

THE TECHNIQUES OF STORY-TELLING PERFORMANCE IN EKITI NARRATIVE TRADITION, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Each culture has its own forms of educating and entertaining its citizens. In Ekiti, folktales are a form of entertainment, relaxation and education for the child. This art form is performed later in the day when all the day's chores and meals are over. To make the exercise interesting and memorable to the child, a narrator is free, within bounds, to spice her narratives to the best of her narrative skill. Folktales in Ekiti tradition are in various forms. While there are dilemma tales others are etiological. There are those that have "expansible image" as well as those in which all actions are completed in one plot. Tales without accompanying songs usually appear dry, and uninteresting, they are not much different from ordinary discourse. Those with accompanying songs are interesting and allow the audience to participate actively instead of listening actively.

Keywords: *Techniques, story-telling, performance, narative tardition*

INTRODUCTION

Folktales, in Ekiti tradition are designed to inform, educate and entertain the child. They are usually performed in the evenings after the daily chores are over and dinner taken. Then children from and within the family compound would come together on the corridor, sitting round palm oil lamp to listen to and participate in story-telling exercise in which women are the main narrators and children the target audience. The children could sometimes assist the narrator in either shelling melon or ginning cotton fluff while she is either spinning yarn or weaving cloth on the traditional hand loom. There are sanctions against holding story-telling sessions in the daytime. Children accept such sanctions as a rule even though it has not yet been established that any person (parent or child) has ever suffered any misfortunes as a result of violating the prohibitive sanctions.

Only very few attempts have ever been made to study folktales and the art of story-telling from Ekiti in a scholarly fashion; the few attempts have been made by only Afolabi-Ojo (1966) and Oriloye (1977). This paper sets out to appraise the various techniques which make the performance of story-telling exercises in Ekiti a memorable experience to the participants. An exploratory exercise of this nature cannot claim to be perfect or all-inclusive hence there is room for further works.

CONTENTS OF EKITI FOLKTALES

Ekiti folktales contain animals, plants, fairies and fictitious persons having human attributes such as the ability to think, and talk as humans, wear clothes, work and

walk on two legs. The many feats and antics credited to them tend to provide fun for the children especially as most of such characters are known to them in appearance and habits. However, the amount of amusement a child can derive from a folktale would largely depend on the narrative capabilities of the narrator.

Form: There are short stories in which all actions and whatever conflicts generated in the story are resolved in the same single plot. There are stories that are not accompanied by any song. Such stories however tend to be dry and uninteresting to the audience. There are stories with song-accompaniments that just allow the audience to participate to reduce boredom. But there are stories with songs that are designed to lead into such stories by containing germs and specs of the story proper. There are tricksters stories in which a relatively smaller animal tricks and renders a much bigger and stronger one stupid. In such stories, the trickster performs his antics on the larger one as a form of entertainment in the traditional society. The trickster is therefore the most paradoxical of all characters: the creator and destroyer, prosecutor and judge, giver and negator. He always dupes and he too is sometimes duped or fooled. Also, there are stories that have "open-ends" Such are stories that allow further thematic development of episodes along the style of the original story theme.

Stories in this category are a deliberate action aimed at challenging a narrator to demonstrate her compositional skill. They also inspire both the narrator and audience to take more active interest in their environment and explore same for literary material. There are stories that have more than one or two plots. The narrator is also challenged to knit all the different plots into an organic one that is sequential. There are folktales which are designed to provide explanations for why certain things are the way they are. This category of stories is known as etiological tales. Though the explanations they contain may lack scientific proof, they succeed at satisfying the curiosity of the child about the why's and wherefore of certain things.

Narrative Techniques: Some stories are told strictly according to local conventions in respect of narration, audience and the time and context of performance. Among the Ekiti, story-telling is never taken or practiced as a profession. It is a taboo to act or dramatize folktales or dance to the rhythms of the accompanying songs. However, a narrator may draw on her own experience to add some detail and vividness to demonstrate her literary astuteness. This could make it an oral drama.

Language: The language of Ekiti folktale is very simple and straightforward unlike the complexities found in adult discourses. This relative simplicity could be explained in terms of the limited vocabulary of the child, his incomplete usage and his limited experience of life. Since the art of story-telling is designed for the child-audience, it is only logical that its vocabulary should be couched in simple straightforward language so that he can easily understand both the contents and the instruction it is meant to convey to him. However, this does not mean that the language must always remain monotonously plaintive. Linguistic devices and other narrative techniques are employed to make the narratives less prosaic and memorable to the child. Such devices include the use of songs, ideophones, onomatopoeias, allusions, metaphors, obscure terms as well as dramatic dialogue.

