

THE LITERARY SIGNIFICANCE OF AKILE BENDE'S POETRY AMONG THE TIV IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The present-day African society is already falling prey to the dictates of westernisation. As a result, Oral literature is viewed by some people as anachronistic and moribund. There is no aggressive effort towards its encouragement, recognition, let alone preservation. Oral poets like doctors, pilots, engineers, journalists, teachers among others play very important roles through their various talents in society. Nevertheless, the society gives very little recognition to these great roles to nation building. The Tiv Oral poet, like his fellow poets in other nationalities is very much interested in chronicling the contemporary issues of Tiv society. This is achieved through a marriage of the traditional and modern values. The choice of Akile Bende: a quintessential first generation Tiv traditional artist from Benue State is aimed at highlighting the place and relevance of Tiv Oral poetry in the nation, Africa and indeed the humanity.

Keywords: *Akile Bende, Poetry, Tiv, Literary significance*

INTRODUCTION

Oral literature scholars in Nigeria tend to focus attention on the so-called big traditions namely the Oral literatures of the Yoruba, Ibo and Hausa. In Nigeria, according to Ker (2004), not much attention is being paid to the oral literatures of the so called minorities. Recently, however, scholars from the neglected nationalities started carrying out researches into the Oral literatures of their people. It therefore, follows that, if our modern society whose population is still largely illiterate truly wants to create and sustain national consciousness and cohesion, then they have to learn several lessons from oral poetry, hence, this treatise on the poetry of Akile Bende, a pioneer Tiv Poet, the only surviving person among the first generation Tiv oral poets. The concern of this study is to demonstrate that traditional societies like Tiv use oral poetry as a vehicle for inculcating socially acceptable behaviour in their members. This is a dominant feature in Akile Bende's poetry. He uses his songs to preach Tiv tradition and culture. He is a community mobiliser and chronicler of important events in Tiv history. Oral poets have always eulogised the lives of those who epitomise the moral virtues of the society, while at the same time, they satirizes the wrongs of social malefactors.

Akile Bende has plausibly demonstrated this in all his songs. Therefore, a research on Akile Bende's songs is crucial because Nigeria is be-devilled with the problem of total collapse in our private and public morality. There is

the pursuit of selfish interests and crass materialism. A research on a moral poet will help in changing the situation. Similarly a research of this nature underscores the need to preserve the works of notable Tiv oral poets like Akile Bende whose works are already facing the threat of extinction, a common malaise facing other Tiv oral poets that must be tackled with vigour. The primary aim of this research work is to demonstrate that oral poetry is a veritable medium of creating national and community consciousness throughout the whole world.

BRIEF HISTORY OF AKILE BENDE

The contemporary first generation Tiv Oral Poets include Bam Gbinde, Maza Nomwhange, Amegh Ijov, Aunde Iyom and Akile Bende. Curiously, none of them is still living except Akile Bende, who started his singing career before 1941. Akile is a Tiv Oral Poet per excellence who preaches and propagates government policies and programmes. Other issues addressed in his songs are that of the concept of witchcraft in Tiv tradition, political and elegiac songs. Although the exact date of his birth is unknown, but it is known that he was born in Mbayion in Gboko Local Government Area of Benue State, to Mr. and Mrs. Bende from the same Local Government Area of Bende. Akile's late father was an acclaimed Oral poet during his life time. Akile Bende's wife, Gumkwase, was until now adjudged to be the best female dancer in the whole of Tivs land. "The Tiv believe that to succeed as a poet, one has to take medicines "Ijiagba" to clear his voice"

Akile revealed this in an interview in (2004) that he started singing without taking any "ijiagba" medicine, until much later when he succumbed to pressure to intending Tiv Oral Poets who wanted him to give them the medicine. The Tiv people are patriarchal in nature. Ker (2002) asserts that There are two sets of rights in Tiv land and it is upon these that the superstructure of Tiv egalitarianism is based. If an individual feels that his "Tyo" is somehow persecuting him, he takes refuge in the mother's birth place that is his 'Igba' (material kinsmen). Akile Bende fled to his 'Igba' at a very tender age, as a result of witchcraft manipulations. According to him, anytime he slept, agundu (house rat) would eat his leg.

