



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 6. Issue.4. 2019 (Oct-Dec)



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

THE ENDURING CHALLENGE OF TAXONOMY IN AFRICAN ORAL LITERATURE

NDUBUISI OSUAGWU, *PhD*<sup>1</sup>, FRANCIS MOWAN GANYI<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Senior Lecturer, Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria.

<sup>2</sup>Senior Lecturer, Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria.

doi: [10.33329/ijelr.64.44](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.64.44)



ABSTRACT

This paper examines the nature of the difficulties of oral literature taxonomy. It reviews the efforts made by scholars over the years to resolve those difficulties in order to arrive at a generally acceptable taxonomy of the art. The study holds the view that the enduring classificatory challenge of African oral literature is partly a consequence of a misconception of the art, arising from an approximation of its essential meaning (to its owners), to its nearest equivalent in alien cultures. The further subjection of the approximated but inaccurate meaning to canons derived from the alien cultures compounds the difficulties. The nature of oral literature itself, especially its compositeness and fluidity; dependence on performance as an essential ingredient of existence; performance contextual relevance; ease of adaptability to new techniques and technology, is particularly challenging to its taxonomists. This scholarship concludes that a generally acceptable taxonomy of oral literature must be based on a proper understanding of the concept of the art, its basic nature and processes of realization.

The problem of taxonomy of African oral literature has its root deep in the conceptualization of the art, and literature generally. It is part of the consequences of an attempt to interpret an experience drawn from one culture to its approximate meaning in another, quite alien to it. The challenge is compounded by further and extensive attempts to use the canons and values of the latter as yardstick for judging the former experience. Appreciation of the verbal art of any linguistic group in an alien language has one purpose: to break down the subject of discourse (in this case, the oral art in question) in such a way that speakers of the alien language may be able to understand. The result of such breakdown is an approximation of terms and concepts to their nearest equivalent in the alien language. Such approximation, *ab initio*, can neither be accurate, nor faithful to the real meaning of such terms or concepts in their original essence.

In Africa, for instance, creativity is an all-embracing endeavour and cuts across all spheres of life. Each linguistic group has a term, generated from its sensibilities, to denote every kind of creative endeavour. The term 'literature' in reference to the oral art of the Igbo, Twi, Kikuyu, or other African people is, therefore, a mere approximation to its nearest equivalent in English. For instance, what the Igbo call *nka* is what is approximated to 'literature' in English. For the Igbo, *nka* loosely means creativity and has diverse application, including creativity in speech, song, dance, sculpture, weaving, sewing and several other dimensions of human endeavour. Thus, the translation of oratory, choreography, songs, narratives and the rest simply as literature is both

inaccurate and misleading. Subjecting these further to critical analyses based on canons or poetics drawn from and meant for analysis or assessment of literature in the same alien language and culture merely compounds an already difficult situation. The owners of the art have names for, and aesthetic expectations from, their property which they judge based on such expectations that are naturally bound to, and dictated by, the people's unique world view and value system.

The apparent disregard of this fundamental point by early western anthropologist and subsequent scholars, building on the faulty foundations laid by those anthropologists, largely accounts for the intractable difficulties in the resolution of the taxonomic challenges of African oral literature. In reviewing the approaches to the taxonomy of the literature, therefore, one needs to determine whether, in the first place, a single taxonomic approach to the study of African oral literature is feasible. In other words: Is a theoretical approach to literature also possible in the taxonomy of African oral literature?

These questions have become pertinent because, like its counterpart (written African Literature), the study of African oral literature has been subject to several kinds of theoretical and analytical approaches, many of which yield little or no positive results, with regard to the scope and content of the artistic endeavour. This situation was made possible and sustained by the fact that early studies of African literature, Oral and written, were subject to Eurocentric anthropological postulations that were generally damaging to artistic endeavour in the continent. The result was and still is that just as African written literature is analysed based on western critical standards that have no relevance within the African context, African oral literature has been approached principally from the western anthropological viewpoint which largely beclouds its artistic and aesthetic content and relevance, as well as its classificatory standards.

Critics and scholars of African oral literature have sometimes asserted that a single taxonomic standard for oral literature is not available and is in fact almost impossible (Ibiyemi: 2017). The problem of taxonomy is further made more complex because the genre of oral literature is intrinsically dynamic; permits change in time, space, form, content, and context of performance. This presupposes its requirement of creativity and originality, since it is performance-based and elusive for a single classificatory standard. A.K. Ayinde (2015) submits that:

*"In traditional African Literature, the oral performer spoke in prose and verse and song [therefore] the dynamism with which the performer exhibits the aesthetic potency of the oral forms makes the African poets and storytellers the community chroniclers, entertainers and collective consciousness".*

Here, the diversity in the mode of rendition partly accounts for the taxonomic difficulty.

