



Bury my bones but keep my words: The interface between oral tradition and contemporary African writing

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Abstract

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The contention in this article is that African oral tradition should be re-examined in view of its perceived new importance in the work of African novelists. This article investigates the nature and definition of oral tradition, as well as the use of oral tradition as a cultural tool.

The increasing inclusion of oral literature as part of the African literature component within university and school curricula is discussed. Finally, the pronounced role of oral tradition in fiction is examined, using as exemplars some seminal works of Bessie Head (1978, 1990 and 1995) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1965, 1977, 1981, and 1982).

Opsomming

Die raakvlak tussen mondelinge tradisie en hedendaagse Afrika-verhaalkuns

Hierdie artikel betoog dat die mondelinge Afrika-tradisies gehervalueer moet word in die lig van die belang van Afrika-verhaalskrywers wat opnuut waargeneem word. Hierdie artikel ondersoek die wese en definisie van die mondelinge tradisie, sowel as die gebruik van die mondelinge tradisie as 'n kultuurinstrument. Die toenemende insluiting van mondelinge literatuur as deel van die Afrika-literatuurkomponent in universitêre en skoolleerplanne word bespreek. Voorts word die beduidende rol van mondelinge tradisie in fiksie ondersoek aan die

hand van belangrike werke van Bessie Head (1978, 1990 en 1995) en Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1965, 1977, 1981, en 1982).

1. Introduction

The title of this article comes from a burial song by Onyango-Ogutu, a Luo writer and poet from Kenya, and represents its central argument, which is that a re-examination of oral tradition and its relation to modern written African literature is of crucial importance for any meaningful study of African literature.

The emphasis in the last few decades on the study of oral tradition has undoubtedly enlarged and enriched the field of literary study in general and African literature in particular. In her pioneering work, *Oral Literature in Africa*, Finnegan (1970:1), argues that the very action of "oral literature" was unfamiliar to most Western scholars. She remarks:

The concept of an oral literature is an unfamiliar one to most people brought up in cultures which, like those of contemporary Europe, lay stress on the idea of literacy and written tradition. In the popular view it seems to convey on the one hand the idea of mystery, on the other that of crude and artistically undeveloped formulations.

Finnegan's attempt to extend her horizon is illustrated by the inclusion in her 1978 anthology of oral poetry, *The Penguin Book of Oral Poetry*, of extracts ranging from *Beowulf* and *The Odyssey* to a number of modern English and Irish poems. This inclusion of Western literature as part of oral tradition unequivocally indicates that Finnegan as an oral-tradition critic later wanted to proclaim the universal nature of oral tradition. Her implicit argument is that oral literature does not belong to African literature only, but forms the basis – indeed is an integral part – of all literatures. Mphahlele (1970:1) has, of course, long regarded oral tradition as having been "a universal phenomenon through the ages, and not something confined to Africa". In the same vein, Agatucci (1998:7) asserts that oral tradition still reverberates in new African writings and continues "to enrich the global human experience and its creative expressions". This view reflects a sound evaluation of the importance of oral tradition because "every human culture in the world seems to create stories (narratives) as a way of making sense of the world" (Agatucci, 1998:1).

It cannot be denied that oral tradition is fundamental in any endeavour to determine the nature of African literature. As Dseagu

(1987:20) argues, “the African novel has an identity of its own derivable from the oral narratives”. Johnson (s.a.:1) is another example of a literary critic who stresses the importance of orality in African literary discourse, as is evident when he remarks that “contemporary written literature in Africa continues to derive a great deal of its vitality from older traditions of verbal art”. Such critics remind non-African critics in particular that they should bear this in mind when studying African literature, because modern Western written literature is not so obviously steeped in oral tradition (although it may be argued that Homer was an oral poet).