In the Tiv belief system, this is witchcraft manipulation. It could also mean a premonition for untimely death or a disastrous thing that is about to happen to the individual involved. This explains why the first song he sang was on Agundu. This song belongs to the genre called 'Tbaimagh'. The first version of his Tbiamagh songs is called 'Dagba Biam'. It was also at this time that he sang on 'Agundu'. The second version of his 'Tbiamagh' songs is called 'Alua Ibiam'. At the time he started singing 'Alua Biam' he introduced music and dance and had a set of musical instruments with 15 players. At Present, he has a companion or helper called Ahor Amande, as the only member of his pioneer band. He won an award for the best Tiv Oral Poet during the FESTAC:

(Festival of Arts and Culture, 1977). His ingenuity in Tiv Oral Poetry has endeared him to many notable Tiv sons and daughters who commission him to sing for them namely: Baaki Kembe, Iorliam Acho, Tar Vanger Atim Dzungwe, Amaa Bai, Astaga Anembah, Iorhemen Dzever, Ijigher Dabo, to mention but a few. He is currently the chairman of the Tiv traditional Oral Poets Association and is happily married and blessed with many children.

SOME OF AKILE BENDE'S THEMES AND SOCIAL VISION

Oral poets all over the world play crucial roles in the development of the society. The Tiv Oral Poet is very much interested in chronicling contemporary issues of his society. And this is achieved through coitus of the traditional and modern values. Akile Bende, a classical first generation Tiv Oral Poet through his art has consistently demonstrated a passionate love for the tradition of his community. He is ever resolute in showing that the Tiv are the model, the book and copy to follow. It is rather sad to note that, rather than appreciating his tremendous contributions to the upliftment of his community, his works are gradually sinking into oblivion even though he is still alive and actively composing more songs. This is why he lamented in one of his songs thus:

TIV VERSION

Kaa gomonti u Benue George Akume Dajo
M hingir tsohon zabiya ke imo cii Nigeria fa

M ngu or u ngise je
Mhii imo inyom in 1941 laje zan zan

Mza gesa u ior ir Afirika kpa m da too

Nashena kopu ken inyom I seventy-seven la jiiiligh

Musa ibgam

Dan-Mariya gbede imo kuma er mo ga

Kpa uke mba civir gben
Ka una da ter or nan na matu je kpa
Mo Akile Bende yo

Wankyekye tso kpa or nam ga
Er mugu tuwhan ior a tuwha yo
George Kehcm Ugba Dajo

Yan mtoo kopu

Doo Nigeria yo mfa me kopu ngu kwagh

Akile Wangbande imo yam I doo kpishi Kpa mba ve fe takerada

Kera mba wasen mo ga.

ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Tell the Benue State Governor, George Akume Dajo
I am old in Tiv Oral Songs
I started singing in 1941 till date
I competed at the Festival for Arts and Culture
And won a trophy in 1977

Musa my maternal clansman
Dan Mariya has not sang to my level
But the foreigners (Hausa) still adore him
When he sings for somebody, he is given a car but as for me
Akile Bende

Not even a bicycle is given to me as if I am insulting people
George Kehem Ugba Dajo When I won the trophy,
Nigeria celebrated so I thought it is a great thing
Isaac Wangbande my song is very good
But the elites do not help me.

In the above song, Akile is lamenting of the shabby manner he is being treated especially by the elites in his community, despite the numerous achievements he has made in his career. He compares himself with Alhaji Dan Mariya Jos, an Oral Poet from Plateau State who is adored by the Hausas. The common themes treated by Akile Bende in his songs are poverty, elections, praise, witchcraft, agriculture, etiquette, appeal funds among others. Tiv songs address more than one theme at a time and Akile Bende's songs are not divorced from this common trend. And so it is possible to find elements of praise songs in his funeral or political songs. The latter part of this study therefore intends to carry out a sequential analysis of the various themes portrayed in Akile Bende's songs.

WITCHCRAFT

One of the main pre-occupations of literature is to project and promote a people and their culture. This enables the world to know them for what they are. The concept of witchcraft is very crucial in the understanding of the Tiv belief system. In fact what ignited the art of singing in Akile Bende is 'Agundu' (house rat). This 'agundu' was fond of eating his legs while he was asleep. For a die-hard Tiv traditionalist like Akile Bende, it was a premonition that something was amiss or a sign that he was suffering from witchcraft manipulation. This explains why in 1941, he sang his very first song as a way of attracting the attention of his kinsmen to this unfortunate plight.

TIV VERSION

Mo yo mugu ne nyam yene ine ya je Man ka nyi agundu a beem e?

Ngu va yan mo kpa ngu yan u tamber ga Gyuse Gule alu me sule ne kar
nyam ayina

I can ne m umbur ye

Agundu nyimam sha gambe

M pine kpa Tyotume Agahyande tsuumu

hev I wa iyar I hi keren a kor ye

Agundu tsev tsetsa kpa ka a pever mo iyou ga

M u da za ishor man u fa ye?

Gadia me kende iyough me agundu a lu tswen ga

M maa kpa ngise lu wasen mo tom ga

Gyuse Gule mo m ta cia ne m hemen

Apundu a dondo ga, a de yan mo anghahar.

