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## Oral Literature in Nigeria: A Search for Critical Theory

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### **Abstract**

*Nigerian literature has a long history in the oral tradition. What have not been streamlined however, is the theoretical criteria for its critical appraisal. This paper reflects on the huge challenges faced by researchers into the various components of Nigerian oral literature in an attempt to locate suitable theoretical framework in their researches. The paper argues that much as literature theories meant the description of underlying principles or tools by which we attempt to understand literature, such theories should be able to capture the nuances of meanings embedded in the body of work they set out to mirror. The paper criticizes the 20<sup>th</sup> century literary theories such as New Criticism, Reader Response Criticism, Structuralism, Feminism, Marxism, Cultural Poetics and Cultural Studies which are formulated, using western criteria, with the text as the object of inquiry. The paper interrogates the placement of Nigerian dances, songs, tale-telling, dramatic rituals, myth stories and the festivals, to mention a few, which are in the domain of Nigerian oral literature and for which the western theories above cannot claim to have captured. The paper concludes that Nigerian literature, by its very home based nature, needs home based theoretical criteria that will provide the premise for the interpretation of its written and oral forms and thus suggests the use of the theory of "Oratural Eclecticism."*

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**Keywords:** Nigeria, oral literature, written text, oratural eclecticism, theoretical framework.

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### **1.0 Introduction**

The etymology of the word 'literature' emphasizes the written. However, literature means more than just the written text. Indeed, there are alluring and enduring legacies that subsume the concept of literature in the verbal arts otherwise known as oral literature. In most cases, especially in Nigeria, oral literature serves as the first contact of the people with issues pertaining literature. Without mincing words, Nigerian literature originates from the verbal arts. In the words of Bade Ajuwon:

Pre-literate Nigeria once enjoyed a verbal art civilization which, at its high point, was warmly patronized by traditional rulers and the general public. At a period when writing was unknown, the oral medium served the people as a bank for the preservation of their ancient experiences and beliefs. Much of the evidence that related to the past of Nigeria therefore could be found in oral tradition (306).

The imprints of Nigerian oral literature cut across the writings of Nigerian authors. We see the expression of elements of orature in Nigerian prose texts, drama and poetry. For instance, in Chinua Achebe's first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, we are enthused at the use of Igbo proverbs and other traditional practices all of which are within the purview of Nigerian oral literature.

In traditional Africa and in Nigerian traditional communities as well, the use of proverbs in speech making is a mark of honour. The excerpt below, justifies this assertion. “Among the Ibo, the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten” (Achebe 6). Today, proverbs, are used in most of the writings of African writers. The question is: can proverbs be interpreted using the 20<sup>th</sup> century literary theories? The answer ought to be in the negative. Most of Wole Soyinka’s works especially, the drama texts are developed using myths and rituals from the oral medium of Nigerian literature. In *The Strong Breed* for instance, there is ‘the myth of the carrier’ which occupies the text as the central theme. The dialogue between the following characters is a test case:

Oroge: Patience Jaguna...if you want the new year to cushion the land there must be no deeds of anger. What did you mean my friend?

Eman: It is a simple thing. A village which cannot produce its own carrier contains no men.

Oroge: I am sorry you would not understand Mister Eman. But you ought to know that no carrier may return to the village. If he does, the people will stone him to death.

Eman: You can see him with your own eyes. Does it really have meaning to use one as unwilling as that.

Oroge: He shall be willing. Not only willing but actually joyous. I am the one who prepares them all, and I have seen worse. This one escaped before I began to prepare him for the event. But you will see him later tonight, the most joyous creature in the festival.

Eman: Then it is only a deceit. Do you believe the spirit of a new year is so easily fooled? (pp 98-99).

What transpires within the dialogue between Eman and Oroge is the exposition of traditional belief of the Yoruba people as couched in the myth of the carrier which must be carried out each year in order that the community is cleansed of its imperfection before moving into a new year. As in the case of proverbs, the western theories have no place for this aspect of social life of the people. We need therefore theories that are home based to be able to accommodate the experiences of the Nigerian people in the different facets of life. Other Nigerian scholars such as Ola Rotimi, James Amankolor, Onuora Nzekwu, Echeruo M.J.C., Ossie Enekwe, Adedeji J. A., Yemi Ogunbiyi, to mention a few have written works and scholarly papers whose contents are focused on Nigerian worldview, values, beliefs, theatre, festivals, songs and traditional aesthetics of performances. These aspects of the Nigerian peoples’ literature can be appreciated through the lens of oral literature.