Painting of Word Pictures: An accomplished narrator might employ impressive passages in which she could describe and paint characters and objects by her emotions and tones thus presenting vividly painted pictures by her own imagination and narrative skill in order to induce different shades of meaning in her audience. Thus the audience could "see" quite familiar pictures of the characters as they go through their actions in the story. Such continues to task the imagination of the listener as if the action being described is being watched on stage live or on the screen. However, since not all narrators possess the same narrative skill, the achievement of a successful narration would vary from one narrator to the other.

Opening Formula: The frequent use of formulas is designed to enhance the literary effects of the performances. It also helps to set both the narrator and audience in the proper frame of mind for the story-telling exercise. It also excites the audience. Each formula elicits certain formal responses from the audience. For instance, there are the following examples collected from various parts of Ekiti land:

Narrator: *Mo waa ro o*

Audience: *Tereja*

Narrator: *Mo waa ro, waa ro, waa ro*
Mo de 'le Ijapa Tiroko
Oko Yannibo

Narrator: *I searched for a tale*

Audience: *Tereja*

Narrator: *I searched, searched and searched for a tale (until) I got to the house of Ijapa Tiroko Husband of Yannibo*

The narrator is at liberty to repeat the first line while the audience continues to answer until she is satisfied that she has secured the attention of the children.

Yet another version of the above formula is presented below:

Narrator: *Alo o o o*

Audience: *Aa loooo*

Narrator: *Alo mi da "paaa"*
O ro "tijo o o"
O so "gudugudu" meje
Oku a gbo "gbii" ale
Alo mi da l'ori Anasin oyere
A nse won-won-won s'udi upon

Narrator: *I have a story*

Audience: *A folktale*

Narrator: *My tale breaks "paaa"*
It hangs "tijo o o o"
It breaks seven big fruits
Each of which falls "gbiii" to the ground
My tale breaks on Anasin Oyere
The one with beaded ladle.

The ideophones "paaa a", "tijooo" and "gbi i i" are deliberately retained in the translation to avoid the violence of detracting from the meaning of the action each represents. Apart from the conventional formulas, each narrator is at liberty to invent her own "internal formula" to start a story. For instance a story about a great famine in the land of the animals is introduced with the following formula:

Narrator: *Aaalo o o ooo*
 Audience: *Aaa lo*
 Narrator: *Uyan mu, mu, mu, aye*
Uyan mu, mu, mu orun
Ojo para para ba 'le
Adiye sare so je "komu"
 Narrator: *I have a folktale*
 Audience: *A folktale*
 Narrator: *Famine raged, raged, raged on earth*
Famine raged, raged, raged in heaven
Isolated raindrops fell to the ground
Hen rushed to swallow them, "komu"

Again the ideophone "komu" is deliberately retained in the translation in order to retain the picturesque manner in which hen rushed to swallow the raindrops. In recognition of the importance of ideophones in enhancing meaning, Finnegan (1970) expressed that:

This special word which conveys a kind of idea-in-sound and commonly used...to add emotion or vividness to a description or recitation ... they are specifically introduced to heighten the narrative or add an element of drama

She goes further to describe the function of ideophones as:

A form of onomatopoeia is often used to add elegance and vividness to the narration. A style plentifully embroidered with ideophones is one of the striking characteristics or an effective story-teller.

Closing formula:

These are used to round off a narrative. For instance, there are the following:

Narrator: *Ibi mo de*
Mo s'eyin ni ni i i o
 Audience: *K'aabo o o*
 Narrator: *Thus far I went (before)*
I returned
 Audience: *Welcome back*
 Narrator: *Ibi mo de mo s'eyin ni ni o*
Ipakun Odo gbala
 Audience: *maa ba onfa*
Mi a ba on ku wooro
Si be.

Narrator: *Thus far I went before I returned
The climbing plant at Odo gbala
Audience: I will join them in pulling it (but)
I will not join them in dying there.*

Some of these formulas might appear naive and trivial. But when considered in the context of their prevalence and popular use all over Ekiti land, then, they could be appreciated as conventional narrative elements which are rich in phraseology and folk thought in literary presentation.