Isidore Okpewho (1986) on his part accounts for the complexity in the taxonomy of African oral literature in terms of the fact that early European critics and perceivers of African literature generally, and oral literature in particular, saw it more in the light of "cultural assertions of the African personality" and also as a result of the fact that, early writers of African literature failed to present the creative artistry and aesthetics of African oral art. As a result, African oral literature faced the problem of taxonomy as early Europeans saw it simply as culture not literature. In Okpewho's view, therefore, early African literature generally:

*...seems to have made somewhat less impact as a product of creative genius than as a manifestation of those dynamics of human culture whereby the erstwhile colonized peoples have emerged from a state of subjugation to one of self assertion. Cambridge may have therefore found it more convenient to lodge the phenomenon of African literature in their well established discipline of social anthropology, the foster-home of many British scholars who personally observed and documented the amazing changes through which many African societies have passed. (Okpewho: 1986, P.2).*

Subjecting African literature, both oral and written, to anthropological postulations and theoretical approaches naturally obscured its uniqueness as an artistic and aesthetic endeavour and consequently compounded its taxonomy. It raised pertinent questions as to whether oral literature was literature or culture. However, from whatever point of view one looks at oral literature, what is central and unique to it is that it is realized in performance. There are, therefore, certain techniques which are peculiar to it that cannot and may not come

handy in written literature or anthropology. This means that as a result of its unique existence, oral literature necessarily has a unique essence and its classification must also be unique.

As a result of the controversy over the uniqueness of its existence and modes of classification, Albert B. Lord (1995) posits that:

*...we do not have a special word to designate epics, ballads, prose tales, ritual and lyric songs that existed orally before writing was invented, so we are left with the paradox of oral literature. But if literature can be defined as "carefully constructed verbal expression [then], carefully structured oral verbal expression can surely qualify as literature". People did not wait until there was writing before they told stories.*

What one can easily conclude from this therefore is that the term, 'literature', is used to denote the imaginative constructs and creative potential or conventional structures that designate oral discourse. Therefore, one cannot but regard them as literature in their approximate sense. Oral literature would therefore share with written literature in the use of heightened language in all its sub genres. However, it is unique and set apart in its essence by the fact that it is actualized by word of mouth and only in performance contexts. There is creative intercourse between the performer and an audience. The performer can and does often improvise on the spur of the moment, depending on the dictates of the audience which enlivens the performance such that the oral text constitutes an event. (Ganyi: 2014).

Since oral literature is performance oriented, features of an oral performance become vital in an understanding of the meaning and subsequent classification of oral literature. Unfortunately, the lack of adequate knowledge about this artistic endeavour on the part of western anthropologists who spearheaded the study of oral literature further compounded the taxonomy of the art form. Lee Haring (1994) observes that the problem of taxonomy in oral literature arises from the lack of adequate knowledge about the very nature and form of artistic endeavour. He asserts that the critic J. Hillis Miller once pointed out that:

*The terror of dread readers may experience when they confront a text which seems irreducibly strange, inexplicable, perhaps even mad, often prevents them from attempting to penetrate the text further to decipher its intricacies.*

To him, therefore:

*"Since the west began confronting the irreducibly strange yet compelling power of the word in African verbal art, terror and dread have never been far from the surface.*

Perhaps the most pertinent of Haring's assertions that bears contextual relevance to the problem of taxonomy in oral literature is the reference to Jacques Derrida's postulation in which he holds that:

*One can always inscribe in literature something which was not originally destined to be literary, given the conventional and intentional space which institutes and thus constitutes the text.*

This is precisely what has happened and is still happening in the interpretation and classification of African oral literature within which texts are simply transcribed and translated without any recourse to the creative techniques and performance contexts that produced them. Derrida therefore warns taxonomists' recorders and transcribers that:

*Even given that some texts appear to have a greater potential for formalization, ... ; works whose performativity, in some sense, appears the greatest possible in the smallest possible space, this can give rise only to evaluations inscribed in a CONTEXT to positioned readings which are themselves formalizing and performative.*

In the past therefore, readings, interpretations and classifications of African oral literature have been clogged by approaches which have often sought their grounds in anonymous social forces like primitive mentality of Africans, or other metaphysical presuppositions. Most of these were done with the biases of western critical postulations concerning the fixity of African oral literature.

