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The Oral Artist and Oppositional Politics in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Denja Abdullahi's *Mairogo*

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Abstract

In the context of modern societies, criticism of political leadership is located within the framework of formalized, democratized organizations, movements, and rights groups. These are modern paradigms within which dissenting factions of society express contradictory perspectives of the policies, actions or inactions of the leadership. This article examines the role of the social critic which oral artists played in traditional African societies in two selected literary works: Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) (a play) and Denja Abdullahi's *Mairogo* (2009) (a dramatic poem). It also investigates how the symbolism-rich oral aesthetics aid the criticism. This essay regards the role of the oral artist in the society as a viable model of opposition which can be synthesized with aspects of the modern model. This would produce an effective medium for the expression of opinions and dissents against constituted authorities in postcolonial African societies. This exploration is crucial as postcolonial African states continue to grapple with the challenges of stabilizing their polity within a western framework which breeds factional rivalries and conflict between competing parties. This article concludes that re-thinking and merging traditional and modern paradigms of opposition discourse is fundamental to postcolonial African states attaining the needed environment crucial to their socio-political and economic development.

Key words: oral art, opposition, criticism, Africa, postcolonialism.

Introduction

The emergence of hegemonic frames of discourse from western cultures and their deployment as universal paradigms continues to draw flak from culture scholars who criticize the categorization of nonwestern cultural practices as defective and unconventional. Cultural differences are

unassailable realities which confer uniqueness to societies in the ways morality is defined, problems are solved and development attained. The model through which leadership and governance are criticized is one such area where societies can differ from one another. Criticism is an essential factor for ensuring the wellbeing and stability of a society and its people. It checks leadership and institutional excesses and ensures that actions which will benefit the larger society are taken. In pre-

colonial African societies, criticism contributed to stabilizing communities and checking leadership excesses by performing ideational and corrective functions. The modes through which criticism was expressed included oral and/or performative acts such as poetry, songs, proverbs, drama sketches, dances and mimes and even organized and sometimes spontaneous protest marches. Tanure Ojaide (70) writes about the Udge tradition of the Urhobo people that “Udge is Urhobo satire but a moral charter through concepts of living up to communal expectations”. Other scholars such as Ajuwon (201) and Olatunji (194) have written on the African oral art as including criticism. Colonialism and the attendant imposition of the universality of Western norms in Africa and other continents inadvertently diminished the recognition and use of these traditional forms. This paper thus explores the traditional modes of criticism contained in the selected literary works vis-à-vis their viability as means for criticism and checking excesses.

Opposition and Criticism in Precolonial Era

George Anastaplo opens his essay, “Loyal Opposition in a Modern Democracy” with the following quote from Herodotus’ classic work – *History*:

So spoke Mardonius and stopped, having put a smooth coating on [King] Xerxes' opinion [that the Persians should invade Greece]. All the rest of the Persians held their tongues and did not venture to declare a judgment opposite to that which was in discussion. But then Artabanus, the son of Hystaspes and Xerxes' uncle-and who trusted in his kinship--spoke up: "My lord, when no opposing opinions are presented, it is impossible to choose the better, but one must accept what is proposed. When such opposites are stated, it is as it is with

gold, the purity of which one cannot judge in itself, but only if you rub it alongside other gold on the touchstone and see the difference ”

- Herodotus, *History*, VII, 16

Above, Anastaplo emphasizes the need for societies to encourage divergent opinions from different quarters before decisions are made. The quote also indicates that participatory and communal elements were integral to the political structure of classical Athens, just as they were in many traditional African societies. In African societies, this role was usually played by palace singers, bards, griots and members of age groups who used songs, stories, chants, dances and other narrative modes to check excesses, sound notes of caution, and to also voice their opinions on matters of state. This created a structure for minority opinions to be heard and considered in all spheres of the community’s life.