This article thus sets out to show that the lack of real acknowledgement of and appreciation for oral tradition as the cornerstone of literature, especially of African literature, is the result of two major factors: its minor role in the Western critical tradition as well as the negative influence of colonialism in Africa. Western scholarship has more or less exclusively focused on the narrow interpretation of the word ‘literature’ which the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines as the “acquaintance with letters or books” or “literary culture”. This approach thus effectively denies the existence of oral tradition as part of literature. Colonialism on the other hand, determined the nature of the educational systems in Africa. Literary curricula were thus premised on Western educational practices. As a result, adherence to the westernised educational system negated the existence of oral tradition, which in turn led to a situation that contributed to reinforcing a feeling of cultural inferiority and alienation in colonial and postcolonial youth.

2. Theoretical framework

As may be anticipated, a fair number of definitions have already been given for oral literature. An interesting feature is that *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (1990) limits “oral tradition” to orality only by defining it as

... the passing on from one generation (and/or locality) to another of songs, chants, proverbs, and other verbal compositions within and between non-literate cultures; or the accumulated stock of works thus transmitted by word of mouth.

The above-given definition of oral literature is not an exception because even relatively current studies on oral literature still merely confine it to the verbal art as Agatucci (1998:1) opines that “in contrast to written literature, African orature is orally composed and

transmitted, and often created to be verbally and communally performed as an integral part of dance or music”.

Lusweti (1984:1), however, earlier provided a fairly simple but workable definition of oral literature that reflects the more contemporary view of regarding as oral literature even works in written form:

Strictly speaking, ‘oral’ means ‘expressed in spoken words’, but oral literature now includes material in written form (as long as it was originally expressed orally). The immediacy of the spoken word contributes to the richness and beauty of the written language.

Finnegan (1978:2) also favours “a fairly wide approach to what can be counted as oral”. She, therefore, does not feel that “a poem [and by extension, any literary work] must have been in every respect composed, transmitted, and performed orally” to be regarded as belonging to oral tradition. As a result, she even includes as part of oral tradition literary works where the original composition has not been oral, but where “the primary means of delivery and circulation are” (Finnegan, 1978:3). According to this demarcation even literary broadcasts on the radio may be regarded as belonging to oral tradition.

Both Lusweti and Finnegan’s definitions of oral literature find resonance in the thesis of Graden and Kreiswirth (1997:3) when they assert that “the privileging of (written) *literature* over *orature* is increasingly discredited in view of the continual flux between orality and literacy”.

It is thus evident that the modern definition of oral tradition veers in the direction of regarding as oral literature all forms of literary composition in which any of the three elements characteristic of orality is dominant, namely oral composition, oral performance and oral transmission.

3. Oral tradition as a cultural tool

Having broadly defined oral tradition, some attention will now be devoted to the contribution of oral tradition to a study of written literature. Oral tradition has undeniably enhanced and enriched literature, being both a unique literary form and a medium of instruction. Okpewho (1989:3) hails the new emphasis on oral tradition as an important element in the understanding and practice of culture as such:

By a strange but happy coincidence, the recent boom in the publishing of contemporary African literature has occurred side by side with advances in the study of oral literature in Africa and the world at large. The two phenomena have been motivated by quite disparate circumstances, but their effects have clearly shed light on one another and together they promise to give us a better understanding of the nature of human culture in general.

Roscoe (1977:9) emphatically advocates a study of African oral literature for a better understanding of literature globally. He regards vernacular writing in Africa as the outgrowth of oral literature. Roscoe quite rightly sees the oral story as “Africa’s dominant form” while regarding the novel as a foreign form imported into the canon of African literature. In similar vein Moore (1980:1) remarks that much of the “exaggerated surprise” which followed the publication of numerous African novels and poems in the 1950s resulted from a “general failure to connect literary activity which expressed itself in writing, with the immense riches of African oral culture”. On this basis, one may contend that the available written African literature is mainly the product of oral tradition. That is why the boundary between the two is sometimes fuzzy (Osborn, 2003:1).

