritten*?)” (8). This is, in fact, why the Ugandan scholar and theorist, Pio Zirimu, has made a brilliant but not very successful case to change the terms ‘oral literature’ to ‘orature’ so as to safely incorporate oral renditions into the scheme of things. And yet there is some measure of appropriateness in the seemingly contradictory phrase, ‘oral literature’, since the study and preservation of oral practices are very largely contingent on written documentations, and it is by means of the received knowledge from a formal study of ‘literature’, from Western canons that educated Africans learn about their ‘orature’. In other words, it is through this received knowledge from a formal study of literature of Western canons that the learned African can identify a metaphor in an African oral performance, be it an oral poetry rendition or an oral narrative display.

But what, actually, is a neat definition of verbal art? Richard Nordquist explains that “the term *verbal play* refers to the playful and often humorous manipulation of the elements of language. Also known as *logology*, word play, speech play, and verbal art” (“What is Verbal Play? Glossary of Grammatical and Rhetorical Terms” Web n. pag). What is immediately apparent in Nordquist’s description is that verbal art is the same as verbal play, speech play, and other synonymous terms. Beyond this, however, Nordquist does not say much else. For example, he does not convey the nature of this manipulation; or, what elements of language, or samples of them, he is referring to.

Lacking still in the definition are the sorts of art forms through which verbal art operates, and whether what are known in 'literature' as Drama, Prose or Narrative, Poetry or Lyric that are within the domain of 'oral literature' in the forms of Masquerades, Folktales or Storytelling, and Songs or Chants respectively can 'all' conveniently be said to exist in verbal art. Strictly speaking, leaving aside Drama, the rest can.

In this essay, therefore, the term 'oral literature' will be used in a limited sense with such variants like oral performance, spoken art, and oral art as synonyms for verbal art. The question of what is the art in verbal art will also be considered.

### **Sources of the African Verbal Art Artist**

Many sources exist from which Tiv oral poets derive materials for compositions of their oral poetry. These sources are not alien from what is already known in literature as themes and are or can be applicable to oral literature. In other words, the sources of the songs of Tiv oral poets are the ideas with which they compose, or, the situations of life out of which the oral poets extract materials for their oral renditions in much the same way of thematic handling of writers within the sphere of literature. This must also be the case with the Igbo oral poet, the Ibibio oral poet, the Senegalese oral poet, the Gambian oral poet, the Kenyan oral poet, etcetera, etcetera. For as Ngugi wa Thiongo', the powerful and revolutionary Kenyan writer, argues: "literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum; it is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society" (Killam 123).

But although the sources or situations from where Tiv oral poetry is derived by oral bards of the tribe are many and varied, attempt can still be made to loosely categorize some of them here under generic names of types of poetry alongside those with already known identities, namely: War Oral Poetry, Work Songs, Didactic Oral Poetry, Religious Oral Poetry, Funeral Songs, the Panegyric or Praise Oration, Therapeutic Songs, Political

Oral Poetry, and Oral Poetry of Abuse or, as Moses Terhembra Tsenongu quite appropriately terms it in Tiv in his bewitching article, “The Five Ages of Tiv Oral Poetry”, the “*ibiamagh* Poetry” (82). In fact, an oral poet can be regarded as a certain kind of oral poet vis-à-vis the song(s) he has sung. Gbasghera Dajoh, for instance, can be considered an *ibiamagh* poet because he has sung an oral poem of abuse in which he insults someone with whom he was displeased.

Taken together, as their names imply, War Oral Poetry is sung during war to stir the hearts of men to fight fearlessly in order to defeat the enemy. Those sung during work are so done to encourage hard-work for the eventual completion of the task at hand. Didactic Oral Poetry, of course, serves to inspire good conduct and to teach a moral. Religious Oral Poetry serves to praise the creator whom the oral poet believes in whereas Funeral Songs mourn the dead. Typically, the Panegyric or Praise Oration is performed by oral poets to curry the favour of kings in their palaces. Therapeutic Songs are sung to ameliorate the plight of the very oral performer or to lessen the painful situation of the affected person described in the song. The Political Oral Poetry is usually composed by an oral poet whom a political party has contracted for political campaigns. The Oral Poetry of Abuse or the *ibiamagh* Poetry plays out sometimes as spat between Oral Poets and at other times as an attack by an oral poet on an individual with whom rivalry over, say, wooing a woman for marriage prevails, particularly if the concerned individual beat the oral poet to it thereby hurting his pride. Mention must be made here in passing that among the Tivs, there is hardly a female oral poet, hence the use of the pronoun “his” in the preceding sentence. But many oral bards have existed in Tiv land, some of whom are: Aginde Agena of Gaav, Bam Ginde of Mbativ, Maza Nomhwange of Mbawuar, Tarker Golozo of Mbativ, Iyough Ute of Mbagbera, Tondu Kumbul of Mbatiev, Mtsem Acaver of Mbakor, Gbasghera Dajoh of Mbakor, Ameer Ijorpo of Ukum and Obadiah Okor of Ukum (Tsenongu 78-90).