In spite of traditional oral art being a form of cultural expression and means of communicating and illuminating histories, philosophies, and ideologies, Steiner (342) describes it as a means by which a people reject who they are not and repudiate worlds in which they do not want to live. Jeylan W. Hussein also posits that African oral arts evoke “questions about power relationships in a society, as a means of articulating the individual as well as communal protests against social and political deprivations” (19-20). He adds that the adaptability of the role of African oral art enables it to transform and transit from one role to another. Using the Geerarsa (heroic recitation) of the Oromo folk of Western Ethiopia, Hussein notes how the Geerarsa genre is used “to express pathos of their victimization in the hands of local officials” (20). This demonstrates the ability of the genre to morph from a traditional medium of celebration to one of protest.

Traditionally and restrictively, African oral art forms were considered merely as modes for entertainment, recording history and lineages and for moralising. Simon Ebine (5) writes about the griots of the Manding tribe of the Senegambia region of West Africa that they played the roles of counsellors, community historians, story tellers, singers, as well as mediators in family and tribal feuds” with the aim of moralizing and upholding the community to values that are considered sacrosanct. Also, Akintunde Akinyemi in his paper on the works and relevance of Yorùbá Royal Bards emphasizes that while entertainment is one of the primary responsibilities of bards, they also describe the qualities and physical appearances of patrons and document history (102). In his words: “Yorùbá royal bards are also regarded as the repository of tradition and as chroniclers of the kings’ genealogy, reminding them of histories and great deeds of their (the kings’) predecessors, so that they (the kings) may uphold tradition” (102). Akinyemi adds that royal bards used their art to instil courage in warriors during pre-colonial times. This they did by, for example,

making reference to previous battles which they (the warriors) have won or by acclaiming the warriors through personal *oriki*. According to the bards themselves, the purpose of *oriki* in their poetry is to preserve a record of the past and to spur their listeners by such recitals on to greater achievements in emulation of their ancestors. (103)

The ability of bards to use names, appellations, attributes and *Oriki* is indicative of the effectiveness of this art form to do more than just spur the subjects of their renditions towards emulating their ancestors to more progressive feelings of nationalism and greater

good. Akinyemi however sounds a crucial note of warning concerning the veracity of information contained in Yorùbá royal poetry:

Scholars wishing to use Yorùbá royal poetry as their source of information should always remember that the poets’ ultimate concern is to chant to the satisfaction of their patrons. Hence, scholars must watch for exaggerations and distortions embedded in the poetry before they can reach the little gem beneath the heap of rubbish (103).

This warning is vital as the artists – either attached to royalty, personages or wandering the streets – perform for economic benefits. Ruth Finnegan alludes to this in her book, *Oral Literature in Africa* when she refers to the lack of emphasis on verbal accuracy or even near accuracy especially by freelance poets (98). However, she identifies that there is a common tendency to overlook the significance of African oral art and its topical functions, noting that “poetry can also be used to pressurize those in authority or to comment on local politics. Songs of insult, challenge, or satirical comment also have a long history, and can function not only on a personal level but also as politically effective weapons” (267).

In her exposition of political songs, Finnegan cites democratic purpose and poetic justice in the songs of Portuguese East Africa (265) and the eventual deposing of a Somali Sultan “who was ignoring the clan assembly and trying to assume dictatorial powers” (267) as examples of how singers express dissent and criticise power. This is important in view of the fact that this paper seeks to emphasize oral artists as both performers of vibrant opposition to tyrannical leadership and chroniclers of the needs of the larger society as against performing solely for their own benefits. This paper maintains that by virtue of

the fact that contemporary African societies still retain some degree of communality, the oral artists, though motivated by their personal gain, remain conscious of the fact that they belong to the larger society and any negative policy implicates them also. The immediacy of composition and dexterity of language use which results in analogies and innuendoes are strategies oral artists employ to crouch opposition in compositions. There is therefore indirectness in the communication which allows the artist “to influence while at the same time avoiding the open danger of speaking directly” (Finnegan 268).

Beyond the African continent, Marie Lecomte-Tilouine (238) notes that there is an emerging social function of the bards of Western Nepal in the Asian continent:

following the recent sociopolitical upheaval, the bardic repertoire incorporated new forms of historical truth and transformed itself from inside, showing its mirroring of the social context, its responsiveness to change, and no doubt, the role that its imperceptible transformations can in turn play in this regard.