It is for this reason that X.F.P Ruiz (2012) has succinctly asserted that:

*It is impossible to capture every detail of an oral performance only in paper, to encapsulate the essence of a specific period or author. If this were so, then one speaks of the contemporaneity of oral literature which makes it rather difficult to tie it down to any specific or general taxonomic model of classification.*

Ruiz's supposition would mean that authors and periods determine their taxonomic modes based on contextual influences and aesthetic standards of the oral repertoires of the communities that produce the oral narratives. In his view therefore, perhaps the best and most rewarding mode of classification of oral literature should be a multi-dimensional or what he calls a "polyhedral" mode of analysis and classification that will take into consideration:

- a) The function of narratives
- b) The context of narratives or narrative context that provides the images
- c) The content of narratives
- d) The structure of the narrative

This, he argues, is because the internal dynamics used by the improvisers or the performers in performance sessions afford a greater understanding about communicative categories and strategies which presumably could be connected to oratory and rhetoric as well as to narrative dialectics.

From his own perspectives on Croatian oral literature, particularly oral narratives, Tanja Peric-Polonijo (1995) has asserted that "the problem of classification has not often received the attention of literary theoreticians. It seems that they have remained the basis of the folklore sciences which has to classify its disarranged, heterogeneous and interdisciplinary material. (Peric-Polonijo: 1995, P1). In his view, oral literature, particularly lyric poetry, taxonomy can be carried out at different levels considering that the principles of classification are pure conventions, even as such conventions may not be arbitrary. He believes that the problem of taxonomy requires elaboration from the perspectives of literary aesthetics, literary theory as well as folklore – what X.F.P. Ruiz has termed a "polyhedral" or multidimensional approach to taxonomy.

From the foregoing perspectives, what appears irreducible is that taxonomic studies in oral literature have not only been inconsistent, they have also been complex and divergent as well as clogged by the multi-disciplinary nature of oral literature itself. However, considering that oral literature corresponds to the sphere of the spoken word, and written literature operates at the level of, or approximates to, the printed form, there has been a long enduring controversy over an appropriate definition and consequent classification of oral literature.

Indeed, there hardly exists any standard definition of oral literature that can aid its taxonomy. The continued tendency by folklorists to describe the literature as either "oral", or "folk", even in the face of its dynamic accommodation of contemporary social media experiences, has equally been particularly unhelpful. Such terms largely becloud and diminish the artistic or creative import of this indulgence of society (traditional or cosmopolitan), and compounds the already complex problem of its taxonomic studies.

In spite of this, a broad conceptualization of oral literature places it in the realm of literature that is characterized by oral transmission within a performance context and in most cases the absence of a fixed form. Scholars and critics have therefore tended to adopt two basic approaches to taxonomic studies in oral literature, each of which determines the tools to be employed for the taxonomic exercise. They include but in no way preclude other relevant approaches that a researcher may find relevant: the academic and the generic classification methods. Each of these has its own merits and such demerits that have necessitated the more comprehensive or eclectic approach adopted by Isidore Okpewho and others, and based on the contextual imperative of performance.

Okpewho (1986) argues that in the attempt to find a more befitting critical approach for the analysis and consequent classification of oral literature, critics and scholars should pay more attention to "the contextual

imperative of performance” or “the interpretive approach”. According to him, such an approach analyses not just the content but also the context of performance of oral narratives. It emphasizes narrative intricacies and places the burden of interpretation and classification of oral material on a proper understanding of the performance context. This is inevitable for an understanding of oral material that will enhance its valid classification.

The academic classificatory method appears to be close to Okpewho’s proposed eclectic approach. It allows the researcher to generate criteria of his own, based on personal observation of performance contexts, or maintain already established criteria, also based on observed contexts of performance(s) to categorize the text(s) he encounters, or collects in the course of field research. The academic method however assumes that the researcher:

- 1) Has the ability to justify the adopted criteria for classification based on keen observation of the intricacies of the performance contexts.
- 2) Has the ability and adequate resilience to identify and use patterns generated by the forms of the oral texts themselves to determine to what category each text belongs in his schema.
- 3) His classification of the oral texts is based on stylistic components that are both acceptable and verifiable within the source community, as authentic to the oral narrative repertoire indigenous and conforming to the aesthetic and artistic standards of the people.

The major advantage of this classificatory method is that it is apparently fairly objective. However, it is also largely criticized as smacking of intellectual arrogance and imposition. Consequently, it is seen as being both undemocratic and misrepresentative of the verbal or artistic indulgences of the community, considering that the researcher often ignores the community’s own concepts of its oral literature.

The Generic classificatory method or approach, on the other hand, emphasizes the artistic repertory of the producing community and highlights its aesthetic principles, as evident in their modes of performances and criticism of their oral narratives. Consequently, the researcher’s mode of classification is based entirely on the source community’s perception of the text and what they construe it to be. The major advantage of this approach is its view as being more democratic and empowering of the community. It allows for community participation and final pronouncement on what their literature is or is not. Its major criticism is that it is time consuming, as it requires the researcher’s immersion in the source community. It also requires that the researcher learns the language of the source community to enable him to decipher and appreciate the nuances or levels of language use by performers in their performances. This will, in turn, aid the researcher’s determination of the levels of fluidity or fixity of the oral material and enhance the taxonomic processes. Proficiency in language use will also limit the degree of classificatory error or conflict of oral material.