ENGLISH TRANSLATION

I am meat for you people

Why would the house rat finish me?

It is coming to eat me without caution Gyuse Gule when I die and you share

My meat it may not be enough

It's this suffering that I am thinking of.

The house rat bit me on the bed,

I asked but Tyotume Agahyande lied to me.

The house mouse is pregnant and is looking for food. It has hatched but I
am yet to be comfortable.

Should I consult a sootsayer before you will know?

If not I will not leave my house for the house rat alone.

When I was building, it did not help me to work.

Gyuse Gule, I make my oath first;

The house mouse (agundu) will not follow it should stop eating my legs.

In the Tiv tradition, it was believed that when a person dies he is exhumed and his meat is shared among witches and wizards for eating. That is why in the song above, the poet started by singing that he is his kinsmen's meat why they would allow the house rat to finish him. He continued that his worries are because he feels when he dies his meat may not be enough for them to share. This song is hinged on the theme of witchcraft.

LITERARY FEATURES OF AKILE BENDE'S POETRY

The term oral poetry is complex rather than an absolute and clearly demarcated one. In trying to find out the features of Oral Poetry, Finnegan's advice in Ker (2002) is instructive:

What we must look for is not one absolute criterion but a range of Stylistic and formal attributes: features like heightened language, Metaphorical expression, musical form or accompaniment, structural Repetitiveness (like the recurrence of stanzas, lines or

refrains) prosodic Features like metre, alliteration, even perhaps parallelism.

So the concept of poetry turns out to be a relative one, depending on a combination of stylistic features, no one of which may necessarily and invariably be present. In this study therefore, the mode of delivery of poetic compositions and the various poetic devices that have been used by Akile Bende in the poems discussed in this study will be investigated. This is inevitable because a good appreciation of any literary work is incomplete without a critical analysis of the way in which the artist may have passed his message to the audience.

LITERARY FEATURES

Prominent features used by the Oral Poet include metaphor, idiophone, repetitions of linguistic and sound features, loan words, apostrophe, exaggeration (hyperbole), proverbs, biblical allusions among others. It is important to note that, it may not be possible to go into an exhaustive discussion of all these poetic devices, where ever they may occur in the poems studied. Instead, the aim here is to give a representative number of the prevalent features and consequently discuss how they function (where applicable) in the poems treated in this work. The procedure adopted in the discussion of the poetic devices used in the study is as follows:

First, an attempt is made at defining, the poetic device under examination where it is absolutely necessary. Secondly, an example is given from the original text. Thirdly, there is a literal translation of the identified and fourthly, we indicate the elements in the text that constitute the devices used where need be. Other relevant remarks are made, where necessary in the course of the discussion.

APOSTROPHE: This is a literary device in which a subject is addressed in absentia. The subject could be a person, an animal or a supernatural figure. The address is normally in praise of the addressee. Akile Bende uses some apostrophes in his poetry especially when he addresses some of his admirers in their absence. A good example is when he addressed the former governor of Benue State, Late Chief Aper Aku thus:

TIV VERSION

Tor Aper Aku er u hide tyo yough
Ve nenge a we man u kpe yo
Aku kiso, u yange se u peven ityav
A atotyev yo kwagh kpa shi bee je
Gaadi u yange korou kpa da nenge u
A ibo you ga.

ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Chief Aper Aku since you returned for your
Kinsmen to see you before you died
Aku kiso, you've stopped us
From warring with the foreigners, the matter is finished
The prison that arrested you saw you
With no guilt.

HYPERBOLE: Hyperbole is a figure of speech that uses gross exaggeration in order to heighten the meaning or effect of an otherwise normal situation. Akile's use of this figure of speech is rampant and it thus affords the audience the opportunity of knowing the poet's sentiments usually exhibited by the poet which are normally passed to the audience.

TIV VERSION

I tyo yam I mough cica se da haa gomna Akume Dajo
Voto a kmbir yan zan zan
A tema gomonti yo ior mba yan ve lu a indi ga
La mba kehen I can bee ve

ENGLISH TRANSLATION

My people let us all go and vote Governor Akume Dajo.
He should win as governor again and again.
When he became governor even those who were thin
became fat and are no longer suffering.

In the above poem, the poet is goading on his people to vote Governor George Akume for a second term, since according to him, Benue people are enjoying democratic dividends to the extent that people who were hitherto thin are now fat.