Given the adaptability of the oral art form to social realities, it can be deduced that understanding the genre as a form which bears experiential complexities of the people who create it requires contextualising such productions within the appropriate socio-cultural, political and economic space. Thus, the succeeding section of this paper investigates how two characters – Praise-Singer (Olohun-iyó) in Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the Kings Horseman* and Mairogo in Denja Abdullahi’s *Mairogo* subsume their personal gain within the loftier quest of better and safer societies.

Background to the Selected Texts

Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*, first published in 1975, dramatizes

events which took place in 1946 in the ancient Yoruba city of Oyo in the present South-West region of Nigeria. The play depicts how the established order of life in the community is almost overturned by the reluctance of one of the custodians of history and culture to perform his duty of ritual suicide. In the Author’s Note, Wole Soyinka sums the story thus: “That year, the lives of Elesin (Olori Elesin), his son, and the Colonial District Officer intertwined with the disastrous results set out in the play”. Elesin as custodian of culture attains this position by virtue of his lineage. He is groomed to commit ritual suicide at an appointed time after the demise of the Alafin, the King of Oyo. In respect and awe of the supreme sacrifice expected of Elesin, he enjoys the patronage of all in the community and lives a pampered life just like that of the King whom he is to accompany to the land of the dead. The death of Elesin is hinged on the belief that the late Alafin must be accompanied to the land of the dead in all the splendour expected of royalty. This will please the Alafin and give him the privilege and honour to influence the ancestors to be benevolent to their living off-springs. Soyinka explains this belief in his book titled *Art, Dialogue and Outrage* (1993) as an awareness of the cyclic interconnectedness of the world of the living with that of the dead and that of the unborn, “past, present and future being so pertinently conceived and woven into the Yoruba worldview of life” (143).

Denja Abdullahi’s *Mairogo* on the other hand is a dramatic poem about a miscreant who is the titular character. This character, Mairogo typifies an ‘Almajiri’, a young male who roams the streets in many northern Nigerian states begging for alms. Mairogo from whose perspective the dramatic poem is seen is a vagrant who wanders the streets observing and commenting on the society. Abdullahi employs the wandering and the begging

attributes of the Almajiri in the creation of Mairogo through whom the poet expresses his views.

While Soyinka's play is an award winning text for which he won the Nobel Prize in Literature, Abdullahi's text is a less known work by a much younger and less known writer and has received far less scrutiny. The combination of these two texts, especially emerging from different cultural settings, offers two contexts for the appreciation of the role of the oral artist. That both texts are also written by Nigerian writers who straddle different eras in Nigeria's literary traditions further opens the discussion up to a sociological understanding of the importance of the oral artist to the society regardless of the time setting. Given the status of Soyinka's text, it has garnered an array of critical study, many of which have investigated diverse aspects of the play using a range of literary tools.

Amechi Akwanya, for instance, investigates *Death and the King's Horseman* as a cultural struggle for change between Elesin and Iyaloja, "one antagonist pushing the movement of change by default, not by intention, the other demanding total compliance with the cultural tradition" (38). Iva Gilbertova explores African and European features in the text, emphasising the imperatives of investigating any "distinction between what is still perceived as local and what as (sic) imported may be much less simple than we would tend to think" (85). On the use of form, Golnar Karimi examines Soyinka's language use and intersection of culture through the engagement with ritual masks, dance and music. The study finds that Soyinka develops a text that is accessible to those with the Yoruba cultural sensibilities.

. However, despite the scholarly attention paid to Soyinka's award winning play, there has

been no identifiable study to investigate its exposition of the role of indigenous criticism of leadership and how it can be adopted for modern African nation-building in the postcolonial age. The potentials of this play to offer this perspective is boosted by the pairing with *Mairogo*, a dramatic poem set in northern Nigeria.

