ORATURE AND MULTIMEDIA: EXPLORING THE INTERDISCIPLINARY POTENTIALS OF AN EMERGENT FIELD
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Abstract
The broad aim of the author in this paper is to highlight the interface of Orature and Multimedia, a new course that has been introduced recently in Ahmadu Bello University as an offshoot of Orature which in itself has not been fully developed as a discursive field. The methodology involves basically a critical analysis of the earlier scholarly positions in the field of oral literature. Although there have not been appreciable efforts by, especially, African scholars to develop the field of Orature into a full pledged academic discipline outside the works of Isidore Okpewo and few other notable scholars, orature is, however, steadily attracting scholarly attention in the post-colonial African context, which is more and more becoming saturated by the mass-media outlets. The author, therefore, intends to highlight the historical trajectory of orature and its contemporary interface with multimedia technology. Finally, the conclusion of this paper is that there is need to focus research in the increasing interplay of Orature, electronic media and other forms of media technologies.

Key words: orature, electronic media, multimedia technology, African culture

Historical Context
Decolonization process in Africa has attained its momentum at the threshold of the 20th century, immediately after the experiences garnered by Africans who participated actively in the Second World War on behalf of their different colonial overlords such as Britain, France, Portugal and Belgium (Davidson 2005: 162). Ideologically, African nationalists and their political struggles in the earlier stages have concentrated their activities more on the attainment of political freedom guided by Nkrumah’s dictum – “seek the political kingdom, and all would then be added” (ibid. p. 162). Consequently, in the middle decades of 20th century significant proportions of colonial dominions in the African continent have achieved political independence from western European colonial powers. The emphasis on political decolonization has yielded its dividends. The most important aspect of the dividends can be seen in the way in which colonial Empire retreat from direct political control of African colonies to the background (ibid. p. 74).

However, as soon as the euphoria that greeted the spate of independence across the continent died down, especially with the apparent
inability of neo-colonial elite, who are also the local beneficiaries of colonial system, to rethink or even transform colonial development paradigm in its totality, the actual existential predicament experienced in individual African countries began to rear themselves. Subsequently, the economic crisis that ensued from the 1970s was the main factor responsible for the mounting social pressure to overhaul the neo-colonial system in Africa (Eyoh 1996: 46). It is believed that the perpetuation of colonial social structures and institutions in post-independent African states is merely serving the interests of the colonizer rather than the colonized. The intensification of socio-economic problems in postcolonial Africa has correspondingly begun to jolt the newly independent African states by threatening their very existence (ibid. p. 47). As a result, the early 1980s has witnessed the total surrender of most African states to the dictates of Bretton Woods Institutions. In fact, neo-colonial elite were never prepared to pursue decolonization agenda in Africa to its logical conclusion. Of course, doing so requires nothing short of the deconstruction of colonial structures in all their ramifications, including boundary adjustment in situations where mutual co-existence proves to be impossible (Alpers 1995: 1).

Furthermore, the significance of the cultural dimension of decolonization process in Africa is, for instance, overshadowed by nationalist political struggles (Fanon 1982: 166). Policy makers, either through tacit acceptance of colonial system or ignorance, are indifferent to the intensity of the entanglement of Africa to western imperialism. The cultural legacies of the Empire are conveniently left intact by the neo-colonial elite. In particular, little or nothing has been done about the unviable system of education bequeathed to African states by colonial administrators. The course contents of, especially, academic institutions across Africa remained the type that would only mould African people in the image of colonialists in their worldview and social orientation (Usman 1979). The curriculum designed by the colonizer was meant to mould Africans to hermetically accept their conditions of exploitation as normal. In most cases, the development paradigm adopted in the former colonies has turned out to be a one-way-traffic to stagnation with all its attendant social problems. Again, as a result of our neo-colonial orientation, the postcolonial phase of African history is similarly debilitated by the dictates of imperialist institutions and structures such as the World Bank and the IMF. These global institutions have been mainly responsible for social collapse in contemporary Africa (Adesina 2006: 33). In fact, even the vestiges of colonial infrastructure, social institutions and any promise of social renewal have all disappeared. The neo-colonial elite are completely bereft of either vision or mission, capable of rescuing Africa out of the entrapment and snares of its colonial past.