Songs: The frequent occurrence of songs in folktales is confirmed by Finnegan (1970) who remarks that, "songs are characteristic of African tales all over the continent" Most stories are accompanied by songs which constitute a part of the narrative or are used just to ensure audience participation thereby eliminating boredom. The audience constitutes the chorus. The accompanying songs could be in the form of lead-chorus, call-response or dialogue. Thorne (1913) informs us that: "Speeches by animal characters are often sung; sometimes in falsetto and always with a nasal twong" Doke (1934) emphasizes that: "They (songs) do not occur in every story and in some cases, there are local distinctions between prose and choric series".

Stories without songs usually sound dry and bare as they might not be easily distinguished from the ordinary everyday speech or conversation. In some stories, the songs constitute the main elements of the story. This is especially frequently employed in "tales with expansible image". These are tales with open ends as mentioned above. Commenting on the importance of songs in Swahili folktales, Steere and Werner (1922) emphasize that:

Frequently, the skeleton of the story seems to be contained in the snatches of singing which the story teller connects by an extemporized account of the intervening history.

Songs also perform entertainment functions in narratives by guaranteeing audience participation in the process of story-telling. Thus, rather than being passive the audience becomes participatory. However, among the Ekiti, the singing aspect does not involve the use of any musical instruments as accompaniment beside handclapping. Also no dancing to the rhythm of the songs is allowed. While most Ekiti folktale songs are performed antiphonally, others are in the choric form.

Theatricality: A story-telling session is an oral dramatic performance. This is one of the fundamental features of the Ekiti Story-telling tradition. Narrators are known to deliver their stories with such subtlety, vividness and drama which may not be easily understood by a casual observer. The sitting arrangement of the children presents a horse-shoe formation which tends to thrust the stage into the audience area. From her place at the center, the narrator could see and interact with her audience. Lighting for the performance is supplied through fire or palm oil lamp(s). For the costume, each child retains his or her normal house wear which has been put on since morning. No other props are used; hence it is cheap to produce. Emphasizing the theatricality of African story-telling exercises, generally, Smith and Dale (1920) use the Ila story-telling tradition as a paradigm. According to them:

It would need a combination of photograph and kinematograph to reproduce a tale as it is told ... Here was a hip mumbling but every muscle of the face and the body spoke, each in its tone.

Also, Junod (1938) from an observation of the Thonga and the South Bantu Folktale performance concludes that the narrator

... acts tales rather than just telling them. No written version, however accurate in language or translation could hope to reproduce the real atmosphere of the actual narration.

Also, from an observation of Lamba story-telling performance, Finnegan (1970) remarks that:

The single characteristic that I found both striking and most incommunicable in writing was just this ... the way narrators could add subtlety and drama, pathos, humour, characterization or detached comments by the way they spoke as much as by the words themselves.

The above confirms an appropriate use of words, expressions and figures of speech. It is therefore questionable why the dramaturgy of African story-telling traditions had been downplayed for so long. Neither are the stylistic elements mentioned. Unfortunately, the dramatic elements constitute what many observers see and regard as "the shadowy or crude characterization of many personalities in African stories" (Finnegan 1970). When narrating her story, the Ekiti narrator assumes the personalities of the various characters involved, acting out their dialogue, their facial expressions and so on. Thus, through oral dramatization, the narrator saves a lot of words.

To then argue or insinuate that the African "narrator, (Generally) cannot enact the various actions of the characters in the full sense of drama" is to be unmindful of the fact that story-telling is not a full-scale drama but a "dramatized narrative" The narrator can be observed to be suggesting the virtuous acts and emotions of each character through the use of dramatic dialogue and body movement, even as she remains on her seat. She explores and exploits to the fullest all the narrative freedom granted her by tradition to enhance the vividness of her story while the audience too make verbal contributions in the form of spontaneous exclamations, remarks, comments or questions.

CONCLUDING REMARK

Story-telling is an important means of socializing the young ones in the traditional society. Women lead narrators while children constitute the audience. Story-telling allows the narrator to develop and demonstrate high literary skills. Through regular participation the children, as the audience, are being socialized, and informally instructed on morals, norms and traditions and literary skills. Story-telling is an oral theatrical performance with essential features of drama. As an exploratory work, it is neither exhaustive nor water-tight. The scholar is therefore challenged to take interest in researching into the various aspects of the African oral performances especially children's performances.

Research into African culture should be stepped up as modernity and urbanism are weaning the young from their cultures at very early stages. Technology, having reduced the world to a village setting, keeps bombarding the child with lots of foreign cultures. Educational planners should make the study of individual culture compulsory in the curriculum. All the tiers of government should generously fund research into, collection and preservation of Nigeria's cultural materials for posterity.

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