Whiteley and the contributors to the *Oxford Library of African Literature* (1964) are seen as pioneers in the field of conserving African oral literature by emphasising it in this major early series of African literature. In the Preface to this series, Whiteley (1964:i) stresses the value of oral literature:

We approach Africa now as general editors of this library of her literature ... with a sense of exhilaration and of urgency: exhilaration because so much unexplored country can be discerned ahead, and urgency because in our own short time many compositions recorded only in human memory were being everywhere lost ... But our intention is not to be misunderstood as the conservation, merely, of archaic conventions or of passing forms of social experience. On the contrary, we think it harmful to African studies to divide the past from the present.

A cursory glance at some oral poetry exposes the close connection between past and present, as revealed in, for example, some of Okot p’Bitek’s poetry. The late p’Bitek may be regarded as one of the most important literary figures in the field of oral literature. p’Bitek concerned himself with one of the predominant themes of African literature continent-wide, in the words of Roscoe (1977:32),

that of “making tradition meaningful to modernity and avoiding Western solutions to African problems”.

This is especially important for young Africans who are feeling rather bewildered after having attained freedom from the yoke of colonialism and apartheid in particular. Many of these youngsters are still confused by personal suffering as a result of the colonial and apartheid experience while being simultaneously attracted to elements of Western civilisation, by the glittering lights of urbanisation and promises of tasting the fruits of the new political, educational, economic, and social dispensation. Youths should thus reject the Western notion of living for its own sake. They must be made aware that their existence on this planet has a purpose that, in the main, is to work for the upliftment and prosperity of fellow Africans. Mores that are an impediment to achieving the aforementioned ideals such as greed, cruelty, jealousy, and selfishness should not find any fertile ground to sprout on. They thus need to be connected to the cultural values of their traditional past to readjust with a sense of responsibility to the demands of a new Africa in general and a new South Africa in particular. Connectedness to their traditional roots through a sound knowledge and appreciation of oral tradition may aid them in retaining a balanced view of the past, a view encompassing a sound comprehension of both the positive and negative qualities of traditional African life. In this sense oral tradition plays an indispensable role in the often painful process of cultural adjustment. Such insights may shed light on the development from orality to literacy, in other words aid our understanding of both the psychology and aesthetics of culture as a constantly dynamic phenomenon. In a nutshell, one cannot exist and live meaningfully in Africa without learning its cultures and oral traditions. It is no wonder, therefore, that Wilson (2003:1) clearly sees the link between oral literature and life in general when he comments that “the spoken word has been the strength of the African people for many generations. It has been a major and valuable part of African heritage with great spiritual significance”.

4. Oral tradition and education

The importance of oral tradition as a vital part of African literature is reinforced by a study of this genre as part of school and university curricula. Ngugi wa Thiong’o may be regarded as a pioneer in establishing oral tradition as an essential part of academic literary studies on the African continent. In his plea for placing oral literature at the centre of the English curriculum at the University of Nairobi,

Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1981:94-96) and some of his colleagues, Owour Anyumba and Taban Lo Liyong, issued the following statement:

The oral tradition is rich and many-sided ... the art did not end yesterday; it is a living tradition ... familiarity with oral literature could foster attitudes of mind characterised by the willingness to experiment with new forms ... The study of the Oral Tradition would therefore supplement (not replace) courses in Modern African Literature.

The comment by Ngugi as given above is apt to South African universities as well. The study of African literature should be the backbone of the literature curriculum. The implementation of such a strategy would be supportive of African Renaissance as espoused by Mzamane, El Saadawi and Ngugi (2000:3), where the emphasis is on the promotion and consolidation of democracy, education, development, decolonisation, and communication.