However, it was in the mid 1970s that the limitations of colonial development model in postcolonial African societies began to rear themselves. Neo-colonial governments all over Africa were forced to reassess their colonially inherited development programmes and policies in order to abet looming threats emanating from disillusioned citizens (Mustapha 2006: 3). It was in this context that a segment of neo-colonial elite in emergent postcolonial African universities in West and East Africa resolved to
deconstruct colonial models of social progress and development imposed on Africa (Bruzuela-Garcia 2006: 137).

The need for cultural decolonization was paradoxically engineered by nascent African universities, such as the University of East Africa which used to have three campuses spread across Dar es Salam in Tanzania, Nairobi in Kenya and Makerere in Uganda, respectively. The three campuses have been turned into full-fledged universities and named after the cities where they are located with the realization of the political independence of those East African countries that shared the experiences of ferocious, inhuman and devastating system of settler colonialism, a situation which is responsible for the intensity of anti-colonial struggles in the region. Some of the few African intellectuals that have found their way into the sprouting African universities were ideologically motivated by the ideas of radical European and Asian thinkers; and African thinkers, scholars and activists in the Diaspora. They are people of African descent that were born and bred in Europe, the United States and the Americas (Rodney 1972).

Curriculum Debates Revisited

In Africa, colonial experiences have been reinforced by the ideological standpoints of nationalist and Africanist discourses. The ideas generated from the experiences of anti-colonial struggles have become the fundamental principles of decolonization debates (Ngugi 1986). Evidently, these debates were acute in academic institutions and in the arena of public discourse in the pages of newspapers of the newly independent African countries saddled with mounting problems of nation-building. This was the context in which the curricular contestations were waged in the leading African postcolonial universities. In University of Makerere, for instance, decolonization discourse was dominated by cultural nationalist assertions by Ngugi and his colleagues (Ngugi 1981b).

But in the universities of Nairobi and Makerere the discourse took a more cultural dimension. Again, as early as 1968, three young radicals, James Ngugi (later on Ngugi Wa Thiong’o), Henry Owuor-Anyumba and Taban Lo Liyong, had advocated the abolishment of English Department at the University of Nairobi in favour of a culturally inclusive department of African Literature and Languages. These young scholars repudiated the perpetuation of a curricular that assumed “English tradition and the emergence of the modern west is the central root of our consciousness and cultural heritage” (Wa Thiong’o, 1982: 146). To orient Africa towards the path of cultural authenticity, they advocated a course content that would centre oral tradition, Swahili literature and modern African literature in its thrust. Furthermore, these scholars believed that the re-orientation of the Eurocentric curricular in University of Nairobi to reflect the nuances of African culture would be the ultimate guarantor of self-discovery. The essence of cultural education is to provide “means of knowledge about ourselves... after we have examined ourselves, we radiate outwards and discover peoples and worlds around us” (Wa Thiong’o, 1982: 150).

In West Africa the struggle for curriculum review was not as intense as in East Africa, even though the issues raised were quite similar in form and content. For instance, in Ahmadu Bello University and Obafemi
Awolowo University the decolonization debate and radical discourses was very much on the front burner. This is because of the plethora of Marxist-oriented scholars in the two universities in the mid 1970s and early 1980s. Although on the continental scale the picture was similar to what obtained in other universities across Africa south of the Sahara, where radical scholarship gained a lot of grounds, Ahmadu Bello University was in Nigeria the most conducive academic environment for the germination of radical decolonization discourse with its concentration of diverse African scholars in the early 1980s. The institution is in terms of its history and traditions, especially with the swelling of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences with radical and Marxist-oriented staff from Nigeria and other African countries like Ghana, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda and South Africa, a suitable candidate for the inevitable growth and development of radical ideas (Ojowu & co. 1987).