More than ever before, research interest is now more in the direction of studying indigenous literature and languages. The question then is: what happens at the level of choosing a research theory to explicate the studies in oral literature? No doubt, the attempt is definitely going to be herculean. The reason is self-explanatory. The Nigerian literary scholar would have no alternative but to force on Nigerian indigenous verbal arts, alien critical tools of the western based theories just to fulfill the scholarly expectations in the area of hermeneutics. More recently, African scholars and writers such as Henry Louis Gates, Toni Morrison and Kwame Anthony Appiah have brought attention to the problems inherent in applying theoretical models derived from Euro-centric paradigms to minority works of literature while at the same time exploring new interpretive strategies for understanding the vernacular (common speech) traditions of racial groups that have been historically marginalized by dominant cultures. Indeed, a literary scholar puts the above situation in just the right perspective by saying:

I once thought it our most important gesture to master the canon of criticism, to imitate and apply it. But now, I believe that we must turn to the black tradition itself to develop theories of criticism indigenous to our literatures (Gates Jr., 20).

It is in line with the foregoing, that this paper advocates for the development of home based literary theories that will properly capture the nuances of oral literature in terms of context, contents, form and aesthetics. To do this right, Africans, and indeed Nigerian scholars of literary minds, who know the Nigerian societies, the people and the processes of their doings and practices in the area of enactment or re-enactment of rituals, myth stories, festival organizations, dance drama, songs of war, birth songs, work songs and the seasons and occasions for their outings, should help to develop appropriate theories for the interpretation of Nigerian oral literature. Bernth Lindfors is equally of the view that foreign scholars cannot fashion out adaptive literary theories that will truly reflect the Africans in their true Africanness. He thus said:

Foreign critics should heed this warning and not attempt to trespass brazenly on territory that belongs to others who acquired the indigeous grammar while young and thus know how to decode and interpret the deep structures underlying their own semantic universe (7).

Similarly, Okafor C.G. criticizes a situation where African rituals will be viewed with European lens as is the case with Michael Echeruo who is a leading voice of the evolutionary school of thought. In one of his scholarly papers, Echeruo had said:

Until the ritual content of Igbo festival (for example, Mbom-Ama and Odo festivals) is forced 'to yield its story, the dramatic content of these festivals will remain subsumed in their ritual purity (Ogunbiyi 7).

Okafor maintains that "misunderstanding arises when African verbal arts or oral literature such as "rituals" are evaluated on the basis of western critical criteria" (39).

Going by all these revelations, this paper posits that Nigerian oral literature should be evaluated using home based theories, one of which could be the "Oratural Eclecticism Theory as propounded by this researcher.

## **2.0 Conceptual Issues**

### **2.1 Orature**

Every human society gets anchored on its cultural artifacts. Indeed, literature is influenced by culture. Pre-literate societies were enriched by their varied forms of oral traditions which became legacies for the modern traditional societies. Experiences in folk epics, folklore, proverbs, myths, rituals, dance and folksongs were carried over from pre-literate societies into the mechanized age of ours as platforms for the growth of indigenous literature. Literature, is not only written, it is also oral. The idea of "Orature" is informed by this awareness. The word "Orature" was coined by a Ugandan linguist and critic, Poi Zirimu. Zirimu became the first in literary circle to imagine that literature is both spoken (oral) and written. In orature, artistry and content delivery merge together. There is no separation. A scholar of literature once wrote that:

Traditionally, Africans do not radically separate art from teaching. Rather than write or sing for beauty in itself, African writers, taking their cue from oral literature, use beauty to help communicate important

truths and information to society, indeed, an object is considered beautiful because of the truths it reveals and the communities it helps to build (George 304).

Orature, according to Poi Zirimu, is “the use of utterance as an aesthetic means of expression” (Kimani 204). Poi Zirimu’s argument or rather concept of literature as both spoken and written has generated useful discussion in academics. For instance, Wellek and Warren are not comfortable with the idea of literature as strictly a written phenomenon, hence, they write: “One of the objections to literature is its suggestion (in its etymology from *litera*) of the limitation to written or printed literature, for clearly, any coherent conception must include “oral literature” (22). In the same vein, the New Encyclopedia Britannica gives a definition which is equally in tandem with the views of Wellek and Warren:

To use the word writing when describing literature is itself misleading for one may rightly speak of ‘oral literature’ or the literature of preliterate people. The art of literature is not reducible to the words on the page; they are there because of the craft of writing. As an art, literature is the organization of words to give pleasure; through them, it elevates and transforms experience; through them, it functions in society as a continuing symbolic criticism of values (1041).

Orature serves as the springboard for the emergence of written literature. When Achebe, in *Arrow of God* says: “in all the time I have come across bad people, I have not yet met anyone like her. Her own badness whistles” (67), Achebe is only transferring his Igbo Syntax into English. No wonder Ernest Emenyonu, in his book, *The Rise of the Igbo Novel* writes that:

The foundation of all Igbo literature is the Igbo oral tradition, sometimes known as folklore but more recently called oral performance. Igbo oral literature embodies the literary aspects of Igbo oral performance such as folksongs, folktales, riddles, proverbs, prayers including incantations, histories, legends, myths, drama, festivals...contemporary Igbo novel, poetry, or drama is the extension of Igbo oral literature (2).