The Oral Artist

The general conception of oral artists as entertainers accounts for their diminished status in contemporary society. This is however ironic as a number of scholarly works accede to the function of oral poets and their poetry in promoting the good of society especially as they play crucial role of the conscience of the people or the society. Aliyu-Ibrahim and Aliyu in "An Ecocritical Analysis of Ogaga Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp*" for instance, opine that "the African poet from the oral literary period has in addition to entertaining his audience also served as agent of change. He employs his art in the service of the community recording its history in his composition and also serving as its conscience in his criticism/lamprooning of the ills in the society" (143). AbdulRasheed Na'Allah in *African Discourse in Islam, Oral Traditions, and Performance* (151-52) lists the functions of oral poetry to include journalistic, corrective, educative, and entertainment to all strata of society. While citing Kofi Anyidoho's description of oral poets as "mythmakers and mythbreakers", Na'Allah opines that these poets make and break myths "to ensure a politically, socially and morally stable community" (152). Na'Allah goes further in his investigation of traditional oral poets in Hausa-Fulani and Ilorin communities of Nigeria to note the declining status of oral poets. This he attributes to the overwhelming transition of communities from their traditional cultures to the Islamic culture. This suppression of the oral art form as mere

entertainment, with the attendant decline in the status of oral poetry implicates upon the acceptance of the genre to initiate revolutionary tendencies and protest mentalities inherent in traditional African communities when the people are faced with anti-progressive policies or leaderships.

The language of oral artists is such that is loaded with imagery, allusions, pun, among several other figurative devices. The seeming 'esotericism' in the use of language implies a combination of aesthetics and functionality. It indicates skill in capturing the essence of particular issues, imbuing the medium with vitality commensurate to the weight of their message, yet not losing out in the form in which the message is passed. This aesthetic confounds Pilkings so much so in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (hereafter *DKH*) that he retorts that "Christ! Must your people forever speak in riddles?" (*DKH* 71) Perhaps it is this high aestheticism that casts a shadow on the message contained. This can be both a blessing and problem. It can be a blessing to the artist as he/she is able to criticise patrons without outrightly offending them, especially given that their recitations are accompanied by singing and praise singing. Finnegan describes this indirectness as an unconventionality in language use which "makes it possible to indicate publicly what could not be said privately or directly to a man's face" (268). It can be a problem when the sting in the criticism is not sharp enough to penetrate the consciousness of patrons. However, in situations where the sting is not felt by the target directly, other members of the audience can be relied upon to relay the message to the intended hearer. This position is lent credence to by the Yoruba saying that loosely translates thus: "it is so the deaf can hear what is said that the message is given in the presence of the deaf person's child."

Soyinka in *Death and the King's Horseman* describes the Praise-Singer in the opening scene of the play as primarily an entertainer. This corresponds with how Akinyemi too describes bards, as entertainers. Praise-Singer also describes himself in relation to Elesin an adornment: "The cockerel must not be seen without his feathers" (*DKH* 11) and Elesin responds to his praise-singer's accusation of being in 'haste' by saying he is going for a "tryst where the cockerel needs no adornment" (*DKH* 9). To Elesin, the Praise-Singer is a mere adornment as he complements Elesin's moods, wants and lifestyle. This is buttressed by Elesin's response to Praise-Singer's request to accompany him to the land of the dead. Here he reiterates other functions which a praise-singer carries out: "My fame, my honour are legacies to the living; stay behind and let the world sip its honey from your lips" (*DKH* 10).

The Praise-Singer and his Unheeding Auditor

Praise-Singer in Soyinka's play performs the role of the conscience of his patron as it is through him that Elesin hears repeated warnings to stay on the course for which he has been prepared all of his life. These warnings are delivered even before Elesin gets to the market place and is seduced into wanting to stay on, on this side of the world. The philosophical messages of Praise-Singer's lines attest to his depth of knowledge and commitment to the well-being of the community of which he is part and this is in spite of the fact that his economic status is determined by his patron. He says:

PRAISE-SINGER: There is only one home to the life of a river-mussel; there is only one home to the life of a tortoise; there is only one shell to the soul of man; there is only one world to the spirit of our race. If that world leaves its course and smashes on

the boulders of the great void, whose world
will give us shelter? (DKH 11)

[. . .]

