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Orature and Oratorical Teaching Strategies in African Literature: The Examples of Laye Camara and Chin Ce

OUR paper seeks to examine some oral tales selected from various regions of Cameroon which affirm time old values in communal African existence such as individual deference to public good or the larger welfare of members of society. It then assesses the literatures of Laye Camara and Chin Ce which, by fusing traditional elements in transitional societies, illustrate the cultural awareness that touches upon the exalted role of the artiste in his community. It argues that both prose works adopt oratorical strategies of African literary education in order to reaffirm some of Africa's positive traditions, or, to critique changing behavioural traits that corrode traditional ethos and impinge on genuine development of society.

Tradition and African Literature

Traditional literature in Africa (orature) serves as an instrument for examination of individual experience in relation to the normative order of society. It was used, and is still being used in several parts of rural Africa to chart social progress or to comment on how society adheres to or deviates from general community aesthetic. Seen in this light, traditional literature as a creation of the imagination ultimately derives its material from the realities of society. As mirror of the society it enables the

community to teach, entertain, and explore the ambiguities of human existence. The substance of human experience out of which orature is created is that which has made sufficient impact in the community to excite the imagination of the people to literary creativity. One of these experiences is civic responsibility and leadership training which is sadly lost in modernised or postcolonial environment.

Quite often in traditional literature characters are classified in three categories –heroes, antiheroes and villains. Effective leadership is usually entrusted in the hands of a heroic character. The hero is one who finds personal satisfaction in the service of his community or one who has offered invaluable services to the community. Of course, there may be monarchies and dynasties with their autocrats, dictators and despots. But the leader, where there was one, was somebody who must submerge his private interests in the pursuit of national ideals which were also in harmony with universal morality. The point we intend to make is that the ideals of good leadership are fundamental to the concerns of African oratory. African folk tales reveal three broad attitudes of communal attitudes towards leadership and social change as reflected in the three tales we have selected for study below.

Tale no. 1 Tortoise the wise

In Tale Number One¹ from the North West Province, tortoise rogue and wheeler-dealer wisely accepts the authority of the lion. One day, lion, goat and tortoise go on a hunting expedition at the end of which they kill a deer. The meat is brought to the home of the lion for sharing. Lion calls on the goat to share the meat. Goat, on its part, decides to share the meat into three equal parts. Lion is angry that goat has treated him as an ordinary

citizen rather than a king and therefore strikes goat with such force that he dies. Lion then turns to tortoise and asks him to proceed with the sharing of the meat. Tortoise divides the meat into two parts-one very large and the other very small. He gives the large part to the lion and keeps the small one for himself. Lion is happy with the “wisdom” of tortoise and asks him where he learnt how to share meat so well. Tortoise points at the dead goat and replies, “by looking at my dead companion”.

The lion in the above tale represents the benevolent despot who will do everything to ensure that his personal interest is served first and his authority is enforced very strongly. It is obvious that the lion will want to see the status quo maintained and entrenched so that he can continue to exploit and oppress the masses unchallenged. While the lion's aversion to change is motivated by greed, tortoise's conservation is caused by fear. Tortoise here represents the majority of Africans who are disgusted with their self-seeking leaders but at the same time will do nothing concrete to remove them from power for fear of the attendant consequences. It is common for this group of socio-passive Africans to point at social stability by focusing upon peace, order, continuity and regularity as basis for their being conformist. They also argue that since the outcome of political innovation cannot be predicted with absolute certainty, it follows, logically that the known ways should be preferred to the unknown. Put differently, “Whatever is, good, however imperfect it may be”. Nevertheless, such resistance to political change based on the refusal to share, contradicts the fundamental principle of collective responsibility in traditional African society.

Tale no. 2. “How Vulture turned Scavenger”

Tale Number Two² from Garoua in the North province of Cameroon is essentially about the use of force to overthrow tyranny thus:

Once upon a time, all birds of the sky assembled to discuss on how to depose vulture, their leader-turned-despot. Parrot, their spokesman stepped forward to address them. He began by thanking them for answering his call. He then went into the heart of the matter. He said: “It is now seven years since we gathered here and unanimously elected vulture as our chief. At that time, we all thought that vulture could protect us and take care of our interests better than hawk. That was why we chose him. But, since then, vulture has proved to us that the reverse is true. He does not dialogue with us any more. Rather he prefers to maintain an imperial distance from us. He taxes us arbitrarily and seizes our properties with impunity. Whenever any of us raises his voice in protest, he is visited that very night by the owls, his dreaded secret police. I say enough is enough. Vulture must go”.

