

## Theory in the Study of African Oral Literature: The Oral Artist's Agenda

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### ABSTRACT

This paper grapples with the question of choice of theory in the study of African oral literature. The paper argues that while it is easy and desirable to choose a facilitative theory in the analysis of a written work of literature, such a process poses challenges when it comes to the oral type of African literature. The difficulty of such choice lies in the unpredictable and ephemeral nature of oral literature in which to a large extent it is the performer who decides what to perform and how to perform it. This leaves the literary analyst in a dilemma over what theory to apply unless the latter wants to base the choice on trial and error.

Owing to the centrality of the performer in an African oral performance this paper argues that choice of theory in this respect has to put the oral artist at the center. Besides the paper criticizes unchecked application of the Western type theories to African oral literature as some are not designed to cater for the oral nature of the said literature.

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### What is Theory?

I vividly recall the fascination I felt as a child when our lower primary school teacher came and posed what our young minds considered a real scholarly hunch. The teacher asked us which came first, the egg or the chick? I recall my own self-importance as I explained why I thought the egg came first and after twenty-one days, hatched out the chick. I thought, oh, how clever of me! But before I could start celebrating my wit, another pupil deflated my ego as he eloquently stated that the chick came first and laid the egg. This latter explanation sounded so convincing that all of us seemed to concur. But after the teacher left, we revisited the issue and after much argument, we found ourselves divided fifty- fifty, though I must admit that I sometimes found myself oscillating between the two opinions.

Today, I find myself asking an analogous question in relation to literature. Is choosing an appropriate theory a pre-requisite to the proper understanding of literary material, or, it is the proper understanding of literary material which is a pre-requisite to choosing of an appropriate theory? One would straight away say, you choose the theory, to help you understand the literary material. This seemingly obvious response is justifiable in view of the fact that the real aim of theory is to help one understand the principles that govern the appreciation of a given discipline. Referring to the place of theory in literature, for instance, Masheti Masinjila (1992) states that: "with particular regard to literature, theory has been ostensibly a facilitator of literary criticism, which aims at interpreting and synthesizing ideas and concepts expressed within an aesthetic mode." Apparently sharing similar views, Lois Tyson (2006:6), states: "Theory tries to explain the assumptions and values upon which various forms of literary criticism rests." Besides, Masinjila (ibid), further posits that literary theory begins with the question: What is literature? To this end then, theory could be taken to mean the coherent set of conceptual, hypothetical and pragmatic principles forming the general frame of reference for literature like every other discipline.

We see, therefore, that the natural approach to analysis of literary material starts with the choice of the theory to be applied to the analysis. This is due to the understanding that often the perception and interpretation of literary material and indeed the meaning one gives to a literary work so much depends on one's theoretical standpoint.

If in agreement up to that point, one may still find him/herself confronted with a pertinent question: Is the above theoretical approach to literature applicable to oral literature as well? A quick answer to this question

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could be: Why not? After all oral literature like every other branch of literature is constructed out of language and relies on the word! However, it is in such an assertion that this debate reaches the point of departure.

Majority of researchers, critics and students of oral literature have approached the subject with a preconceived theoretical approach. Choice of a theoretical framework has always been easy, since readily formulated theories abound: structural, sociological, deconstruction, psychoanalytical, functional, diffusionist, evolutionist, feminist and many others. The question here, however, concerns the effectiveness of these approaches in the study of African oral literature.

To start with, these are theories that mostly arose from Western studies of literature, anthropology, history, sociology and other disciplines. With particular regard to African oral literature, resorting to Western theories, while useful for comparative purposes has a limitation for the fact that most of them have their basis in fieldwork carried out among European communities, whose findings are subjected to their understanding of oral literature, (Masinjila, *ibid*). This observation is significant – the understanding of oral literature in largely literate Western cultures, may be quite different from that of the majorly orate African settings. These differences are bound to create major theoretical and methodological challenges and differences. For instance, the question: What constitutes oral literature? is bound to elicit a different response from a society that is grounded in a written literary culture as opposed to one which is mainly orate. This may sound far-fetched, but let us look at it this way, for example: an ornate society which transacts most if not all its businesses orally, may have to start first by identifying what qualifies to be oral literature and what does not. On the other hand, a society that is rooted in a writing culture already enjoys the ease of simply saying this is written literature and this is oral.