### **The Aesthetics of the African Verbal Artist's Art**

In considering the aesthetics of the African verbal artist's art, two varying views merit attention here.

The first is by Chinua Achebe, who has declared in an essay, "Africa and her Writers", that "Art for art's sake is just another piece of deodorized dog-shit" (9). From the same paragraph where this is extracted, Achebe further reports: "Our ancestors created their myths and legends and told their stories for a human purpose(including, no doubt, the excitation of wonder and pure delight); they made their sculptures in wood and terracotta, stone and bronze to serve the needs of their times" (19). Inferences can be drawn from Achebe's statements which ultimately lead to the following questions: first, does art wholly exist in the service of itself, or, does it also serve a human need? Second, by enclosing his view on the aesthetics of old African art in bracket, isn't it glaring that Achebe conceives the place of the diversionary and entertainment aspect of art as secondary, not primary, to his ancestors?

In response to the first question, it is true that in literature the doctrine of art for art's sake exists. But whether or not this doctrine has validity remains to be debated. In a way, while it is true that a Tiv traditionally performed song on its own has not and cannot fix any personal or social problem, and so there is validity in enjoying art or oral literature for the sake of it as the doctrine holds; it is nevertheless safe to say that the utility of a performed song is undeniably present, however marginal or infinitesimal, because there is the likelihood that the song will serve to delight someone. Answer to the second question is that Achebe deliberately brackets his perspective on the aesthetics of ancient African art, which shows his thinking that the utilitarianism of the art of African ancestors was the prime reason for their artistic renderings. Now, even though one did not live in the times of the ancestors, it can be deciphered from careful reasoning that the first artistic motivation or impulse of the ancient artists would have been predicated on an individual or group, although not 'group based' as to merit the

sweeping generalization of 'African ancestors' anyway. Whether an art work was born of need or pleasure depended on the very initial motivation or situation of the concerned individual or group. It also depended on what art form or mood was involved. Among the Tivs, for example, the following tongue twister offers no practical help, except play whose very slight usefulness---which is to amuse--- is to the human health: *Ade de Adenger, Adenger nga dengeh a dengeh*. The interpretation of this is *Ade leave the Garden eggs alone, the Garden eggs are only gardening*.

Among the Igbos of *Things Fall Apart*, an atmosphere of pastoral idyll is evoked as shown below under which little happy children sing to the rain:

Gradually the rains became lighter and less frequent, and earth and sky once again became separate. The rain fell in thin, slanting showers through sunshine and quiet breeze. Children no longer stayed indoors but ran about singing:

The rain is falling, the sun is shining,  
Alone Nnadi is cooking and eating (28)

The mood of the song is unmistakably one of happiness and provides no utility besides entertainment and playfulness which, again, is very little beneficial to humans.

Thus, these two analogies from the Tiv and Igbo tribes give the aesthetic role of art a primary place.

By contrast, if a wood carver has need of a mortar because his wife no longer has a good one in which food will be pounded for consumption and then he beautifully carves another mortar, the primary role of art in this instance is certainly that of utilitarianism.

Similarly, the women's song of empathy performed by Okonkwo's uncle, Uchendu, at the end of chapter fourteen of *Things Fall Apart* is certainly propelled by a useful need, the need to console in times of distress. It reads: "For whom is it well, for whom is it well? There is no one for whom it is well" (108).