An obvious fact arising from the exposition so far is that orature or oral literature is the beginning of literary tradition in all cultures and it also serves as a storehouse for traditional artifacts which written literature depends on for its ornaments. Nigerian oral literature requires a place in literary theories, so it can be evaluated creditably hence, the theory of oratural eclecticism as suggested by this paper.

## 2.2 Theory

The word theory originates from the Greek word ‘*theoria*’ meaning “contemplation, speculation, a looking at, things looked at.” In literature, theory provides the philosophical foundation, the aims and goals of interpreting works of arts. In reading works of arts, in analyzing and in interpreting we are often guided by certain principles, procedures and processes. All of these provide us with the basic tools and skills which direct our attention to how to read, what to read, what to analyze and interpret. These principles and guidelines are results of investigation carried out by theorists of the various theories.

One issue that is pertinent when discussing literary theories is that they are text bound. Theories are therefore studied from the cultural, historical, sociological, political,

religious and economic perspectives. Others are viewed from the mythical, psychological, linguistic and feminine settings. In literary criticism, Charles Bressler writes:

Whether the primary focus of concern is psychological, linguistic, mythical, historical or from any other critical orientation, each literary theory establishes its own theoretical basis and then proceeds to develop its own methodology whereby readers can apply the particular theory to an actual text (9).

Going by the above citation, where can we place the subject matter of Nigerian oral literature? Indeed, some critics have argued that there is no theories which apply exclusively to African and by extension, Nigerian literature. The understanding is that African or Nigerian literature is placed on the pedestal of contemporary critical traditions (Amaechi 68). Nigerian oral literature requires home grown critical standards. This is the view of Ikiddeh Ime, a literary artist who feels the frustrations of African literary scholars in the research field of oral literature (93-4). When eventually, theories about African literature, where Nigeria is an integral part are developed to encompass the verbal arts or oral literature, researchers in the field of oral literature can then appraise literary experiences in the areas of Nigerian songs, dance, rituals, myths, telltales and the festivals as abound in Nigerian communities.

### 2.3 Nigerian Literature

By Nigerian literature, we simply refer to the literature that foregrounds Nigerian experiences in both the oral and written modes. Such literature are performed or enacted by Nigerian, written by Nigerians or non-Nigerians with Nigerian background, worldview and experiences in the languages of the country or by using English Language as a vehicle that carries the Nigerian thoughts, worldview and traditional practices. It is on record that Nigeria has produced very important writers who have demonstrated their ingenuity and craftsmanship in the documentation of Nigerian oral literature as well as the production of literary works that illuminate Nigerian experiences in the historical, sociological, political, psychological and religious spheres. Some have won prizes, laurels and accolades from enthusiasts.

Notable Nigerian writers, who by their works, have endeared themselves to the world include: Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Elechi Amadi, Gabriel Okara, Femi Osofisan, Cyprian Ekwensi, Daniel Fagunwa, Buchi Emecheta, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Tanure Ojaide, Ben Okri, to mention a few. There are also upcoming young Nigerians with wonderful literary minds. We can mention Chimamanda Ngozi Adiechie, Chris Abani, Yemisi Aribisala, Sefi Atta Oyeyemi, Nnedi Okorafor, Chika Unigwe and others too numerous to accommodate in the list.

Nigerian literature, whether in print or oral, started with the issue of identifying the unique characteristics that distinguish Nigerians from other African countries and other people of the world. In sum, these features are the expression of the cultural traits of the Nigerian people. From this standpoint, Nigerian literature was by circumstances, compelled to address the issue of colonialism and gradually wades through neo-colonialism to a period of self-rule. One unique characteristic of Nigerian literature is its pre-occupation with the “protest theme” which cuts across the genres of spoken or written literature. In the prose genre, we see Chinua Achebe, Kole Omotoso and Ben Okri to mention a few, acting as “town crier” of the protest tradition. In poetry, we have Gabriel Okara, Christopher Okigbo and Wole Soyinka as first generation poets. They were closely followed by Niyi Osundare and Odia Ofeimun still acting as town crier of the protest tradition. In drama, we also have Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan and Bode Sowande, who have equally contributed to the protest tradition of Nigerian literature.

Indeed, Nigerian literature has witnessed an impressive expansion for a period of five decades of its existence. Nigerian literature is better defined as:

“any literary work of imagination spoken or written by Nigerians or non-Nigerians but discusses issues that are cardinal to Nigerians and shares the same sensibilities, consciousness, worldview, and other aspects of the Nigerian cultural experience. In a nutshell, the writer must share values and experiences of the people of Nigeria for the writing to be classified as being Nigerian” (Ojaide 318).