In addition to these two major methods of oral literature classification, there are other secondary approaches that have sometimes been adopted by scholars – namely, general and detailed classifications. The general classification method implies movement from simple to complex forms of categorization in the already identified major categories of oral literature. It involves breaking oral literature (oral narratives) simply into prose and poetic narratives, which correspond or approximate to simple or complex narratives. This method is generally seen as simplistic and incapable of encompassing many forms of oral narratives.

The detailed classificatory method, though also regarded as simplistic and too broad, focuses on smaller sub categories or sub genres of oral literature thus highlighting potential differences and, or, similarities in the structure and content of oral narratives. It attempts to make subtle distinctions between such sub genres as myths and legends, or trickster and ogre narratives.

From the above considerations, it is, therefore, obvious that the problem of taxonomy in oral literature is still far from resolution. This is particularly significant in the context of a globalized world polity in which digitalization has become a determinant of different modes of realization and dissemination of the oral narrative. The reactions of performers to the influences of contemporary media technology are numerous and

diverse. Considering that oral literature naturally yields to in-situ improvisation, the performer is at liberty to create new forms to meet contemporary demands.

Furthermore, society is dynamic and prone to changes in time and space. Oral forms that emerge at different points in human evolution also change with time to reflect contemporary exigencies (including the reflection of orality in social media, for instance). This rightly presupposes that orality, as Walter Ong (1982) also notes, is metamorphosing and therefore requires current modes of conceptualization and taxonomy. In the light of these developments, therefore, it seems reasonable that the solution to the taxonomy of oral literature lies in the adoption of new modes and new perspectives. Indeed, Peric-Polonijo aptly observes that:

*...in the last decades, folklore studies have been in a situation, as has the literary science, to re-examine and reach new solutions and theoretical explanations from their respective fields. In this re-examination, oral literature forms have an important role, not only through their interpretation but also through their classification.*

What is required for oral literature therefore is a unique and distinct poetics of orality, a set of criteria for its classification, or, as Peric-Polonijo puts it, “*the criteria for asking the computer the right questions*” in the process of taxonomy, since oral literature is gradually being stored in computers and other high-tech devices for researchers to access. He finally asserts, and we agree, that:

*...it seems that the problems of classification (taxonomy) of the oral literary forms can be solved only if elevated to general level where they become examples for consideration in principle. Thus we are forced to shift from the individual towards the general and vice versa, trying to find, at least, momentarily, satisfying answers to the proffered questions.*

## REFERENCES

- Ajadi, Gabriel (1999) “African Oral Literature, Definition, Theory and taxonomy” in E. Adegbiya (ed) The English Language and Literature in English: An Introductory Handbook. Department of Modern and European Languages, Univ. of Illorin.
- Aynde, A.K. (2015) “Aspects of African Oral Literature and Performance Aesthetics”. Ansu Journal of Language and Literary Studies vol I, No. 2.
- Derrida, Jacques (1992) Acts of Literature (ed) Derek Attridge. New York: Routledge. Quoted by Lee Haring.
- Ganyi, Francis M. (2014) “The Word as Event in Oral Discourse: The meaning and importance of storytelling performance contexts in Bakor Society”. Journal of Education and Literature, Research Academy of Social Sciences vol. I No.3, PP. 76-90
- Haring, Lee (1994) “Introduction: The Search for Grounds in African Oral Tradition”. Oral Tradition vol. 9, No. 1 PP.3-22
- Ibiyemi, Ayodele M. (2017) “A Critical Approach to the study of Oral Narratives”. <https://www.academia.edu>. Accessed 14-07-2019
- Lord, Mary Louis (1995) (ed) The Singer Resumes the Tale Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press.
- Miller, J. Hillis (1995) “The search for Grounds in Literary Study” in Rhetoric and form: Deconstruction in Yale. Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schiaifer (ds) Norman Oaks: University of California Press pp. 19-36.
- Okpewho, Isodore (1986) “The study of African Oral Literature”. Presence Africaine. No. 139.
- Okpewho, Isidore (1992) African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character and Continuity. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Ong, Walter (1982) Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word. London and New York: Routledge.
- Peric-Polonijo, Tanja (1995) “The Levels of Classification in Oral Literature: Oral Lyrical Poems Classification According to the Record and Function”. Narrative Unjet vol. 32, No.1, pp55-67.
- Ruiz, X.F.P. (2012) “Towards a Taxonomy of Basque Oral Poetry – Bertsolaritza”. A Thesis submitted to the University of Birmingham for the degree of Mphil, Modern European Studies. Department of Modern Languages, College of Arts and Law.