It is also significant to note the increasing pressure for teaching in the vernacular at school and tertiary levels in post-apartheid South Africa. This approach simulates the situation that existed in many African countries following independence from colonial authority, although this phenomenon manifested itself in most parts of Africa a couple of decades earlier than in South Africa. Where we in South Africa are grappling with a process aimed at changing the whole educational system as well as most of the syllabi. Mboya (1965) already remarked in a speech delivered at Kusumu as far back as 1964 that the

... educational system and the teaching received in the schools during colonial days were ... designed to belittle African traditions and customs and replace them with habits and attitudes developed in Western Europe. The folk stories and rhymes and jingles of African society were neglected in primary schools. Instead the wholly inappropriate fairy tales and verse of an alien culture were imported at an early stage.

The repetitive pattern of history is obvious when we apply the words of Singano and Roscoe (1974:vii):

It is a sign that colonial scars have yet to heal that there should be any need at all to emphasise the importance of oral tradition. Yet the need is acute, as any educational worker in Africa will agree. African students, by and large, simply do not appear to value their past. Indeed, we have reached an ironic historic moment where, on the one hand, African youth pursues a gadarene flight from a myth-dominated, spiritually rich past into

a westernised modernity, and on the other, cohorts of Western youth rush in the opposite direction, seeking a world of poetry and myth, anxious to quicken the shrivelled seeds of their spirituality, determined to reforge broken links with the soil, and shouting abuse at the sterilities and empty can of industrial civilization.

Having established the need for employing a study of the oral tradition in education, attention should be paid to the critical stance to be adopted towards this study. Despite the universal character that oral literature displays, there are, however, certain aspects that are unique to African oral literature and that necessitate the implementation of special critical criteria for evaluating its products. It is common knowledge that critics of oral tradition have often lacked the necessary skill and knowledge of indigenous cultures to truly appreciate products of oral literature. They have frequently regarded these cultures as primitive and failed to note the poetic qualities as well as the melodiousness of the indigenous languages. The eminent Igbo folklorist, Umeasiegbu (1980:11), for example, advocates that the existing critiques of oral texts should be supplemented by research done by fieldworkers such as anthropologists as well as African poets. This is imperative as Iyasere (in Agatucci, 1998:2) remarks: "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."

To conclude, the message that runs like a thread through this article is that it is pivotal that any critic worth his/her salt should be aware that modern African literature derives its unique being from a variety of oral traditions such as folktales, music, dance, myths, fables, narrative proverbs, and ballads.

Another moot point in applying relevant criteria in evaluating the contribution of oral tradition as a specific critical approach to African literature is undoubtedly the fact that it broadens the scope of current literary criticism that may be regarded as concentrating on postcolonial aspects at the expense of other critical discourses. The extension of the discourse most certainly enriches the study of African literature, resulting in a more balanced, relevant and exciting critical discourse.

5. Oral tradition as reflected in African fiction

The generalisation may perhaps be made that much more emphasis has been placed on examining the role of the oral tradition in poetry

than in fiction. We would, therefore, like to conclude by briefly referring to the pronounced influence of oral tradition on fiction, in this instance on the creation of both the short story and the novel. We intend using as exemplars Bessie Head and Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

In contrast to many African countries, where oral literature has been recognised as one of the most vital and valued parts of African literature, its importance has not always been truly appreciated as a significant part of the South African literary scene. In addition, despite their involvement in oral poetry and story-telling, the mammoth contribution of black South African women has until fairly recently not been recognised as part of the South African literary canon. Their contribution to spread and enhance the culture of the written narrative art has virtually been ignored till a couple of years ago. However, there are some critics who have realised the influence of oral tradition on the works of female writers, such as Bessie Head as MacKenzie (1989:17) remarks:

... 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 characterised by a milieu of informal gossip and tales.

The influence of oral tradition is undeniable in Head's short stories as exemplified by many of those published in *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales* (1977) and *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* (1981). Gardner (1986:117), for instance, remarks on Head's indebtedness to oral tradition:

Ultimately, 'teller of tales' would be the most neutral term one could devise for Bessie Head, for this frees her from bondage to fact while releasing her into folklore, epic and myth.