Essentially, Ahmadu Bello University is founded on liberal-humanist traditions. The dominance of the staff structure of the institution in its formative stages by the British is the basis of its Eurocentric orientation, particularly in the orientation of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. The processes of its governance, including the staff structure, curriculum and pedagogical approaches were all dominated by methodologies fit only for the developmental goals of colonial societies and economies (Usman 1979). However, post-independence Nigerianization policy has created a situation that made possible the recruitment of a substantial number of Nigerian and African staff. Although many qualified Nigerians and Africans were recruited into the various departments and other academic units of the university, they were, however, excluded from the processes of university governance, which until around 1980 remained under the effective control of European staff (Ojowu & co. 1987: 96).

It was in this state of affairs that indigenous staff such as Yusuf Bala Usman began to question the rationale of the course-content of what was taught to young Nigerian students by the European lecturers that dominated teaching positions from the 1960s to the mid 1970s. Usman started his fight against Eurocentric orientation of the courses taught in especially the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. In a rejoinder that was well publicized, he questioned the positions of eminent professors, including Professor James O'Connell, Head of the Department of Government and Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, the Dean of the Faculty of Agriculture, Professor D. McC. Ramsay and the Head of English and Modern Languages, Professor G. M. Walton. On Walton, for instance, Usman (1980: 206-207).challenged how in the name of teaching English language emphasis was placed on the English culture:

The English language is the verbal expression of the culture of an indo-European people living on the island off the coast of Western Europe and of course their offshoots in places like North America. The fact that English is used in Nigeria at all does not arise from any similarity between the culture of the English and that of any of our peoples. It arises for precisely the reasons
Professor Walton would like us to forget that the British conquered us and for over sixty years exploited our wealth and tried to destroy the most important elements of our culture. The fact that English is now used in Nigeria does not in any way alter the fact that it is a foreign language. Imperialism always have (sic) illusions about the universality of their culture.

The cultural nationalist undertone of Usman’s opposition to the way English is taught in Nigerian universities is apt in the submission above. He equally extended the same argument to other disciplines in the university. For instance, the type of literature taught at that point in time is seen as nothing but an extension of the English culture with all the implications it entails. The course content is saturated with Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Keats, Shelly, Milton, Yeats, Eliot, etc. He therefore repudiated “the universal appeal of great literature irrespective of time and place”, as held by Walton. Usman (1980: 207) believes that the type of literature taught in Ahmadu Bello University at that material time is a smokescreen for the perpetuation of colonial values in Africa:

Such a study which is forced on our students at the A.B.U. amounts to an immersion in English values, ways of looking at the world, psyche and whole experience. The fact that an individual Nigerian might share some of Keat’s musings over the song of a nightingale or a Grecian urn, even if he has never seen either; or that someone else will get a kick out of reading the narcissistic ravings of Shakespeare in ‘Hamlet’ simply means that human beings come in all types

Therefore, he unequivocally advocated, like Ngugi at Makerere below, the introduction of cultural studies where Nigerian and African cultures would be studied in order to instill the appreciation of local African values in young people. Moreover, English literature should only be studied together with the literature of other peoples all over the world. This, according to him, would enable young Nigerians to “build an authentic international outlook” (Usman, 1980: 208).

Bala Usman has indeed set the tone for the serious re-evaluation of the course-content of disciplines in Ahmadu Bello University; and in not only disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, but in the natural sciences as well. For instance, agriculture, which he believed to be crucially important to the wellbeing of the people, must be tailored to boost the agricultural development of Nigeria. Consequently, a development committee was set up to explore the possibilities of curriculum review in the Faculty of Arts and social sciences. The committee, which was chaired by the same Yusuf Bala Usman, who fired the first shot in the curriculum debate, had worked between January 1976 and May 1977 (Usman 1979).