IDIOPHONES: Ideophones are phonaesthetic representations of extra-linguistic gestures such as human looks, actions, movements and postures. By using the device the oral performer attempts to make a visual recreation of human action by the use of suggestive sounds and gestures. Idiophones rely very much on the use of reduplicatives which are compounds formed by two identical words or those which are just slightly different. Ideophones add rhythmic quality to the poem in which they are used. Akile Bende makes use of Idiophones in his poems. In one of the songs on the use of fertilizer he puts it this way: *mo a pase ne a wanger ne ga kpa ior miba wan a mo mbagen mba bungu-bungu* (if my explanation of the usefulness of fertilizer is not clear there are other oral poets bungu-bungu). There is also the use of another idiom in one of his songs where he emphasizes the need to vote governor Akume for a second term he said: gomna "hingir zie zie" meaning the governor became restless. In yet another song Akile wanted Mr. Nyaregh Dajo to buy a motorcycle for the wife as he said:

TIV VERSION

Una kaa iyo sha ijime
I hemhe "vuwo-vuwo"

ENGLISH TRANSLATION

When she climbs on the back of a snake
it crushes to pieces.

It is pertinent to say at this juncture that ideophones form pictures of what they refer to and are also a characterization of actions or states.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF HIS POETRY

Our country, Nigeria was colonized by the British and so our national policy on education seems to be fashioned after that of the British who had little or no interest in stimulating research in the rich African orature in their colonies like Nigeria. The result is that, up till now, oral literature is not adequately recognized in our schools. Therefore, most Nigerian Scholars were hitherto unaware of the necessity of embarking on academic research in folklore or oral literature, but today the story has changed. For more than three decades now African Scholars have shown appreciable interest in the study of African orature. They include: Okot P. Bitek, A. Babalola, Wande Abimbola, O. O. Olatunji and Isidore-Okpewho to mention but a few.

Their works have debunked the Eurocentric assertions that African oral literature is only based on prose narratives and therefore, has only little place in literature. These efforts have clearly revolutionalised research into African orature. Using Akile Bende as a credible example of an African oral poet, we would be right to say that African orature can be favourably compared with any other literature any where in the world. This is because the created world repeats itself within the nations of human beings in order to show their common origin and their great unity. According to a Swahili poet, Shaoban Robert in Mapanje (1982):

Poetry is not something precious obtainable only in Maindi, which gave the Swahili's Muyanka.

It is obtainable in every country.

In the saying which goes what there is in Pemba is in Zanzibar as well.

*Take away Zanzibar and Pemba, and say
'What is in Europe is in Africa as well',*

Take away Africa and say 'what is in Asia is in America as well.

Back home to our country, Nigeria, there is a noticeable imbalance in the oral poetry research which is concentrated on the major nationalities of Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba neglecting the minority ones as if they do not have their own poetry. This situation is totally unacceptable. The choice of Akile Bende from a minority Tiv nationality of Benue State is tailored to show that oral artists of

repute abound even in the' minority nationalities in Nigeria. This has become imperative as a result of the multi-talented and multi-factted songs composed by the poet and the significant contributions made to his community and society since he started his singing career in 1941.

We have attempted a treatment of the major themes, functions, significance and relevance as well as the literary features employed by the poet such as biblical allusions, similes, metaphors, proverbs, personification, rhetorical questions, ideophones etc. All these have greatly enhanced the beauty of his art. Akile's songs convey moral lessons. Nigeria is be-devilled with the problem of a total collapse in our private and public morality. There is the pursuit of selfish interests and aggressive quest for materialism. Parents no longer create enough time to inculcate morals in their children. Therefore, Akile's songs can be prescribed as a veritable alternative in changing the sad situation. This makes Akile Bende's songs stand out in Tiv orature. His moralistic songs are not limited to a particular age group but both for the elderly and the young. He uses his songs to warn or caution the Tiv people not to deviate from the pious culture of their forebears. He encourages the youth to seek wisdom under the tutelage of the elderly.

CONCLUSION

The elderly who are the repositories of oral materials could serve as informants to intending scholars and the oral poets themselves too. This is necessary because of the constant deaths of the elderly due to old age. Hence, the need for a timely collection and preservation of their works for generations yet unborn. To encourage scholarly research into Tiv orature and oral literature in Nigeria, we recommend the inclusion of Nigerian cultural studies in the school curricula, beginning from primary to tertiary levels of education. There should be the establishment of folklore studies in Nigerian Universities. No meaningful achievement can be made in any research work without injecting the needed funds into it. Consequently, research grants should be made available to individuals and research institutes to write about the cultures of their people. This will enable people to read about other cultures other than their own, thus promoting unity in diversity among Nigerians.

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INTERVIEWS

Interview with Akile Bende in his compound at Mbayion in Gboko Local Government Area, Benue State by the researcher on Friday 19th November, 2004.

Interview with Akile Bende of same address by John Diogo: A producer with Radio Benue on the 14th August, 2004.