However, this is not the biggest challenge. The real challenge in approaching African oral literature (and indeed any other literature that is purely oral) armed with a pre-determined theory, is the very elusive nature of the oral form. We call it elusive because, to start with, it does not exist until it is performed. Imagine therefore, you are, say, armed with the “deconstruction” theory as you prepare to analyze a work of oral literature; where is the text you are going to deconstruct in the first place? Similarly, suppose you wanted to apply the very popular “structural approach” or even the “functional approach,” will you not find that you are confronted with the same question: Where is the very text whose structure or function you want to analyze?

I am sure one clever oral literature practitioner may petition us saying, for example: “but I have applied Propp’s structural approach to African folktales and it has worked. I have, say, been able to identify in an African folktale, all those Propp’s functions of the dramatis persona: absention, interdiction, violation, reconnaissance, trickery, villainy, lack and so on. It is only at this point that one, however, comes to discover that perhaps this analysis was based on a performance that had already been done; perhaps recorded in print; even though this again brings us to another question of whether a work remains oral after it has been written down.

The argument being advanced here is that since oral literature only begins to exist when performed, a practitioner of oral literature can only pre-select a theory based on guesswork. One has to guess what, for instance, a narrative will be like, that is to say, what the performer is likely to perform. How does one then rely on such guesswork to equip oneself with, say, the deconstruction theory or any other? It is true that one may not appreciate the danger involved, but think of it this way: an oral performance is dependent on what the performer will say next. Even if one may have heard an oral performance before and is going to listen to it as a repeat, the new performance may apply completely different words and even arrange the events in a different order depending on the purpose, audience, actual occasion and other performance dynamics. In other words, the context may determine what the performer will render and how this will be rendered, meaning the analyst is under the mercy of the performer, and therein lies the dilemma of the analyst of oral performances.

However, before we discuss how much the oral literary analyst is held at ransom by the performer, so much so that she/he cannot afford the luxury of choosing a definitive or analytical theory beforehand, let us first discuss how the nature of the oral text seems to compound the analyst’s predicament.

### **The Oral Text**

Naturally text is a crucial component in communicating messages. "Only when it is clear how the text stands to the performance and the other to the tradition can an analysis of the contents of the message begin", (Vansina, 1985). This observation underscores the centrality of text in a work of art. We do realize that Vansina's concerns were in history, but the place of text in literature too cannot be gainsaid. We, however, have our own reservations when text is discussed in relation to an oral performance or any other creative verbal art. Two questions stubbornly refuse to go away. The first question concerns the criterion one uses to determine what constitutes oral literary text, particularly in a setting like in the majority of African communities, where most if not all businesses are transacted orally. But the more stubborn of the two questions is how accurately one can speak of text in a medium as flexible as oral performance?

Let us first consider the first question: What merits being an oral literary text in a predominantly oral tradition of a people? And closely related to this is: What methodology do we use to sieve the art from the non-art? We realize that the two questions are hinging on content and method in oral literature. Of course the justification of the questions is the very realization that not every utterance in the vast oral tradition of a people can surely qualify to be called oral literature. Oral literature is not an amorphous field. It inclines towards P'Bitek's (1973) definition of literature as "creative works of man expressed in language."

The question of what constitutes oral literature is a complex one. It perhaps calls for a very clear understanding of the principles that govern the people's appreciation of their own creative verbal art, (Okombo, 1992:22).

Our interpretation of this is that what constitutes an artistic or creative utterance in any one culture or situation is not a constant variable, nor does it subscribe to a constant criterion. Despite this, Okombo (ibid) recommends Benson and Hughes' "ethno methodological approach" as a possible route to finding out what merits being art in a given culture. He explains the approach as based on the recognition by social scientists of the fact that human communities are not just communities of naïve actors; they are also communities of analysts, who reflect and pass judgments on their own actions. The work of the individual members of a community is on the whole directed by their own consciousness of the judgmental expectations of their community (P.22).

Effectively, therefore, each community has a yardstick, though tacit, upon which to judge their own art. We may say that it is by this yardstick that the people will be able to say that this artist is better than the other, or that, that performance was well done and that, this dance or that song is truly our own. Indeed this view finds support from Leo Tolstoy's (1988:82) justification of such separation when he says: "it is necessary for a society from which works of art arise and are supported to find out whether all that professes to be art is really art." This recognition seems to demand of us to take extra caution before declaring an utterance as oral literature.