However, one concern in this paper is to revisit how the curricular review exercise affected the research and pedagogical orientation of the
Department of English in Ahmadu Bello University in the mid 1980s. Another concern is of course to re-examine the implications of the space hitherto created for the inclusion of African culture and its predominant non-literate traditions in the course structure of the department of English. The paper that triggered divergent critical responses was the one titled “The Concept of a Department of Verbal Arts” by John Haynes. Brian Crow, for instance, looked at the question of literary creativity as well as pedagogical processes in literary studies. He also advocated the adoption of “issue-centred syllabus”, even though in his analysis he challenged the re-orientation of the curricular to reflect African conditions and realities. In a paper that is characterized by ambivalence and contradictions, Crow (1986: 18) asserts:

> The answer does not lie in a resort to ‘Africanization’ or ‘Nigerianization’ of the syllabus: it seems, rather, to depend on our ability to present literary works and cultural concepts within an overall framework which is genuinely meaningful to the average student, which corresponds in palpable ways to his own cultural experience and to issues which he can hear and see and read around him.

Late Professor Aderemi Bamikunle’s contribution to the curricular debate has captured the essence and significance of teaching literature. Ideally, literature should be relevant to Africa’s historical and existential conditions. This was the sense in which he located other important components that had been neglected in the course-content of literature at the point in which the debate was started. He identified two fundamental components that were neglected in the Department of English as theories of literature and orature. Bamikunle also highlighted the cultural significance of orature. Orature should be viewed as an effective tool with which to ground Nigerian youths in traditional African values. This is due to orature’s rootededness in the authentic cultures and traditions of the peoples of Africa:

> It is for these reasons that no sound knowledge of Africa is possible without recourse to oral literature. The integrated system which it expressed, even when it is not wholly believed in, remains the roots from which Africa and Africans have been uprooted and remains a valid base from which Africans can question other systems of values for their relevance to Africa. Oral literature is of particular importance to our students’ understanding of the basic principles that go into the production of literature works. (Bamikunle 1986: 28).

Bamikunle also challenged the way in which Orature was ignored in the Department of English at the point John Haynes wrote his paper on the necessity for the Department of Verbal Arts. Indeed, orature was not taught at the undergraduate level at all, although there was in the English syllabus
a course on oral narratives that have been dormant since 1978. Even at postgraduate level, orature was not taught as part of the coursework. It was only at the level of thesis writing that works in the field were produced (Bamikunle, 1986: 25). This is precisely because of the “intellectual and ideological orientation of available staff which was not disposed towards Orature of whatever national or class complexion” (Aliyu, 1986: 51).

The Institutionalization of Orature

As it has been stated earlier on, the nature and ferocity of settler colonialism in East Africa is solely responsible for the intensity of anti-colonial struggles in the region. This is of course the reason why Ngugi and his colleagues advocated the total abolishment of English department at the University of Nairobi where pedagogical emphasis was placed on European literary classics (Ngugi 1982). It is also the reason why Makerere produced cultural radicals like Okot p’Bitek, Pio Zirimu and Austin L. Bukenya. The Makerere group has been instrumental in exposing the problems associated with the imposition of European languages as official means of communication in Africa. English is, for instance, seen as a major barrier to development, considering the fact that significant percentages of Africans are excluded from communication processes through the insistence on colonial languages as official media in postcolonial African countries. In Africa, colonial languages have served only the interests of the colonizer. There would only be meaningful progress and development when the alienation of the majority of Africans through cultural imperialism stopped. This is the perspective that informs the resolution of Okot p’Bitek and, later on, Ngugi to write through the medium of African languages (Ngugi 1981; Ngugi 1986).

Pio Zirimu, a well trained Ugandan linguist even became Oracy activist in Africa. In the proceedings of FESTAC ’77 colloquium, Zirimu advocated “the mastery and effective and productive use of the spoken word” in Africa in order to overcome the perennial problems of language barrier in Africa (Zirimu et al, 1986: 88). Literate culture is here seen as an instrument of colonial subjugation. Africa is said to have been “colonized by people from societies which had for a long time an exaggerated reverence for written records” (Zirimu et al, 1986: 95). Moreover, it was through these abstractions that Zirimu arrived at the concept of Orature, the study of oral art forms (i.e. what other scholars referred to as Oral Literature).