Sparrow took the floor and said, “Parrot has spoken very well. We all agree that vulture must go. The question is, how?”

Crow cut in and said, “Where there is a will, there is a way. Vulture may be powerful, he may have bat as his spy and the owls as his secret police. But they cannot fight all of us if we stand as a group. Therefore let us all march to the palace and drive vulture away”.

So all the birds marched to the palace. With no Bat to warn him of the approaching danger, vulture was taken completely by surprise and had to run away to the desert where he now lives on carrion away from the other birds.

Although this is an aetiological tale meant to explain why the

vulture scavenges, it can be used to illustrate the use of violence to overthrow tyranny. It is to be noted here that the birds did not use violence for its own sake. Rather they resorted to it when all other peaceful means have proved ineffective. In their reaction, the birds represent the group of political activists who reject the status quo because it has thwarted their expectations.

The necessity of violence as a means of expressing and achieving political preferences has been emphasized in struggles for liberty throughout the world. In fact, most of the great political changes the world has known have taken place under violent conditions. African traditions while acknowledging the fact that violence may pay off where other means have failed, are constrained to reject coercive, costly and disruptive actions whose results are uncertain.

Tale no. 3. “Tortoise rides the Elephant”

Between the two extremes of the political spectrum discussed above is an intermediary group of Africans who encourage political change provided it is brought about peacefully. This is reflected in tale Number Three³ from the Bakossi of Kupe Muanenguba Division in the South West Province of Cameroon.

Elephant was always boasting that he is the biggest animal and, therefore, the king of the forest. Tortoise, on his part, countered by saying that kingship depended not on size but on wisdom and since he was reputed to be the wisest animal, it followed, naturally that he was king of all animals.

Elephant could not understand why his authority should be challenged by such a nonentity as tortoise so he put the case before the other animals. A date was fixed for the hearing and the elephant waited anxiously for the day so that the question of

his authority would be resolved once and for all.

On the day of the hearing, all the animals assembled at the market place. Elephant paraded majestically waiting for the decision to be taken. But the hearing could not begin because tortoise was absent. Enquiries were made about his whereabouts but no animal seemed to know anything. At last, lizard ventured to say that on his way to the market place that morning, he passed through tortoise's house and found him to be in bed writhing with pain. When he asked what was wrong, tortoise told him that he had fallen down a palm-tree that morning and broken a leg. As a result he was unable to attend the hearing on foot. When elephant heard that, he offered to go personally to bring tortoise. But when tortoise saw elephant coming he knew immediately that his trick had worked. The great elephant had fallen into his trap!

Elephant told tortoise that he heard of the accident, and offered to come and carry him to the market place. Tortoise thanked him and pleaded with him to be gentle as he was in great pain. Elephant agreed. He carried tortoise and moved gently. But, as soon as they got near the market place, tortoise began to act like a royalty and made as if he was giving orders to the elephant. The elephant reached the market place and carefully stooped for the tortoise who now descend in majesty. He was hailed by all as king. When Elephant realised what had happened he became quite furious. But it was too late. Tortoise had been acknowledged king.

Of particular importance is that Tortoise had used his intelligence, and not brute force, to carry out the most successful coup d'etat against the elephant. The emphasis here is on the universality of intelligence which is the basis of equality among men and the justification for democracy as a political system.

Modern Oratorical Teaching Strategies: *The Dark Child* and *Children of Koloko*

Salient methods of African education through orature are evident in Laye Camara's *The Dark Child* and Chin Ce's *Children of Koloko*. For instance both novels employ oratorical devices which include songs, legends, proverbs (or the dereliction of them) and folktales for their traditional, as against modern western, teaching strategies.