The second view is by Isidore Okpewho who reflects in his article, "The Aesthetics of Old African Art", that:

The moonlit square has for ages been the setting for songs and stories whose primary intent was entertainment, more so it would seem than edification. A large number of proverbs and quips survive today, and in many of them the outstanding feature is more the style than the content: they impress us more for their technical appeal than as fossils of a complex worldview. (*Okike 38*)

There is no need to over-flog the issue here. This point of view which Okpewho expresses is common place in African Literature. However, as enunciated above, the entertainment or utility of art varies from one individual to another or from one group to another. It is also premised on what art form is involved and what mood or situation is at work. But let it be borne in mind that the utilitarianism of art or the pleasure it offers are very closely linked. Let it also be noted that it is in oral performance of the verbal arts accompanied by facial gestures, costume, (and dance/body performance) of the verbal artist that the aesthetics of spoken art is fully exploited and realized. This is because the human body is an art site. In other words, any part of the human body can be trained to be artistic. So, the artist uses the resources of his body to entertain his audience; and, it is the artist's skillful manipulation of voice and language (and body) that constitute the art in 'verbal' art.

### **The Functional Role of the African Verbal Artist's Art**

As it has already been demonstrated, art has not only the role of amusement but also that of utilitarianism one of which is to communicate or advocate or propagate. Propagation is a communication or an advocacy to influence a person or persons to take a certain decision or behave in a particular way. And it is as much a need as the wood

carver's for a new mortar; or, even, someone's need to adopt the Tiv tongue twister in whatever form and for whatever purpose. But to set the record straight, although propagation can be classed with the wood carver's need under the utilitarianism of art, it is not exactly the same need as the wood carver's. One clear distinction is that propagation persuades whereas the wood carver's need does not. Nor is propagation tongue twisting, the latter being actually playing with words. Among the Tiv people, Political Oral Poetry are usually verbally performed and taped by oral poets who are commissioned by political parties for the purpose of electioneering campaigns, to propagate the validity and legitimacy of heads of parties and the parties themselves, with success sometimes.

But that is not all. Sometimes, Tiv oral poets communicate their own experiences of ontology which, besides the songs serving as escapism from the harsh realities of existence, they also function as therapy both to listener and performer. A case in point is Ameer Ijorpo. According to Tsenongu in an essay, "Creativity and Disease: Tiv Oral Poets and Poetic Self-diagnosis":

Ameer hailed from MbaGar sub-clan, Ingyenev clan of Ukum district in Ukum Local Government Area. He started composing in the mid-1940s in the *ibiamagh* mould and established himself, before his death in 1994, as one of the all-time greats in Tiv oral poetry. ...Throughout his life, Ameer had a problem with his eyes. In fact, it was this problem that made him to disengage from the Nigerian Civil War. Ameer therefore often referred to the problem of his eyes in his poetry. (*The Ker Review* 95)

The following lines, taken from one of Ijorpo's oral poems and translated accordingly by Tsenongu, attest to the poet's plight and how he has used poetry as an outlet to communicate and lament his misfortune:

Ter Aondu nam ican yam ka ken uya je ee;  
*The Lord God apportioned my suffering for me from  
my womb-days ee;*

Shi nam mliam ma vaan; M vaa ior gege ashe pirim...  
*He also apportioned mourning for me; how I have mourned for people till my eyes  
are blinded [with tears]... (The Ker Review 96)*

Needless to say, a Tiv audience listening to this performer can be comforted knowing full well that they are not alone in suffering the harsh experiences of life, especially if the song is well sung in which case gifts are given to the oral poet in appreciation of his art. When a song does not appeal to an audience, comments of disapproval are of course made. So, the Tiv audience/society serves to appreciate and reward good oral art as well as to disapprove of the bad. Besides, verbal art is also playful. But, as David J. Minderhout, has titled a book with great shrewdness, *Serious Play: Verbal Art and Performance*, verbal art is not just a play; it is a *serious play*. Thus, art also has both personal and social function, even if its effect is predominantly very little felt.

### **Conclusion**

The African/Tiv verbal art artist is undoubtedly an entertainer and a good advocate or communicator into the bargain. The sources where the oral artist derives materials for verbal renditions are the ideas for the artist's composition of songs, which are taken from either personal or social experiences of life. In the process of entertaining, some dint of usefulness is made manifest, namely that of offering escapism, even if momentarily, from the hardship of life lived daily. Of the functional role of verbal art, even when a Tiv oral poet is campaigning for a political candidate by means of a song,

the piece of oral poem being performed still affords the listener/audience pleasure and delight. It is, therefore, the initial impulse or mood to create or the art form in question that determines what prominent position either aestheticism or utilitarianism, the two functions of art, occupies. Thus, although body performance is enormously useful to the verbal artist's art, verbal art is ultimately and fundamentally oral performance and Tiv oral poets are and have been such consummate African verbal art artists.

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