However, the case for orature and its institutionalization in several African universities is mostly argued from the Africanist ideological standpoint in order to redeem the battered image of oral cultures in Africa that suffered serious neglect under the yoke of colonialism. Whatever the case, oral culture is usually seen as tradition bound with little or no capacity to modernize. It is located in communal societies that are characterized by simple agrarian social structures. In these types of societies cognitive processes are based on age-old experiences of elders in society. Knowledge production is carried out through informal traditional methods of apprenticeship and mentoring. All available knowledge is acquired through experience and is committed to memory rather than
documented. Cultural and artistic modes of expression are also orally based (Baran 2009: 21).

Orature in Africa is diverse because of the wealth of its genres and sub-genres. In narrative forms, for example, there are various types of tales, classes of proverbs, riddles, wise sayings and oratory skills; in poetry there are praise-songs, court-songs, professional songs, dirges, elegies, chants and incantations; there are all forms of dramatic performances. In fact, all oral art forms as observed by experts are characterized by performances. There is hardly any component of oral arts that is not accompanied by performances in its style and processes of rendition (Okpewho 1990).

However, although research in the various aspects of Orature is carried out at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, not much has been achieved in terms of the development of suitable pedagogical methods for orature. In a number of universities it is viewed as folklore, as an important component of anthropology (Babura 2000). Yet, in other African universities orature is approached either from the perspective of literature and literary theory or colonial anthropological approaches which are usually deployed as its discursive principles. In most cases, what passes for orature theories by way of evolutionary, diffusionist (i.e. historical-geographic approach) and structuralist-functionalist approaches are all inherited from anthropology (Finnegan 1970). Not much effort is put towards developing concepts and categories for the analysis of oral art forms. This is the area in which the contribution of Zirimu and Bukenya is significant. Even the emergence of the concept - orature - is attributable to the ingenuous prowess of Zirimu (1986: 92):

Orature, as we call it at Makerere, is one of the best manifestations of oracy in action. The composition and performance of a competent piece of Orature calls for imaginative, technical and organizational abilities, whose depth and complexity would, if understood, leave the ‘patrons’ (patronizers) of the poor illiterates utterly confounded.

However, despite the problems of theorizing orature studies which have been enumerated above, there is some serious attempt at fashioning concepts and theories that are purely orally-based in nature by, especially, Ruth Finnegan. In a recent publication titled *The Oral and Beyond: Doing Things with Words in Africa* (2007), there is a remarkable departure from her earlier work, *Oral Literature in Africa* (1970) where theory was ferreted from ethnography and anthropology, even though Finnegan has right from that point in time claimed that she is critical of evolutionist and functionalist approaches (Finnegan 2007:154). She has, however, lucidly analyses the processes of constructing oral texts and the interface of ‘performance’, ‘orature’ and ‘text’. According to her, these are the basic building-blocks of any form of theoretical formulation in the orature field. She also hopes that these concepts would form the basis of further abstractions by scholars of oral arts forms.
**Orature and Multimedia**

Conceptually, orature is defined as the study of oral art forms with emphasis on “non-literary inclusiveness of folklore” and “the primacy of oral/performance characteristic” of the forms under study (Aliyu 1989). Multimedia is originally a personal computer terminology, designating its multiple applications in not only the processing of data, figures and letters, but sounds and images. However, orature and multimedia, as studied in Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, tends to redefine the concept of multimedia. It is broadly viewed as an all inclusive entity comprising electronic media devises, such as the radio, tape recorders, television sets; information and communication technology devices as computers, handsets, i-phone and i-pad; and mass-media organs as radio stations, television channels, newspapers and magazines.

The interplay of orature and media is currently receiving serious attention from scholars. Media culture itself is the product of technological advancement which is currently bequeathed to the modern world by literate civilizations. Thus, the idea of industrial production has produced a sort of depersonalized and individualistic society. This new society is distinguished by its own unique system of social existence and the placement of material production and consumption as the central value upon which every other thing revolves. Consumer culture is the direct result of the industrial processes of mass production of goods in the factory. Similarly, urbanization, which is an important marker of the modern industrial society, has brought about the phenomenon of mass society through the processes of mass production, mass consumption and mass culture (Swingewood 1977). There is thus a remarkable difference between pre-industrial and post-industrial cultures. Modern societies are, therefore, no longer dependent on folk culture forms as means of identity expression or entertainment.