Harold Courlander notes quite rightly in *A Treasury of African Folklore* that the traditional African story teller employs myths, traditions, legends, proverbs and wise sayings to “(en)capsulate... the learnings of centuries about the human character and about the intricate balance between people and the world around them (1). This oratorical strategy thus equips the African mind with a sense of orientation that situates him in time and space as it bridges the past, the present and the future. It teaches morals through its unfailing discernment of wrong and right and enables the African child to be anchored to his/her traditions. At the same time, it ploughs the field for his/ her adjustment to the present and future. In this light, Maxwell Okolie is therefore correct in his observation that

One of the greatest implications of childhood in African literature is not its role as a means of recalling the grandeur and valour that characterized the African peoples' past, but as a period of initiation of the child into the mysteries of nature and existence. (32)

Initiating the child into the mysteries of nature means bringing the child in contact with vegetation, animals, rivers,

etc. (the physical nature) as well as making the trainee learn the valuable moral and spiritual values as can be seen in Laye and Yoyo the protagonists of *The Dark Child* and *Children of Koloko* respectively. At first both are quite in contact with nature at their Tindican and Boko homes until the time comes for a change of environment that impacts heavily in their consciousness. Earlier the hero of *The Dark Child* had been involved in farming and thus he is familiar with small game: hares, wild boars, monkeys and birds. Even in the town of Kouroussa, he is shown the father's small snake. Likewise Yoyo in *Children of Koloko* enjoys the wonders of the natural world at Boko. Nature –fauna and flora– thus represents the first stage of the African child's education in his home environment.

The second phase is achieved by the use of tales, songs, legends, and proverbs. The protagonist of *The Dark Child* is told stories by his youngest uncle:

Then it was that my uncle told me how the monkey had tricked the panther who was all ready to eat him, how the palm tree rat had kept the hyena waiting all night for nothing. These were stories I had already heard a hundred times, but I always enjoyed them and laughed so loudly that the wild fowl ahead of us took flight. (46)

In Koloko too, De Tuma is seen at the village meeting “telling a story of olden days when people showed befitting examples of themselves.” At the end of his story, he admonishes his listeners thus: “go and look at yourselves again because it is from your homes that we can guard our brood from the threat of the hawks” (96). After De Tuma's story, Bap tells the audience the tale of father tortoise who had brought home a beautiful

maid and had forbidden his sons and all the men folk to touch even a hair of her body. But when the woman becomes pregnant, it was discovered that father tortoise himself had broken his own rule (103).

If all the tales above-mentioned entertain the listeners and readers, their main purpose is to teach principles of leadership and civic responsibility. The recurrent animal imagery used in the tales reveals knowledge of various artistic techniques and shades of meanings. In the first tale, the monkey and the rat are the weak victims that outwit the strong but wicked panther and hyena that stand for the oppressors. De Tuma's mention of hawks illustrates the elders' failure to protect their young ones against danger, while Foreman Obeku's story points at father tortoise who having violated his own law sets a bad example to his sons. His reply to his sons: "All is well my boys; follow my words but not my deeds" is a proof of his inability to teach by personal example, a key principle in African pedagogy.

To show public deviation from traditional wisdom in the Koloko stories, proverbs –the device used in teaching morality – are scarce and when used, seem to deviate from this primary role and function. Fathead's talk during the house warming ceremony is stilted:

Koloko mma-mma-o! I salute you all. Our elders say that *gbata gbata* is a language that has two faces. It might mean good or it might mean disaster. (131)

and aims at making the masses covet his achievements in building a Magnificent Multi Million Mansion. His second proverb is also a razzle-dazzle allurements:

I was building this edifice, I had planned how my

own people may enjoy the first opening ceremony after which shall come my friends, ministers and fellow directors-general from the capital. For we say it is from the home front that all training must take off. The Englishman says it in another way: "Charity begins at home." (131)

Like in the first statement, the chief misappropriates a traditional saying to fool the masses who already have failed as clairvoyant social critics. Unlike Yoyo they cannot lampoon a crafty, egocentric businessman who squanders money that can improve the whole community's standards of living. As Amanda points out, "in this drama of social and communal acquiescence, tradition is made culprit" (17). The women's songs and the applause are therefore testaments to the adulteration of both tradition and the honourable role of the griot in the traditional African communities.

