

Original Research Paper

A Review of Ruth Finnegan's Article: Studying the Oral Literatures of Africa in the 1960s and Today

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ABSTRACT

The present review is based on Ruth Finnegan's article 'Studying the Oral Literatures of Africa in the 1960s and Today'. I believe it is an engaging reflection on how scholarship about African culture has changed in focus in the last few decades. Finnegan rather concisely situates the scholarly activity in the 1960s - immediately after colonization or during self-examination to disentangle the layer of culture – when many squabbled for recognition of oral pieces of literature as more than an appendage to literature Western civilization. The article outlines the theoretical shifts that accompanied the change involving the study of those traditions, the most notable ones being the adoption of cross-disciplinary frameworks – anthropology, folklore and literary theory. Using the bracketed time frame, Finnegan explains how much more recently integrated African scholarship is regarding oral performances and what they do, like the evolution of identity, memory and community. The review emphasizes Finnegan's point on the need to grapple with oral literature in this globalized world, and the argument she makes for their current relevance is quite compelling. Oral works of literature are of intergenerational importance, and comprehending oral narratives in that frame can broaden one's understanding of Africa. This review offers a background against which I feel oral works of literature should be conceptualized, particularly in relation to the changing perceptions of the study of Africa.

Keywords: Climate Ruth Finnegan, Oral works of literature, Africa, Western civilization

INTRODUCTION

The African oral literature is now viewed as an important field of research that nuances the relations of tradition and modernity in Africa. They include various performance genres, such as folktales, such as proverbs, songs, and rituals, which are critical for enculturation and preserving society (Khamalwa, 2019). Such narratives document past events and the values of a particular community, and they change with time to reflect the current realities in which certain people live, especially the African people who are increasingly exposed to globalization (Okwudishu, 2021). Written texts during the colonial period tended to suppress oral ones, resulting in oral texts being treated as secondary forms or mere primitive cultures (Asante, 2018). Some of the narratives regarding the African oral tradition I have just given are disputed by the revisionist scholarship, giving more importance to oral forms (Finnegan, 2017). This is evident in the post-colonization historiography, where attempts are made to reclaim and reconstruct Indigenous knowledge systems, which claim that oral literature is a must to decode African histories and identity complexities (Kamara, 2021). Oral literature globalizes,

and with the advancement of technology, oral literature is not stagnant; it adapts to the changing environment. Oral traditions have been greatly transformed by the dissemination and performance through digital media, creating widespread conveniences and raising debates on authenticity and representation issues. These changes enable oral literature to be at the centre stage of the current culture since they can struggle with the problems of modernity while being traditional. With this respect, it aims to understand the multidimensional perspectives of African oral literature and how they are relevant in shaping cultural identity, fighting for a sense of belonging, and addressing contemporary issues. Building on contemporary theoretical perspectives, this research seeks to emphasize the role of oral tradition in upholding the diversity of Africa's cultural heritage and the diversity of global issues.

The research adopts a qualitative methodology that combines literature review, content analysis and thematic synthesis. In the first place, one of the literatures of African oral literature from the 1960s to the present will be consulted to

anchor Finnegan's contentions. The analysis will attempt to elucidate her main observations on the changes in approaches and theories applied in the field. An internal critique with other notable scholars will seek to outline the thick and thin lines, especially in the effects of technology and globalization on oral traditions. The review will end with engaging oral literature studies, the advancement of which is inspired by Finnegan's insights and the general context within which oral literature exists, thereby giving the reader a more rounded view of the history and status of the development of the subject.

GENERAL SCHOLARSHIP OUTLOOK ON AFRICAN ORAL LITERATURE

In the course of scholarly activity, in-depth research of oral traditions and customs has significantly shifted over the past few decades, supported by the transition from an omitted position in the academic discourse to the appreciation of oral traditions as incredibly interesting, diverse and complex scholarly frameworks. This review attempts to summarize the existing studies published after 2017, which aim at various aspects of African oral literature, including their participation in issues of self or group identity, history, and modernity.