Equally of concern is the reference to "text" in oral literature. The dictionary definition of text gives it two dimensions that disqualify its application to oral literature. One, text in its true sense often refers to the written – main written or printed part of a book or page, contrasted with notes, diagram illustrations and so on. Text could also be said to be original words of the author or document as contrasted with later revisions or versions. Though these are mere dictionary definitions, we do not find alternative definitions of text. In view of these definitions, how do oral performances come to have a text? What, for example, is the text of a story that a narrator intends to tell this group of curious listeners waiting to hear him/her?

Indeed, the term "text" tends to imply something fixed such as, The Lord's prayer or recitals from the Quran. Besides, oral performance is a flexible venture whose "text", which we would rather call "oral expression" – is largely determined by the oral artist or performer. In fact one does not know the oral expression until it has been performed.

The oral artist, who, for instance, intends to narrate a story approaches the moment, often only armed with sketches of the plot. The narrator then formulates words, often in response to the context or the composition of the audience. This makes oral expression in an oral performance extremely unpredictable. Thus, our earlier caution to scholars and students of oral literature not to so much anchor their theoretical "budget" on the text or rather oral expression, as they have to wait for the performance to take place before the oral expression

begins to exist. But again, owing to its ephemeral nature, the oral expression fades as soon as it has been performed and its resurrection depends on another performance which often comes with alterations. It needs to be noted that our decision to talk of oral expression is to contrast it with the written, but more importantly to correct the impression of something fixed which the term 'text' seems to suggest.

We want to conclude this section on text by stating that: owing to the elusive and unpredictable, as well as ephemeral nature of oral expressions, and also given that the form does not exist in a fixed state, majority of the known analytical approaches, or theories – which have perhaps worked well in relation to written literature – may fail to apply in the case of oral literature. This therefore, calls for different theoretical strategies when dealing with this subject. However, as we have earlier hinted, to keep in touch with an oral performance means keeping in touch with the very source - the oral artist.

### **The Oral Artist/Performer/Narrator**

Oral literature practitioners will agree with me that theories directly based on African oral literature are lacking and that the subject has usually been studied using Western literary theories.

We would argue that the most important reason why most oral literature practitioners have failed to choose appropriate theoretical approaches in the study of African oral literature, or even failed to invent appropriate frameworks for the discipline, is ultimately their failure to acknowledge the source and power behind oral performances. The very notion promulgated by the early anthropologists and historians who first took interest in studying oral literature, that African oral literature is community property, simply emerging from communal consciousness with anonymous authorship, largely accounts for the stagnation, or lack of growth of related theory in this area. The misnomer on the position of African oral literature was apparently to be internalized by the very African specialists of the subject who came to take over from these earlier foreign scholars.

Having failed to understand and appreciate both the exact nature of African oral literature and its source, scholars in this area have not found any possibilities of inventing related theory/theories. They have instead resorted to "theoretical grafting," or call it "theoretical patch work" through which they have pretended to explain African oral literature, this by applying to it Western theoretical approaches. If theory is the tool, by which one could understand and appreciate the exact nature of a phenomenon, doesn't commonsense demand that an accurate interpretation can only stem from an appropriate approach? This then calls for appropriate relevant theoretical choice. Grafting or patch work then suffice. Of course a physical scientist will agree with me that in the event of testing the alkalinity or acidity of a liquid, the use of any other paper other than litmus paper could easily yield inaccurate results. The use of western theories, some developed to respond to written literature, cannot adequately and accurately explain some of the oral literature dimensions that are uniquely African, thus the need to come up with relevant theoretical approaches.

It is the view of this paper that scholars of African oral literature have to first and foremost acknowledge the role of the oral artist. We, of course need not overemphasize the role of the oral artist or performer for that matter, by stating that this is the epicenter of an oral performance. Yet the significance of the performer in an oral performance cannot be gainsaid. As we have already mentioned, a performance only comes into existence when performed, but a performance does not begin until the performer comes onto the scene. In the case of a narrative, for example, the success or failure of the narrative depends on the narrator, (Masinjila Ibid).

Perhaps we need to elucidate the relationship in an African oral performance between the oral artist and the four components comprising an oral performance: the composition, the transmission, the audience and the context. The composition could be said to be the main content of the performance. As we have argued elsewhere, oral literature is composed as it is performed. And in majority of oral performances, the oral artist – also referred to as the performer or narrator often originates the oral expression (also referred to as oral text). It, thus, happens that what and how much information or detail to make up a composition is the prerogative of the performer, who also originates the information; creating, recreating or reshaping it.