The millionaire cometh
See the millionaire cometh
All eyes have seen him and
They say the millionaire cometh!!! (133)

Thus the women, like Billy-Joe Okonofa (Okon for short) and Adede, subject their art to Fathead's millions. Their roles as educators (the griot or king's jester was an educator in traditional African societies) become questionable. Fathead's jesters' song contrasts that of the true griot who sings the *douga* in *The Dark Child*:

He [the praise-singer] was a man who created his song out of some deep inner necessity...He would begin to intone the *douga*, the great chant which is

sung only for celebrated men and which is danced for them alone. But the *douga* is a formidable chant, a provocative chant, a chant which the praise-singer dared not sing, and which the man for whom it is sung dared not dance before certain precautions had been taken. (39)

This sacred *douga* is sung for men like Camara's father who is a man of principles (27). As a goldsmith, he observes the rules of his profession; as a man, he is possessed of high dignity in thought and deed. He is not a millionaire like Fathead in Ce's novel yet he is rich and celebrated because his richness is founded on sound perennial values. Both the griot and the father cannot transgress the moral demands of the *douga*; they thus preserve the moralizing function that it has always fulfilled in pre-capitalist Africa. In *Koloko* only the song of Old Bap parallels this chant.

Old Bap's song preserves the morality that underlies both the griot's chants and the Christian songs. In his homage to his grandfather who had outlived and surpassed "any of his peers in all the villages" (171), Yoyo, unlike Fathead's western mediaeval-type court jesters, pays tribute to a poor man who lived according to time old principles of righteousness and human dignity. One of these principles is compassion as seen in his song:

Who say that my Lord hath
never given compassion?
Is there a-ny one my lord hath
Never given compassion? (172)

Although a hybrid of Christian and traditional lyric, the song which teaches acceptance and forbearance, denotes African

communal ethic of solidarity and “collective responsibility [that] is the very essence of ancestral authority”. These principles have been taught Yoyo through this chant, and become the unbreakable link between the grandson and his late grandfather:

Time was when you sang your song in the loneliness
of your nights, your song of consolation which had
become the strap by which I shall always remember
you. (172)

Thus the song that summarizes Old Bap's life is the bridge between the past, present and future. It is this very tune, reflecting Old Bap's sense of communal responsibility and compassion, which spurs Yoyo's epiphany and attainment of growth. The oratorical strategy of the story can therefore be perceived in “transformative” terms showing us Yoyo's development from immaturity to greater awareness after a psychological crisis. The rising action reaches a peak with Yoyo's epiphanic experience at the northern Trium Press. It later falls with the protagonist's resolution to hold a new attitude (Dora's attitude) “for these sons and daughters of Koloko” (177).

Traditional teaching versus Western Pedagogy

If genuine traditional teaching strategy uses orature as the main teaching tool, modern western pedagogy in both novels by Camara and Ce is conversely associated with the cane, the blackboard, exercise-book, fountain pen, book (reading), the transistor and newspaper (journalism). Camara's first days at school were saddened by thrashing administered by the teacher and the school bullies until the day his father beat the school

director. To the young boy, the blackboard was a nightmare as he notes: “We wanted to be noticed as little as possible, for we lived in continual dread of being sent to the blackboard” (*DC* 81-82). In this case the school adds a corollary of fear while the exercise-book and fountain pen shown to the child during the circumcision ceremony stand as a challenge to the caste system. Similarly we see Da Kata in Koloko questioning the rationale of reading that cannot provide her with money: “But when will all this book reading end? Won't you get a job and start bringing us money?” Yoyo replies that reading wasn't all about getting a lucrative job these days. (*COK* 41). When it was first introduced to Africa, the western schooling became synonymous with erudition and monetary acquisition. Learned elite had to be given an office job that ensured a monthly salary. This explains why the old lady cannot understand why her nephew tells her that “reading wasn't all about getting a lucrative job these days”.

It is not just reading that is emblematic of the flaws of western pedagogy; its means of communication, the transistor and the press, are also deficient. When Yoyo's mother hears the town crier's “gong-a-gong-a-gong! gong-a-gong-a-gong! gong-a-gong-a-gong!”, she summons her grandson: ‘Put off that *radie* and let's know the matter! Put off that noise, I said’” (94). The woman shows her preference for the town crier's message and her grandson is forced to put off the radio/ transistor that announces an estranged government's billion naira budget. The town crier's job is a traditional means of communication that is handed over from one generation to the other (from ageing Long John to young Ham in this case). It therefore guarantees the continuity and stability of traditional life ways which is lacking in the politics of modern Africa. Where Da Kata and Big Mam criticize the book and the radio, Yoyo also castigates the press

that teaches lies to young interns. Chief Bada Babatunde, the proprietor of Koloko Herald, who served Dogomutun (Dogkiller) in a servile manner when the latter was still in power, now, uses its news organ to slander his former master. Note the hero's conclusion:

It made me upset. Not because of everything said about him [Dogkiller] but for the reason that lies were potent weapons- weapons known to politicians, lawyers, policemen, press men and, Dickie would add, preachers. (162)

The local Koloko Herald and Fathead's jesters serve money to the detriment of truth. They thus empower unreliable men who only have the executive, judicial or military powers that further alienate the masses.