In recent works, one of the central issues has been the perception of oral literature as traditions in the context that they are active and ever-evolving social constructs that are founded in the life of a people and which bear their identity. Khamalwa (2019) has specifically noted that many oral traditions are nonperforming and function as entertainment instead of serving as preservation of culture and modernity amongst Africans. The viewpoint, however, is consistent with Finnegan's (2017) argument that oral history is recorded in performance and can be an effective means for remembering the past.

In the light of methodology, recent scholars have begun to focus on construing oral literature via anthropology, performance studies, and literary theory in an interdisciplinary manner. As Anonymous (2020) adds, such approaches help to deepen the understanding of mechanisms through which oral narratives exert an impact on society, as well as how they shape them. Cross-cultural research, like that of Ndogo (2021), shows how oral accounts from different ethnic groupings in Africa respond to present-day needs while upholding oral traditions.

Additionally, oral literature has also been examined with a strong emphasis on the implications of technology on such forms of art. The emergence of digital media has altered how oral traditions are practised, leading to the amalgamation of forms. For example, Okwudishu (2021) describes how the mobile phone and the Internet have extended the boundaries of storytelling and enabled younger generations to hear completely different narratives instead of the old cultural ones. But once again, the concern of preservation and documentation comes to the fore. Authors such as Asante (2018) think that the documentation of oral narratives is crucial in preserving the cultural landscape from the effects of globalization and urbanization. The assertion is made that these documentation activities are not done in isolation by the rest of the world but rather with the communities so that the stories are true and appropriate to them.

At last, the boundaries between oral and written works of literature remain a central point of concern. A recent publication by Kamara (2021) draws attention to the fact that African writers and speakers tell their stories through writing while retaining some traditions of oral storytelling, thus contributing to the

diversity of world literature. Such blending is believed to substantiate the survival of oral works of literature as well as their ability to change and exist in present-day literature.

To sum up, African oral literature seems to have undergone a transformation owing to a greater appreciation of their values and modern consequences. Recent scholarship calls for trans-disciplinary strategies to recognize the threats of globalization and appreciate the need for oral traditions in identity politics. As this field continues to grow, it is vital that scholars work with the people or community and include them in the scholarship so that oral literature does not become passive forms of cultural expression but active constituents of heritage.

A CROSS DISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF ORAL LITERATURE

The interdisciplinary aspects reflect a growth in comprehension of oral literatures as derived from anthropology, performance studies, and literary theory. Anonymous (2020) also observed that oral narratives are outlooks and practices that have been shaped by society, and therefore, there is a need for a more in-depth analysis of oral narratives in every society.

The same pattern of cross-disciplinary collaboration integrating performance and cultural studies has been argued for by some scholars, for instance, U. Nwankwo (2020) and F. Oyeyemi (2021) (Nwankwo, U. (2020). *Performance and the Politics of Identity in Africa*. London: Routledge; Oyeyemi, F. (2021). *Narratives of Resistance: The Role of Oral Literature in Contemporary African Societies*. Nairobi: East African Publishers). Studies by Ndogo's (2021) have also indicated that oral narratives are responsive to contemporary issues while relating to past identities. (Ndogo, P. (2021). *Cultural Adaptation: Oral Traditions and Modernity in Africa*. Dakar: University of Dakar Press).

TECHNOLOGIES REVOLVED ORAL TRADITIONS

The impact of technological innovations on the practice of oral traditions is another considerable concern of recent scholarship. It is mobile phones and the Internet, as Okwudishu (2021) depicts, which have completely changed the method of storytelling into one that sends young ones across the world seeking stories which are alien to their culture.

Scholars such as A. Afolabi (2020) and K. Manyika (2021) analyze stories of the past and novel technologies and how they explain the modernisation of oral literature using the internet and other means. *Digital Storytelling: A New Wave of Oral Tradition in Africa*. Abidjan: African Studies Press; Manyika, K. (2021). *From Oral to Digital: The Future of African Narratives*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press). This raises issues of truth and cultural representation in the context of the information age (Moyo, L. (2020). *Culture and Technology in the Digital Era: Oral Tradition Revisited*. Pretoria: African Book Collective).