The gourd you bear is not for shirking.
The gourd is not for setting down
At the first crossroad or wayside grove.
Only one river may know its contents.
(DKH 17)

Just as these lines stress the importance of Elesin's duty of committing ritual suicide to ensure that the delicate balance between the worlds is maintained, the same lines attest to the fact that despite the fact that Praise-Singer's livelihood is dependent on Elesin's benevolence, the need for the continuation of the world overrides Praise-Singer's needs for personal gain. Praise-Singer's lines also show him as an observant character, quick to gauge the ever-changing mood of his patron. It is through him that we know that Elesin's mood has changed when he sees a beautiful young girl. He tries to play-off the attraction he sees in Elesin's eyes, though Elesin waves off the subtle distraction. Praise-Singer also eulogises Iyaloja for her wisdom in first cautioning Elesin against engaging in sexual activities which may dampen his zest towards carrying out the duty expected of him and also in conceding to Elesin's demands to marry the girl just so Elesin dies contented.

Praise-Singer engages with esoteric language as Elesin accomplishes his feat of having the beautiful girl. His lines invoke in Elesin the awareness of the sacredness of the task before him, yet they express fear for Elesin's level of determination to do his duty. At this point, Praise-Singer is performing functionally spiritual roles geared towards the preservation of the community and its people. His expression of fear is a voicing out of the collective fears of the people who see Elesin's nuptial feat as capable of weakening his (Elesin's) willingness to commit suicide. This

ability of the oral artist to voice the people's perspective derives from the fact that his lowly social status means he is closer to the people than the rulers. He interacts freely with the people, being on the same social classification, and thus he is capable of feeling their pulse and understanding their needs. This is a critical ingredient in the composition of opposition; difference, apartness, an ability to view matters differently from the elite or ruling class. By being lower in the social order, the bard is imbued with the capacity to understand how effective or debilitating certain policies or actions are to the people. The fear Praise-Singer expresses is justified as Elesin eventually fails to commit suicide.

Although the playwright depicts Elesin as already in the throes of committing suicide, Elesin does not complete the act. It could be argued that Elesin was prevented by the constables who intrude upon the sacred rites which will culminate into the ritual suicide, yet we cannot ignore his words to his young bride that "my weakness came not merely from the abomination of the white man who came violently into my fading presence, *there was also a weight of longing on my earth-held limbs*" (emphasis mine, DKH 65). The fact that he eventually strangles himself when he is confronted by the enormity of his shirking of duty corroborates the assertion that he could have carried out his duty irrespective of the presence of the white man's messengers.

The Oral Poet as a Critical Witness

In Denja Abdullahi's dramatic poem, his characterization of Mairogo as a wanderer empowers Mairogo to be a witness to many societal happenings. Mairogo's social standing, just as that of Praise-Singer in Soyinka's play, positions him to be able to comment on policies and their effects on the people. Aliyu in the article: "Social Mediation in Denja Abdullahi's *Mairogo*", writes:

By employing a vagabond character, Abdullahi sheds *Mairogo* of the encumbrances of propriety which would hinder him from gaining insights into the lives of the different strata of citizens in the society and also restrict him from voicing his opinion. As such, Mairogo's wanderings allow the exposition of the lives of the rich and the poor, men and women, young and old (56).

The shedding of the encumbrance of elitism is fundamental to Mairogo being able to comment on socio-economic realities. This character further espouses on the benefits of his vagrant status:

No property to shield away from thieves
 No wife to suck away my strength
 No children to remind me of my sins
 No family to tie me down to earth
 (*Mairogo* 6).