The comparison of traditional African teaching strategies and those utilized by western culture in the two novels clearly brings out the important place of African folklore in public education. It teaches younger members of the community adherence to social norms, validates social institutions and religious rituals, which all safeguard the sustainability of the best of African traditions and culture.

Conclusion

Before concluding this paper, it is necessary to comment on the present state of leadership and democracy in Africa which makes this study of orature and its teaching strategies of deep significance for modern African literary and cultural studies. There seems to be the consensus among many concerned individuals and organisations that the political party structures in several African countries have ceased to promote the cause of

human liberty and have degenerated into mono-ethnic power monopolies which merely tyrannise the masses, hence the majority of Africans are experiencing profound dissatisfactions engendered by what they perceive as the growing gap between expectation and reality. These dissatisfactions in turn, lead to demands for greater adaptation, innovation and, therefore, change. As the United States Assistant Secretary of State Herman Cohen once remarked:

Like people everywhere, Africans want and need freedom. And they want what the one-party model has so singularly failed to provide...government based on the equality of all groups rather than dominance by or favouritism toward one; leaders interested in national development rather than the limited perspectives of patronage politics, economic policies that promote rather than preclude individual enterprise.⁴

The general expectation for Africa today is structural political changes which, hopefully, would replace the one-party with truly pluralistic structures. This preference for a truly multi-party democracy has, to a large extent, been based on the assumption that pluralistic political structures by their very nature, favour “ethnic balance, coalition and compromise”. The implication here is that democracy is a system of great adaptability. Seen from this standpoint, it becomes not only necessary but also imperative to reassess continually the democratic reform that has swept through the African continent.

From the oral tales of Africa we have seen three possibilities for political action in Africa which may range from passive obedience through the conventional protest to the ultimate

revolution. These three attitudes to political change are however, likely to be more complementary than conflicting perhaps because political change is basically multi-faceted.

Unfortunately the very people who suffer most from oppression and exploitation are also the very ones with the least opportunities and resources to carry out meaningful political change or create political convulsions. In their attempts to reinstate the institutions and values on which democracy is founded and equally rekindle the lights of individual freedom, African writers and activists have, of necessity, joined ranks in articulating the African vision of true democracy and good governance from their own orature and ancient traditions. It is therefore in this bid to bring about genuine transformation of the nation states that African writers teach some basic lessons from their past through the medium of their orature. They recognise that although traditional African societies were often small, close-knit and homogeneous, and so it was consequently easy to practice democracy and good governance on a small scale, there lies a glaring difference with the situation today where most modern African countries are a veritable mosaic of peoples and cultures. Thus they argue that modern African environment can learn at least the rudiments of good governance and democracy from their orature.

This paper has sought to demonstrate that the works of Laye Camara (*The Dark Child*) and Chin Ce (*Children of Koloko*) are proof of this argument by African writers that effective education of the young starts by the trainee's mastery of the natural environment and their cultural values. Camara Laye's and Ce's protagonists are able to show precocious or prodigious talents in the midst of a general lack of direction because of their affinity and deference for nature (vegetation, rivers, animals

etc.), through their ritualistic journeys, and their exposure to the strategies of African folkloric or oratorical education.

NOTES

¹Tala, K.I. *An Introduction to Cameroon Oral Literature*, The University of Yaounde, 1984, p.64.

²Audu Bature, Labarin Sarkin Tsuntsaye, *A collection of Unpublished Hausa Tales*, Garoua, 1989.

³Tale narrated to author by Nhon Ekukwe Sumelong of Nkikoh village, Bangem on 23 May 2003.

⁴Excerpts taken from an issue of “Afrique Etats Unis”, a publication of the American Cultural Centre, Yaounde.

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