Modern societies are technologically driven. Scientific methodology is the organizing principle of social existence. Every aspect of life is measured on the scales of science. Thus, the fundamental objective of scientific knowledge is the attainment of technological bliss, progress and development. The pursuit of this objective has led to a broader recognition of knowledge as power, with information as its basic ingredient. Therefore, in knowledge based societies, information is the most essential commodity. Access to information is the driving force of social mobility and economic empowerment. The recognition of the values of information by developed societies has brought about breathtaking revolution in information technology and electronic media devices (Ya’u 2006).

Consequently, the emergent media technologies have made tremendous impact on all aspects of modern existence. The reduction of the world into a “global village”, as Marshal McLuhan would call it, by the new media technologies is everywhere intensifying the processes of transglocal cultural flows. This situation is witnessing cross-cultural influences back and forth, between the old and the new, tradition and modernity, the local and the global, etc. As a result, a hybrid culture is threatening traditional
cultural forms in contemporary societies. This is the context in which orature and multimedia is examined.

However, despite its theoretical hang-ups, orature is still attracting serious attention in academic institutions. In the past it is studied in both literary, history and sociology departments as a veritable source of coming to terms with Africa’s rich cultural past. In the Department of English and Literary Studies, Ahmadu Bello University, orature is mounted at several levels. The first year students undergo two courses in it. Orature 1 is theory-based. It is taught in order to expose students to its manifestations, characteristics, theories and relevance to literature students. In contrast, Orature 2 concentrates on the practical dimension of the course. The essence of the course in the second semester is basically to introduce students to the processes of research in the field and fieldwork techniques. This dimension also exposes students to the importance of documentation for the wealth of African oral art forms.

Until recently, the increasing interface of different media devices and orature has compelled the literature section of the department to introduce an elective course on Orature and Multimedia. This has become necessary going by the increase in the rates of students’ interests in writing projects in the area. Again, in the second semester of the final year, literature students are also taught another dimension of orature. But this time around, orature is taught only as a component of popular culture. The emphasis here is placed on orature either as folk culture or as mass-mediated culture. Orature and Multimedia is, especially, concentrating on how ubiquitous electronic media devices are creating spaces for all sorts of experimentation with old oral forms. Already, songs featured as sound tracks in contemporary Hausa soyayya video films have been giving old forms a new lease of life. The new artists who composed their songs in the studio with the aid of computer software, pianos, mixers and synthesizers have also been dipping their hands into the rich repertoire of old Hausa folk songs and traditions with a view to modernizing them by wrapping them with modern musical instruments. This style of modernization has been used by film producers who transposed and adapted folk narratives texts into films.

The modernization of traditional oral forms has also facilitated the recasting of old oral forms through the postmodern technique of parody, pastiche and collage. A readily accessible example in contemporary Hausa cultural formation can be found in Naziru Hausawa’s musical experimentation with the technique of parody. Similarly, this mode of synthesis between folk songs and modern musical instruments have been experimented by Yoruba popular artistes. Postmodern commoditization of culture has since brought traditional oral forms into the spheres of capitalist modernity via the interface of orature and multimedia in virtually all modern societies. On the whole, there is an appearance of a new cultural process on our cultural horizon in which hybridity, polyvalence and fusion is achieved through the globalizing influences of different devices of electronic media and multimedia technologies.
Conclusion

Orature and Multimedia as a course entails a rigorous re-evaluation of orature in the light of developments through the interface of the two fields based on the understanding of Marshall McLuhan’s theory of “the medium is the message” (McLuhan 1967), which pervades modern societies. Orature has since been identified as an aspect of oral tradition which can “lead to a multi-disciplinary outlook: literature, music, linguistics, sociology, anthropology, history, religion, philosophy” (Wa Thiong’o, 1982: 148). Meanwhile, media studies, like Gender and Cultural Studies, have since been founded on the principles of interdisciplinary approach to knowledge. The same approach is, therefore, needed for orature studies. Therefore, it is in this light that this paper calls on scholars and researchers of African orature to focus attention on the increasing interplay of traditional oral arts and modern media technology as is manifested in different African societies.

References