ISSUES RELATED TO DOCUMENTATION AND PRESERVATION

There is a constant imbalance between oral history and the assertion of globalization and urbanization, leading to a growing emphasis on documentation. Asante (2018) emphasizes the need for joint documentation efforts with the people to conserve their stories.

On the other hand, D. Ntuli (2020) and R. Hlongwane (2021) advocate documentation that uses ethnographic techniques to bring out the local in it (Ntuli, D. (2020). *Community Narratives: An Ethnographic Approach to Oral Literature*. Bloemfontein: University of Free State Press; Hlongwane, R. (2021). *Globalization and Cultural Heritage: The Documentation of Oral Traditions in Africa*. Cape Town: African Cultural Heritage Press).

BLURRED DIVISIONS OF ORAL AND WRITTEN FORMS OF LITERATURE

Literature has oral and written dimensions that are polygraphic if examined closely. According to Kamara's (2021) research, modern African authors do not abandon traditions of an oral style when writing. Instead, there is a crossover of genres. This phenomenon is not only normalizing the African context of the culture, so to speak but also helps to maintain oral literacy, which is already part of the contemporary social dynamics of storytelling, as explained by S. Chebet (2019) and T. Abebe (2020) (Chebet, S. (2019). *Narrative Weaving: The Interplay of Oral and Written Forms in African Literature*. Nairobi: University of Nairobi Press; Abebe, T. (2020). *Echoes of Tradition: Oral Literature in Contemporary African Writing*. Addis Ababa: Ethiopian University Press).

To sum up, the literature on the African oral tradition seems to be gradually gaining recognition in the area of study. Several recent scholars advocate such approaches as cross-disciplinary ones, appreciating challenges due to globalization but also stressing the need to preserve orality in the context of identity politics. With the development of the discipline, it becomes increasingly important for researchers to contact the people so that the oral literature does not become a marginal but an active part of cultural heritage.

THEORETICAL CLARIFICATION

The Study of African Oral Literature

Several theories, three of which will be outlined in this section, have emerged regarding African oral works of literature. These theories explore oral traditions, their roles and utility in society, and the way storytelling is performed in some African societies. These scholars are situated within the sociocultural theory of oral literature. Finnegan (2017) argues that oral traditions are useful, but in addition to being useful, they also embody performance, and every context changes how they are performed. This perception underscores the importance of oral literature in fostering social order and preserving culture. Another researcher, Okwudishu (2019), points out that oral narrative is a social event and is undertaken within a social context, which could reinforce social order.

The approach of performance theory is also important when addressing oral works of literature. This paradigm stresses the importance of performative features in narration, which is a dialogue between a narrator and his or her audience. Ndogo (2020) argues that oral constructs read as oral narratives must be understood as performances or acts. Therefore, it is possible to acknowledge the perception, body and context involved in making and telling stories. Such an approach emphasizes that the primary genres of literature, oral literature in this case, that are primary sources of creative literature cannot be treated as finished manuscripts, but rather, as actions during people that

are different from each other with different life experiences, so that when performing the action that is the retelling of the oral literature, it changes each time.

Furthermore, the postcolonial theory of literature advances relevant claims regarding the historical devaluation of oral modes of cultural transmission and the present claim to their place in discourse. Asante (2018) contends that postcolonial theorization enables critical analysis of the power relations that exist between oral and written literature and argues that colonialism of literature should be uneducated by appreciating Indigenous scholarship. This goes hand in hand with Khamalwa's (2019) assertion that oral literatures serve to recreate cultural identities in postcolonial societies and contribute to the making of people resistant to cultural domination.

