

Oral literature and national development

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Abstract

Immoral behaviours like corruption, indiscipline among others have been identified as some of the major obstacles of Nigeria's development since the nation got her independence in 1960. However, the fact that oral literature played important roles in the pre- colonial Nigeria's society cannot be easily disputed. It has served then not only as a means of entertainment, but also as a viable tool for promoting social consciousness. It is based on this backdrop that the paper intends to evaluate the potential of oral literature in controlling the avalanches of immoral and burning social issues such as corruption, cybercrime, kidnapping and many others that have been confronting the development of the country. The paper therefore, uses descriptive research methodology to examine the aforementioned issues. The result reveals that oral literature can be used to address the contemporary Nigerian social problems. Among other recommendations, the paper recommends that oral literature should be given serious attention and should be seen as one of the feasible approaches that can be employed to enhance moral values among Nigerians for sustainable national development.

Introduction

The paper attempts an exploration of the role of oral literature in reawakening moral consciousness. It is imperative to state that one of the factors responsible for lack of meaningful development in Nigeria today is the absence of citizenry to produce a crop of credible and committed leaders. The inability of our leaders to pilot the affairs of the state has resulted to corruption at all levels of governance - federal, state and local government areas. There is no doubt that no nation can progress above the psychological, social and moral state of her citizenry - which are the major determinants of political and socio-economic development of a nation. According to Omoregbe in Ekeopara:

Moral maturity is a mark of human development, and it is the most significant part of national development. Indeed, it

is a *conditio-qua-noun* for national development, for we cannot talk of the development of a country if its citizens are morally undeveloped and immature(25).

The foregoing to a large extent forms the bases upon which this research work is embarked upon. No society can develop amidst corruption and indiscipline. Development will continue to elude Nigeria as long as her citizens lack moral responsibility and social accountability. How can Nigeria develop when law enforcement officers take bribe from criminals, and government officers diverting public funds meant for developmental projects? What then could be a way forward? Moral values must be inculcated in the citizenry for Nigeria to witness development. Morality, therefore, is a key to any meaningful development.

However, one of the best tools that could be used to inculcate moral and ethnic values in Nigeria's citizens is oral literature. Perhaps, it is necessary at this junction to raise this fundamental question; what is oral literature? Oral literature reflects the culture, belief, and world views of the people. Oral literature forms African's philosophy, behaviour, psychology and interrelationship. Therefore, concerns for development has triggered scholars' investigation into man's responsibility in National development with a view to understanding how interactions with other people at home, at work, at school and entire society impact or influence on the development. Oral literature performs a very important role in the society. According to F.B.O. Akporobaro:

Stories like poetry are not only creations from the imagination. They reflect cultural norms, local history and the realities of an environment. They utilise animal such as the tortoise, birds, elephants and sheep as dramatic personae. In terms of themes, they focus on such antisocial traits as cunning, selfishness, greed, jealousy and craftiness. (125).

In the light of this, the Nigeria's oral literature could be used to maintain moral and ethical values among the people. Stories easily penetrate into the human mind and consciousness and shape their personalities. This by implication tells who we are, which in turn brings about socio-economic transformation that aides development. The term development is associated with growth and progress. Whatever that develops possess elements of positive changes. In the context of society, a society is said to be developed when her citizens and infrastructure are in good order. According to Omoregbe:

The most significant part of the development of any country is unquestionably the development of the people that make up the country. To be certain, there are other aspects of development, for a country is a living organism with many parts, every one of which needs to be developed (24).

Indeed, when the citizens of a nation are morally, socially and psychologically developed, the other parts of the nation will surely witness progress. This is the issues of Nigerian nation. The country houses lots of graduates, professors and intellectuals of which more than 6% of them lack moral maturity which they say is a true mark of human development. Because of this problem, "on daily basis, newspaper and the electronic media in Nigeria are inundated with screaming, irritating and heart throbbing banner headlines of incidences of corruption among the political class, public office holders and the organizers of private sector officials" (Amirikpa, 77). And this social ills called corruption and many others among Nigeria's citizens have affected the nation's political and socio-economic development over the ages. This paper advocates for oral literature as a tool for bringing man to the understanding of his society and influence sustainable development.

Theoretical framework

This study is based on a theory known as Humanism. Humanistic theory was developed by Abraham Maslow et al in 1900s. Some of the core values of the theory include, "human beings have their existence in a uniquely human context, as well as cosmic ecology, human beings are conscious; there are aware of being aware both of oneself and In the context of other

people, and human beings have some choices, And responsibilities". (Greening, 2006: 238).

However, it is important to acknowledge the fact that humanistic theory pervades many academic fields which include arts and literature in particular. In literature, S.Y. Atabo says that, "Humanism has the ultimate belief that man is the highest creature and all that literature aims or should aim at is to ennoble him"(61). Akwanya adds that, "The soul aim of literature to the humanist is that literature has a role in maintaining human values" (224). In the light of this S.Y. Atabo further enumerates the salient principles of the Humanistic Theory about literature as thus:

- Works of literature must aim at improve man morally.
- Literature is a criticism of life
- Literature sets a standard for transformation
- Literature may end with poetic justice
- Literature must be as near to nature as possible.