Head's interest in orality underpins her writing, both as novelist and historian. Clayton (1988:56) quite validly suggests that Head's "complex" project – the creation of *A Bewitched Crossroad: An African Saga* (1984) – resulted from an "interweaving of Western literacy and the African oral tradition, thus creating, in its artistic matrix, an imaginative equivalent of her moral and social ideal for Southern Africa" (Head, 1988:56). It is, therefore, no embellishment to declare that the Setswana oral tradition reveals itself explicitly in Head's work in spite of the use of the English language. For example, in *Tales of Tenderness and Power* (Head, 1990:42-45) in the story titled "The Old Woman", Head often employs repetition to buttress the issues under discussion. Repetition is one of the

distinctive features of African folktales which narrators invoke in order to, among many other functions, link the previous events to the present ones, to draw the audience's attention to a specific issue, to keep the audience captivated in the narration, and more importantly, to impart a message to the audience. This is evidenced by the repeated use of the clause "tell them":

Tell them too. Tell them how natural, sensible, normal is human kindness. Tell them, those who judge my country, Africa, by gain and greed, that the gods walk about her barefoot with no ermine and gold-studded cloaks (Head, 1990:43).

Eilerson's (1995) biography of Head, *Bessie Head – Thunder Behind Her Ears*, reveals the role Head's involvement in storytelling built on oral tradition played in this sensitive writer's life. Head even cancelled her plans to settle in Norway after despatching her manuscript, *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*, since recounting village life gave her a feeling of self-esteem, a feeling of belonging. This comes as no surprise because as Agatucci (1998:5) explains:

Oral African storytelling is essentially a communal participatory experience. Everyone in the most traditional African societies participate in formal and informal storytelling as interactive oral performance ...

In the light of this, one understands why Head cancelled a most enticing offer to settle in Norway because, as she confided to Giles Gordon, although she knew that her son Harold would have a more secure future in Norway, she decided against the move when thinking about the energy she had put into writing these treasures about village life, and

... about the way she understood so many things in an entirely different way now. She thought of the doddering old men in the Botlaloote ward with their rich heritage of oral history and their roots deep in the sand, stone and bush of the place ... When she died, she told friends, she wanted to be buried at the Botlaloote cemetery (Eilerson, 1995:163).

Head herself regarded as her forte her ability to "stand back and wait to learn", adding "letting people teach you about themselves can be a wonderful experience" (Head, in a letter: 1978.01.29).

Thorpe (1983:411), interestingly, comments on Head's "kinship with the village storyteller of the oral tradition". He then links this aspect of Head's work to a similar approach adopted by Ngugi and Achebe. He asserts that, like "earlier established and better-known African

writers such as Ngugi and Achebe, Bessie Head ... wishes to present, in a human and humane light, African life before as well as after the white man's coming" (Thorpe, 1983:411).

Head's works also show the link between orality and modernity as regards the naming of her characters. Naming is taken seriously in oral tradition as every name should signify something. Tshamano (1993:81) reinforces this view when he comments that "in African cultural life the name that a person gets goes far beyond merely identifying and distinguishing that person from other people". A name can serve as a wish, a reminder of bad or good things that happened to the individual in the past, or it can be used to describe the physical features and behavioural traits of a person. Bessie Head took this knowledge into cognisance when bestowing names to her characters in *Maru* (1995) as evinced by the names of the two male protagonists, Maru and Moleka. Maru is identified with both the moon and the rain cloud: "Maru preferred to be the moon" (Head, 1995:58). By contrast, Moleka is identified with the sun: "Moleka was a sun around which spun a billion satellites" (Head, 1995:58). Ranko in turn refers to a person with a big nose. The name Ranko is, however, symbolic in this case as it signifies the unattractive nature of life in tribalism as experienced by the San in Botswana.