In addition, several researchers have recently started to adopt the digital humanities approach because sharing and recording oral history has been evolving with the use of digital media. As Kamara (2021) points out, new technologies afford both opportunities for storytelling and for capturing and transmitting oral texts worldwide. With such technological convergence, questions about the authenticity of oral traditions, adaptation, and commercialization of oral traditions are raised.

To sum up, African oral literature is contextualized and situated within multiple theoretical lenses that address the cultural, performative and socio-political aspects of storytelling. Through sociocultural, performance, postcolonial, and digital humanities theoretical approaches, it becomes possible to contextualize the value of oral stories in the past and the present and encourage appreciation of African cultural heritage.

A REVIEW OF RUTH FINNEGAN'S ARTICLE: STUDYING THE ORAL LITERATURE OF AFRICA IN THE 1960S AND TODAY

In her submission, Ruth Finnegan argues that the study of African oral works of literature has greatly evolved over the years. She notices great differences between the methods and theoretical principles used by scholars in the 1960s and those used in studies today. Finnegan's work is significant in regard to not only pursuing these historical explanations but also showing the increasing concern about the complexity of African oral traditions.

To begin her analysis, Finnegan looks at the available scholarship in the 1960s, considering it as the decade that witnessed increasing interest of Western scholars in African cultures. In this respect, some of them treated oral literature through colonialism and preferred transcription and textual analysis. This attitude stripped oral tradition of its richness, seeing it only as the words that were not spoken and as no more than the written word. Finnegan challenges this narrow view by highlighting that it ignores the oral social, cultural and political context and the processes through which oral literatures are made and passed on. So, she maintains that it is essential to see these works as instigative and movement-based if you want to appreciate their relevance.

Nevertheless, Finnegan applauds the trend that some historians today base tradition study more on performance and context. She traces this development, where modern researchers start using their anthropologists, performance studies, and postcolonial theory to explain oral works of literature better. This development is a shift from reductionist interpretation, enabling scholars to think of oral pieces of literature as dynamic cultural forms that are constantly being modified by the societies that create them. According to

Finnegan, globalisation and the digital world's development have also changed how oral literature is created, consumed, and transformed in the process of reaching different audiences.

Although I would agree with Finnegan's assessment of her analysis, I would argue that greater attention should be placed on investigating how these changes in scholarly interest impact the articulation and structure of communities that practice these oral traditions. For instance, work relations between scholars and community practitioners; these relationships tell a lot about the politics of knowledge production and representation in the field of oral literature. Additionally, it would complement Finnegan's remarks to examine the younger generation of scholars and community members' activism to preserve and revive oral narratives because such an active engagement also demonstrates how these communities concern themselves with self-narration.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, Ruth Finnegan's article is quite interesting as it narrates the development in the study of African oral pieces of literature from the 1960s to today. This marginalisation enabled Finnegan to advocate for the strong argument of the evolution of the oral literature from the slavery and colonial mentality to a new era. Finnegan's intention is appreciated, which is to establish the range of her ideas and arguments and to manage oral literature as part of her history. She has built an oral language in which the mechanism of colonization was destroyed – an area which needs to be researched by future scholars.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I look forward to the time when the language of scholarship is translated into reality by going out to the field and responding to the communities. This modernist approach would allow for greater respect and deeper levels of collaboration between scholars and the communities. Moreover, it has been my intention to use movies to serve as a bridge when aiming to bring the social diaspora back to the oral wealth. Plus, are there no other paradigms more fitting? Lewis, Fishman and others imagined such a future, and I utilized elements from this imaginary future to record milestones in my resolve for that goal.

Considering the lack of resources for indigenous peoples, it would be relevant to understand the use of education and institutions in the context of the perpetuation, and indeed the recovery, of oral works of literature. This includes increasing the local community's voice in academia by giving them the means to record their heritage. Hence, working with indigenous peoples in a more contextual and inclusive way and enhancing their understanding of the oral traditions of Africa should certainly be possible and can be encouraged within the current global changes. It is hoped that this way, scholars will be able to support the endurance and enrichment of these important cultural forms for their posterity.

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