However, the relevant of this theory to the aims of this study cannot be over mentioned. The paper focuses on the ways to humanize Nigeria's citizens; i.e., how to use oral literature to lampoon the nation's burning social realities so as to foster development. Right from the early days, Nigeria's oral literature was used to deal with social ills of all kinds. Most of the country's folktales are imaginative transformations of the moral and psychological issues that border the society. They captured themes such as injustice, man inhumanity to man, cruelty, hatred and jealousy with their related ugly consequences in order to set standard for morality and ethical values which in turn foster political and socio-economic transformation.

Oral literature and national development

Literature can be defined as an artistic form that imitates human actions and behaviour through the use of language. It is a kind of art that presents real life experiences or imaginative events using a long lasting and valued language, purposely amongst other things, to entertain and moralize the audience. However, the concept of literature has enjoyed lots of reviews over the ages; it has attracts the attention of many scholars, particularly the scholars within the field of humanities. According to Gordon in Atabo S.Y, "Literature is a kind of written discourse either in prose, poetry or drama. These literary genres are "a constructing of stories or "storing" of ideas" (2). This definition is line with the fact that literature is fiction. "Fiction connotes imaginativeness, not true, lying, distortion. In literature, what the author often creates is all mirage of events that builds into episodes and eventually into a story (S.Y. Atabo, 3). In the same vain, F.B.O. Akporobaro posits that:

Literature is a creation written or spoken which are artistically projected, the collection of oral compositions, relations and performances of high artistic merit which are product of the creative use of imagination by artists (35).

Akporobaro's position has not only given the general fundamental ground of imaginativeness and high qualitiveness of literature, but it has equally postulated that literature is categorized into oral and written forms. The literary pieces like Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Ngugi's *The Trials of Dedan Kimathi*, Kofi Awoonor's *Song of Sorrow* are good examples of written literature. However, Akporobaro offers variants definitions of oral literature which include:

- The totality of verbal expressive forms and beliefs evolved in tribal societies for social entertainment and for the ordering of society and passed on orally from one generation to another (33).
- Songs, stories, beliefs and legends which have artistic merit and cultural values and which form the cultural traditions of a people and are usually handed down from one generation to another (33).

These two definitions are relevant to our discussion. The role of oral literature in National development according to the above definitions, lies in the strength of oral performers to use songs, stories, beliefs and legends through social entertainment to effect the necessary socio-political change within a given society. However, "the artist who must have liberated himself from disillusionment but full of hope for the future, can only function as a pricer of conscience of the nation" (Anigala, 28), if he understands the issues at stake.

The oral performer or artist is a visioner and makes articulate analysis of various situations - politically, religiously and socially with the sole aim to sanitize his society for meaningful development to take place. This he does by breaking the disillusionment which has enveloped the people. The Artist, through folktales, myths, proverbs and songs is able to sensitized the socio-political consciousness of the people in his performance. In this way, he can revive interest in National development especially in our country Nigeria, which in a perfect example, a nation in socio-political crisis. For instance, in Nigeria today, bribery and corruption has become a legitimate acts

in every sector because people are willing to sell their conscience and integrity for survival. Anti-social behaviours like robbery, kidnapping, Yahoo-Yahoo etc. are ways Nigerians, especially the younger generation are engaged in order to make quick money.

There is no doubt therefore, that no nation can progress above the psychological, social and moral state of her citizenry as exemplified in Nigeria today. Indeed, moral rectitude and responsibilities that can attract meaningful development are lacking in Nigeria which means that the citizens should be reminded through oral performance of moral values that were handed down for positive change. Oral artist in his performance can state what is responsible for lack of implementation of government policies which scares away investors. He can state equally the effects or consequences of robbery, kidnapping, Yahoo -yahoo on the individual and the nation. The oral artist can bring man to an awareness of his positive potentials and the need to participate in real national development. "Development is a process of change which should start with man himself" (Dandaura, 13). Development is a process that goes through many stages which starts with " conscientisation of the human mind" (Paulo Freire, 23).

Recommendations

Oral literature is one of the feasible instruments primitive Nigerian's society used to dealt with her social issues, and it brought lots of positive changes then. Therefore, beside other social institutions such as theater, movies, radio and television, oral literature should be adopted by Nigerians as a means of inculcating social norms amongst Nigerians.

Immoral behaviour of different kinds have been identified as the obstacle of economic development in Nigeria. All must

be done to make the Nigeria's citizens realize this fact and then change for better for national development.

It has been proven that the process of presenting oral literature which involves the story teller addressing the audience directly has great impact on message assimilation by the audience when it is compared with modern literature which demands the audience to get the information by reading the literary texts. Therefore, oral literature should be included in academic curriculum across all levels of institution in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Oral performance satisfies man's urge for entertainment and also engenders an intellectual and critical examination of ideas, values, and violent situations prevalent in a society or a nation like Nigeria. Nigeria today is a nation in distress - politically, socially, culturally and most of all economically. Sustainable development can only be achieved when performing artists do not abandon their traditional roles in the society for commercial purposes. The oral performer reflects social reality in his work making it relevant to the solution of social problems which in effect influences sustainable development. (Afolabi,94).

The paper portrays the importance of oral literature in curbing social ills in the society. It establishes the fact that primitive Nigeria's society uses oral literature to enhance social norms among the people, and as such the nation can still use it to address her current burning social menaces for political and socio-economic development.

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