Oral literature, especially folktales, always end with a definite message to relay to the readers. Their concluding paragraphs do not leave the readers in suspense as to what moral lesson to learn from the narration. This is also discernible in Bessie Head's writings. For instance, *Maru's* resolution informs the reader about a specific message: racism does not promote peace among people and should, therefore, be removed from people's hearts in order to bring about lasting peace on earth. Yes, people are different, but this should not stop them from respecting one another. After all, all human races have a common origin: Africa.

A brief review will suffice to show that Ngugi is a novelist who deliberately builds his narratives on oral tradition. In an interview with Egejuru (1980:81), Ngugi revealed this sort of reliance:

In so far as the oral tradition is part and parcel of one's cultural upbringing, it is bound to affect one's narrative technique. But there is another more immediate way the people can affect one's narrative. I have in mind, in the village, two or three women sitting by the fire talking of something that affected them recently. Let's say they are describing a journey from a village to Nairobi. Now the description will take several forms: The first

narrator tells a certain amount, and this portion will remind the listener of another episode, and she will stop the first narrator to tell more about this episode. And this can make another narrator take up another episode, etc. so the whole narrative structure can become more and more involved and by the time you reach Nairobi, you have covered a whole history of the community.

Ngugi's first novel, *The River Between* (1965), is firmly rooted in oral tradition. Ngugi employs historically significant moments in the lives of his characters that he interweaves with myths and legends drawn directly from oral tradition. Vuiningoma (1987:66) states that Ngugi establishes an "oral universe" that "carries the reader into a world of magic, spiritual and mystical powers with myths and legends ... integrated into the text". Chapter 1 immediately takes the reader into this oral universe by describing the historical and mythological background to the rivalry between the two ridges and by stressing the life-giving qualities of the river Honia: "Honia was the soul of Kameno and Makuyu. It joined them. And men, cattle, wild beasts and trees, were all united by this life-stream" (Ngugi, 1965:1). In characteristic oral tone, Ngugi then relates how Kameno has traditionally been the place where the archetypal father and mother of the tribe, Gikuyu and Mumbi, have been given the land by Murungu (God). Kameno has thus assumed spiritual superiority over Makuyu and hosts the origins of the great prophets and seers of old, Mugo wa Kibiro, Kamiri and Wachiori.

Apart from history being related according to oral tradition, the novel abounds in stylistic features characteristic of orality as well. Names, for example, have symbolic overtones: *Keninyaga* refers to "the mountain of He-who-shines-in-Holiness" (Ngugi, 1965:20). In addition, there are numerous examples of alliteration, a device employed in oral tradition to emphasise key concepts. At the climactic moment when Chege reveals to his son that the latter is the last in their line, implying that he might be the saviour of the nation, Waiyaki's trepidation is stressed by the use of alliteration (in this case the repeated use of the speech sounds -s- and -tion): "Waiyaki felt as if a heavy cloud was pressing down his soul and he felt a strange sensation of suspension in his stomach" (Ngugi, 1965:34).

In Ngugi's fourth novel, *Petals of Blood* (1977), the author relies heavily on the use of orality as a means of reconstructing the positive moral values of the past. The journey to the city, in particular, supplies Ngugi with ample opportunity for storytelling.

With exceptional artistic talent, he employs the wise old “mother of the tribe”, Nyakinyua, to recreate the tribe’s lost pride by instilling in this group of weary travellers an appreciation for the achievements of their ancestors with her rich repository of legends, lore, secrets, and ideals. This undoubtedly proves that Ngugi is well steeped in African culture because in an African setting “the grandmother is the most competent teacher of oral transmission of knowledge. Her human experience makes her a living library” (Wilson, 2003:1).