Transmission on the other hand is the actual birth of an oral performance. Again the performer or oral artist is the mother and mid-wife at the same time. The transmission of an oral endeavour depends on the actual artist. Having decided what to perform (content) – usually in consideration of the occasion and the audience, he/she decides how to render it (method). The performer is responsible for setting the mood of the

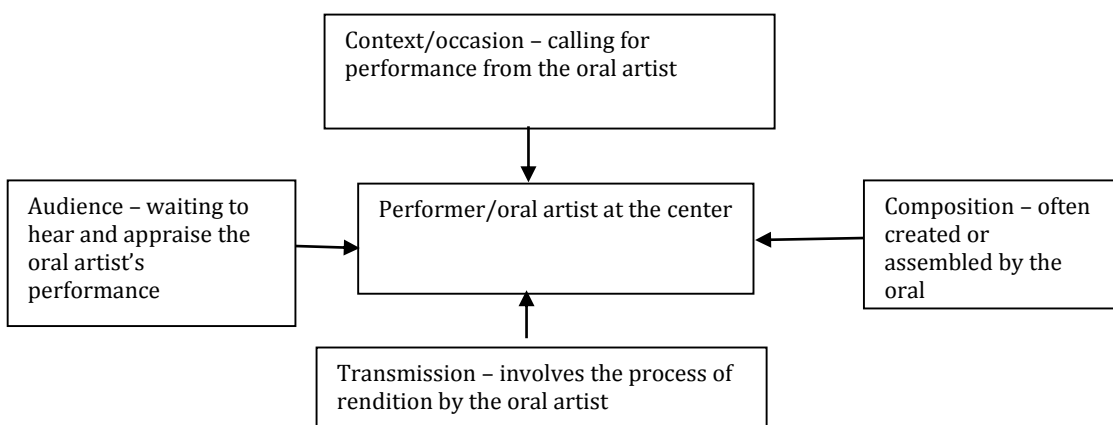
performance and depending on the existing circumstances decides how best to pass the message across.

The third component of oral performance is the audience. One may be tempted to argue that the audience on the other end of the performance – is an entity in itself, and is fully responsible for its own pertinent performance dynamics. However, from a closer look one comes to realize how much the performer dictates his/her audience. For instance, the audience is largely a recipient of the performer's choices. The audience looks up to the performer to select the performance and to decide its pace and other performance dynamics. On his/her part, the performer or oral artist knows the impression he/she wants to make on his/her audience. The performer/oral artist decides what to give, at what time, how to give it and what to withhold. The performer will also decide whether to involve his audience in the performance, when and to what extent. In a nutshell, the audience in an oral performance is a creation of the oral artist or performer.

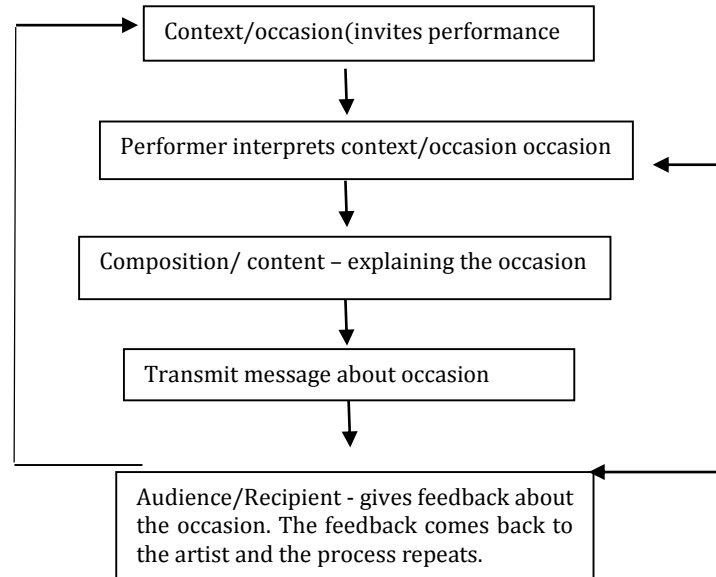
Context is the fourth crucial component of an oral performance. It could be said to be the circumstances for which and under which the performance takes place, or, within which it is to be considered and interpreted. Context is the actual function or occasion calling for the performance. We may argue that even though the oral artist or performer does not determine the type of context, he/she in fact interprets it and decides what impression to be made of the said function. The performer gives meaning to the social function through choice of relevant performances. The performer decides what to perform at what stage of the function and what appeal to make and what reaction to elicit. In doing this the performer also brings to the occasion his/her own world view of the actual occasion. Besides, apart from determining the performational direction the occasion takes, the oral artist or performer could also determine the direction similar functions could take in future in terms of structure, content, aesthetics and believe it or not, even meaning. So much, therefore, is the influence of the performer on the context.