Again and just like in Soyinka's play, Mairogo is imbued with the crucial element needed to serve as an opposition, that of not being a part of the elite or the ruling class and thus capable of speaking out, commenting or criticising policies and actions. Mairogo's vagrant state is caused by a social system which allows a bastardized educational system to continue. The Almajiri educational system which allows the students to beg on the streets as a means of survival has created a vivid gap in the socio-economic structure. While the poet persona accedes to the fact that "Not everybody can be rich./ If the poor and the needy do not exist/ Then who will the rich give *zakat* and *sadaqat* to?" (*Mairogo* 21), he is also quick to identify that alms-giving should not just be to keep the receiver alive, but to bring poor people out of poverty:

But your hunger for people to give alms
 Should not restrain your power of lifting
 people from poverty...

I have seen with my shifty eyes in this land
 How the mighty few cover the multitude
 With the cloak of ignorance
 So that they remain forever high-up
 To watch others grovel before their
 presence and favours (*Mairogo* 21-23).

Mairogo thus lampoons the society which celebrates a system of poverty with no intention of reducing the number of beggars which he says can be done through making functional education and by discouraging begging, and ensuring societies where every person can attain economic heights. The denial of education for the masses has been a tool used to keep the populace submissive:

... the mighty few cover the multitude
 With the cloak of ignorance
 So that they may remain forever high-up
 To watch others grovel before their
 presence and favours
 It is this lack of knowledge and abject
 ignorance that keeps the donkey in patient,
 ceaseless
 Toil all through the years, (*Mairogo* 23).

Mairogo does not only criticize the elite, he equally lampoons the masses who he describes as donkeys for their docility and malleability in accepting their subservient roles:

If only the donkey should know the power
 in its limbs
 If only the donkey should know
 That between it and the pampered horse
 Is only a difference of height,
 If only... (*Mairogo* 23).

Both texts show a critical engagement with the oral artist as the custodian of the morality and conscience of the society. Praise-Singer in *DKH* and Mairogo in *Mairogo* shed personal gain in favour of societal advancement. Especially in *DKH* where Praise-Singer is

typified as being in the employment of Elesin, Soyinka still depicts him as capable of speaking truth to power. Mairogo too, despite his lowly station is unhesitant in calling out poor leadership and poor followership. As both writers employ two different types of the oral artist from the categorisation Finnegan posits in her seminal book, i.e. Court poets, Freelance poets, and wandering poets (83), it is important to note that the oral artists in the selected texts for this study are the two who can be said to occupy polar opposite positions.

Court poets have royal personages or are found around royal courts and they receive reward as professionals. Freelance poets depend on other enterprise and venture to praise singing by the side. Wandering poets however wander from place to place and from patron to patron in the quest for sustenance. The Praise-Singer in Soyinka's play is a Court poet who is attached to a high-ranking personage. The role he plays is most times hereditary and he is on the payroll of Elesin and bound to serve him. Mairogo on the other hand is a Wandering poet with no attached person or patronage. He has no loyalties to any patron neither does he receive any statutory pay for services rendered. Despite the divide in the categories, both oral artists bridge the gulf to play similar roles of social responsibility. This depiction is contrary to Akintunde's position on the function of the bard in relation to speaking truth to power, in criticising personages and their actions. While Akintunde's position may not be incorrect, what the selected playwrights have done with their portrayal of the bard as site of opposition is to focus on the creative capacity of the oral artist to overcome encumbrances of personal needs to comment on real time situations, giving opinion on social matters as it affects the society. This is the crux of the oral artist being an alternative site for the expression of dissenting views.

Conclusion

The traditional oral artists in African societies have honed their art into a functionality that qualifies to be categorized as opposition. Merging entertainment with criticism allows them to engage in opposition devoid of adversary consequences. But because contemporary Western political thought on dissenting opinions is located in formalized, democratized organizations, civil movements, and rights groups, the oppositional functions played by oral artists especially in Africa has been decentralized because the medium is not vested in any formal system. Thus, expressions of dissent outside these groups are rarely, if at all, recognized or given attention. Micheal Karlberg among others, have criticized the Western oppositional system for its competitive posturing and adversarial nature and as "anachronistic, unjust, and unsustainable" (Karlberg 56). This indicates one of the challenges wrought by universalization of ideas and cultures that are predicated on one culture or people.

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