Apart from showing connectedness to oral tradition, Ngugi utilises the character of Nyakinyua to create a sense of pride in Africans for being African. Nyakinyua’s glorification of her husband’s courage helps to inspire the youth to endure the physical and mental suffering caused by the drought and the hazardous trek to the city. Her reiteration of her late husband’s adherence to the honour code fills the present generation with a sense of and respect for the greatness of traditional life and values – fulfilling the avowed aim of many earlier African writers who strove to reveal the orderliness and beauty of lost tribal life.

The intertextual links between oral tradition and Ngugi’s work come to the fore again when Nyakinyua, for instance, orally stresses the positive value of their ancient alcoholic drink, *Theng’eta*:

... they would drink it only when work was finished, and especially after the ceremony of circumcision or marriage or itwika, and after a harvest. It was when they were drinking Thenge’ta that poets and singers composed their works for a season of Gichandi, and the seer voices his prophecy (Ngugi, 1977:204).

In his next novel, *Devil on the Cross* (1982), his most biting political satire, Ngugi masterfully blends elements from Christianity with characteristics of oral tradition by his combination of the parable of “Eathly Wiles” by using images such as the Devil’s feast. While the concept of the Devil as the supreme embodiment of evil is derived from the Bible, it also echoes African belief in witchcraft or the supernatural. Both these concepts, i.e. the Devil and witchcraft, may be regarded as two sides of the same coin because they are perceived as purveyors of evil and destruction. In addition, Zida (1991:201) thinks that the Devil as an image reveals “neo-colonialism as a new form of witchcraft that makes it possible for a country’s life-blood to be pumped away by foreigners through their local surrogates, namely the corrupt elements in the postcolonial one-party democracy”. Ngugi’s narrative is, in fact, another form of

“dissident literature of struggle and cultural assertion which predates colonial invasion ... and continues in the postindependence epoch, to combat neo-colonial hegemony exercising itself through an indigenous elite groomed through colonial apprenticeship” (Graden & Kreiswirth, 1997:1).

The text of *Devil on the Cross* exudes a rich African resonance, especially in its reliance on features of orality. This novel is Ngugi's first attempt to write something conceived almost totally within the framework of oral discourse. *Devil on the Cross* contains more proverbs and sayings characteristic of the Kenyan people's ancient wisdom than any of Ngugi's earlier novels. However, these proverbs are not merely decorative: they are used to illuminate certain key concepts in the novel or appear at climactic moments to lend finality to an argument.

The frequent use of songs and incantations serves as proof of Ngugi's deliberate employment of orality as well. In traditional texts, songs could be used for satire as well as for celebration and praise. The paradoxical nature of the then prevalent morality in Kenya (by implication in Africa as a whole) is thus exposed by the following song:

Crookedness to the upright,
Meanness to the kind,
Hatred to the loving,
Evil to the good (Ngugi, 1982:16).

Despite its apparent simplicity, this incantation that reflects the richness of Ngugi's later style, is intrinsically representative of oral tradition since the use of parallel construction, alliteration, as well as the repetition of words and ideas are typical features of oral poetry. Moreover, metaphorical references, for instance in *pecks*, *pinches*, and *journeys*, are a continuation of symbolic patterns maintained throughout the text, thus making the reliance on the traditional functional.

The employment of songs in *Devil on the Cross* more importantly reveals that the significance of songs in any African milieu cannot be overemphasised. Songs are utilised for a variety of reasons such as fulfilling the psychological, educational, social, religious, and political well-being of people.

Of course the influence of orality on literature does not only pertain to African literature in English, but also to literature in African languages. However, as the main objective of this article is to

concentrate on Head's and Ngugi's work, only a brief exposition of this phenomenon will be given as far as African language literatures are concerned. Moleleki (1988) and Mokgoatsana (1996) opine that oral traditional beliefs and philosophy have profoundly impacted on many modern African writers such as K.D.P. Maphalla (Sesotho), O.K. Matsepe (Northern Sotho), S.N. Tseke (Northern Sotho), to mention only a few. This thesis is correct because almost all authors in African-language literatures deploy oral literary devices such as idioms, proverbs, the belief in magic and witchcraft (Kgobe, 2004:54-64), symbolism, and repetition. For instance, in the Tshivenda novel, titled *Thilaiwi* (1979) (literally translated as: one who does not listen to advice), the author (Demana) invokes idioms and the belief in witchcraft to make the narration both plausible and captivating as the following extract reveals:

'Ndi do vha latisa arali vha sa divhi. 'Ndi ene Thilaiwi a tshi khou ya henengei ...Vha tshi mu vhona vha rwiwa nga luvalo ... 'Ndi do vha latisela vhanzhi. Hedzila kholomo dzanga dze vha vhulaha nga ndadzi ndi dzone dza u fhedza.' Zwenezwi vha sa athu fhindula a mbo di vha o li posa kha lurumbu lwa havha mukalaha.

(Demana, 1979:59-60)

('I'll teach you a good lesson.' Thilaiwi said so while approaching him ... When he [Rabada] saw him he got frightened.

'I'll teach you a good lesson. Those cattle you struck dead with lightning will be the last ones ...'.

Before he [Rabada] could reply, he [Thilaiwi] stabbed him with a spear in the side of the body.)

From the above passage, one notices that Demana has used the idioms *ndi do vha latisa* (literal translation: I'll make you throw things away; communicative translation: I'll teach you a good lesson) and *vha rwiwa nga luvalo* (literal translation: he was beaten by his conscience; communicative translation: he got frightened) to illustrate the intensity of Thilaiwi's anger. This makes Thilaiwi's murdering an old man credible because the author does not simply employ idioms for their own sake, but because of their efficacy in illustrating complex situations. Lastly, Thilaiwi murders Rabada due to the belief that the old man, Rabada, had manipulated natural forces such as lightning to kill his (Thilaiwi's) cattle. This act of revenge comes as no surprise because Africans believe that most misfortunes, however small, are due to witchcraft (Kgobe, 2004:62). There is hardly any doubt that the belief in witchcraft has its roots in oral tradition as Kgobe (2004:63) confirms: "Witchcraft beliefs form

an integral part of traditional religion by virtue of the fact that the beliefs provide supernatural causes of misfortune.”

This extract from Demana’s work thus serves as evidence that orality is the umbilical cord without which modern African writing would be an empty shell.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, written African literature cannot be properly studied without viewing it as firmly rooted in oral tradition. Moreover, literature alters profoundly and often irrevocably with any change in society, whether political, economic, social, cultural, religious, or educational. No meaningful study can thus be made of any form of change without a sound understanding of the manifestation of the true nature of similar conditions in the past. Such knowledge can best be accumulated by studying relevant oral literature.

In addition, oral literature constitutes one of the most powerful means of social protest, as Mbele (1989) demonstrates in his article *Oral Literature and Social Protest* – a moot point at the present moment: a time when people globally, but especially perhaps in South Africa, are effecting some of the most meaningful and profound changes in the history of mankind in a deliberate effort to shake off the manmade manacles of a history of apartheid. Moreover, oral performance has played a vital role in providing a channel of protest in South Africa, a country known for its repressive censorship legislation and law enforcement. Ramogale (1995:213) thus underpins the fundamental role of orality in the South African liberation struggle:

Oral performance became not only an alternative literary medium, but also a counterhegemonic struggle; it positioned the cultural independence of blacks as its praxis and black political emancipation as its goal. In other words, oral performance was a literary practice which looked backwards in order to look forward.

Oral poets and raconteurs, such as Ingoapele Madingoane and Mzwakhe Mbuli, have played a mammoth role throughout the struggle against colonial domination. Since colonial times, these poets have given “the voice to the voiceless, speech to the silenced, and hope to the desperate” – an indestructible enemy, as history has proved. Through patriotic efforts of such poets, heroes, and heroines, Thabo Mbeki was able to proclaim: “I am an African.”

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