We could, thus, summarize the relationships involving African oral literature as follows: performance is the medium that interprets and explains the actual occasion (context). However, performance depends on the oral artist/performer as the agent of interpretation. The performer interprets the context or actual occasion through three arms: composition is the content; transmission reflects the method of explaining the occasion and the audience completes the occasion through appreciation, appraisal, valuation and feedback. Through the audience the meaning of the occasion is made relevant. With the danger of repeating ourselves, we would say that context/occasion responds to the when/where/why of a performance; the composition, the what; the audience, for whom and transmission, the how. But very crucial, is who will actualize these, thus, the performer. This relationship can be represented by two different trees showing relation and processes as follows:

**Performance relationship**



### Performance process



NB. Given the central position the performer or narrator occupies on this tree, we shall conveniently call this relationship “**performer-centric**” or “**narrato-centric**”, meaning it is performer/narrator centered. It is also to be noted that the performer could be an individual or a group charged with transmitting to the audience, compositions or performances related to, or explaining an occasion/context.

### Towards a theoretical decision

The foregoing discussion on composition, transmission, audience and context leaves no doubt about the centrality of the oral artist, performer or narrator. This leads us to argue that an attempt to understand an African oral performance which does not recognize the central role of the oral artist or performer is only likely to yield superficial results. The centrality of the artist in an African oral performance suggests that in order to understand the intricacies involved, one has to understand the driving force behind the performer/narrator as the originator of the performance. This may involve an in-depth understanding of all or some of the factors informing the performer’s disposition: historical background, psyche, position in society, expertise, world view, opinion about the audience, opinion about the occasion and other attendant considerations.

The knowledge of the above factors will assist in answering questions about theory and methodology. By trying to see an oral performance through the eyes of the artist one is able to answer questions on why this particular occasion; who is targeted; what social and cultural conceptions shape the performance; what artistic considerations are to be given prominence; what societal values are emphasized and so on.

Does our emphasis on a performer centered (performer-centric) approach undermine “ethnomethodology” suggested by Benson and Hughes (1983)? The answer is no. Ethno methodology which is concerned with discovering a community’s theory of creative verbal art remains relevant, but it is rather general. Even when it is further explained as concerned with discovering the principles used by members of a community to evaluate the literary texts of their community, the approach still leaves a gap because it does not suggest any specific framework. This is coupled with its concern with “literary texts,” an aspect we described as inconsistent and unreliable in an oral performance. The approach, however, would be more focused if it was employed in the direction of “**performer-centrism**”, or “**narrato-centrism**”.

The justification for a “performer-centric” approach is that you start with the source of the verbal utterance (performer/narrator) and follow his/her thoughts through the content they decide to include in their performance; the methodology they choose to use, the emotions they intend to elicit and the appeal they hope

to make on the audience. Once decided on this approach one can couple it with other relevant approaches that will contribute to understanding the performer's condition and by extension that of his/her performance. A study of African oral literature is, therefore, almost always likely to demand a composite theoretical approach, which will enrich the interpretation of an oral performance – of course as long as those various approaches put the source – the oral artist, at the centre. I suggest to scholars and students of African oral literature to approach their analyses of oral material from a “performer centric” perspective and appropriate and relevant theories will just lend themselves.

### Conclusion

Choice of theory in the study of African oral literature has been and still remains problematic. This is because scholars in this field have not ventured into inventing theories that would be directly relevant to the field. They have instead resorted to applying Western approaches which, owing to the wide differences between the basis of their origin and the uniquely African literary experiences, these approaches have often yielded superficial results. The most significant handicap of these Western approaches is their dependence on text as contrasted with the African situation in which even at the very time of performance the text is yet to be determined. In other words, a typical African oral performance is so dependent on the oral artist/performer/narrator, that one cannot predict its direction until it has been performed. The central role of the performer is such that only a performer centered approach to the study of African oral literature can hope to yield a truly accurate interpretation of the oral literary material. For this reason, this paper has suggested a performer centered approach which for convenience we have referred to as “performer-centric approach.”

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