#### 2.4 Performance and the Performer

Performance is the soul of oral literature. And “oral literature is by definition dependent on a performer who formulates it in words on a specific occasion - there is no other way in which it can be realized as a literary product” (OLA 2). Drama, in the scripted form, is never fulfilled until it is acted on stage.

In oral literature, there is no independent existence of any material outside performance. What this means is the fact that oral literature is intangible as much as it is not verbalized, actualized or performed. Thus, it is not out of place to say that oral literature is principally sustained on the premise of performance. In a telltale session for instance, the tale remains inactive until it is recounted by the teller. At the point of telling, it is performed. The tradition whereby libation is done to appease an angry deity remains unrealized until the priest performs the libation. A typical festival is not felt until it is performed for the people to see and appreciate it. Does it have to do with quoting a proverb in a speech rendition? Reciting a poem or providing an anecdote? We see performance as the driving force that brings these various situations to life. Let us at this point, use the celebration of the “Yormii festival” of the Boue people in Khana Local Government Area of Rivers State for illustration.



**Plate 1**

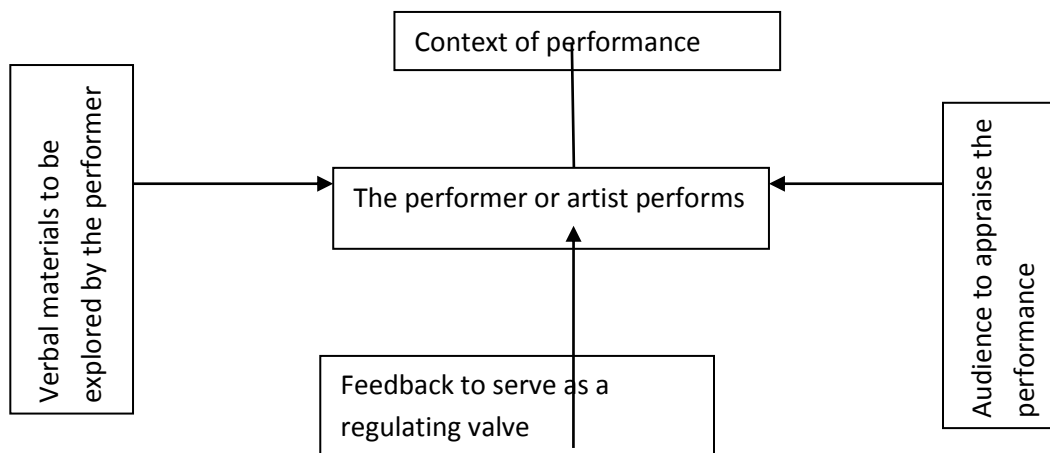
This festival is ancient and it is still very unique today. It is celebrated to give meaning to Palm Wine taping as a career. Many of the tapers in the community above have

used the trade to train their children to universities, build concrete buildings, and have solely depended on it for life sustenance. It became for them only necessary to commemorate the feat in festival, hence the “Yormii Festival.” As seen in the plate above, the festival usually brings home men and women boys and girls who may have been away for sometime to celebrate with their kiths and kin. What gives this festival the glamour, is the issue of performance. The festival is celebrated yearly in the month of June. This citation justifies the fact that “African oral tradition is never simply a spoken art; it is an enactment, an event, a ritual, a performance” (Finnegan 3).

In every performance, there is a performer. Infact, the centrality of a performer in oral literature cannot be trivialized. According to Nkem Okoh: While presenting traditional, communally owned material, the performer is expected to exploit, or experiment with such additional devices. It is the performer’s successful articulation, heightening or harnessing of his improvisational abilities with such internal dynamics of the oral tale as illustrated above that largely determines the emotional impact of a performance (91-92).

The performer, in any performance enlivens the oral material, gives it life and creates enthusiasm in the audience. An assessment of how good or poor a performance is depends on how good, creative, innovative and eclectic the performer is in the given oral episode. A good performer studies his audience and changes his style of delivery just to carry his audience along and to ensure that their curiosity remains throughout the performance. Indeed, the verbal arts owe its uniqueness to the character of the performer. The performer decides what songs to sing in a song acting performance, what tale to tell in a telltale episode, what dance to dance in a dance drama, what role other puppet masks play in a puppetry outing drama, what is to be enacted in a ritual drama, what myth story to recount in a mythical scene or how the masquerades should entertain in a named festival. The point being stressed here is the fact that the performer serves as the medium of interpretation and mover of actions in the verbal performing arts.

In every performance, the performer prepares what suits a given occasion and the verbal material is assessed by the audience. There is a relationship between contents, method of delivery and the appreciation of what is showcased in every oral performance. The following can graphically represent such a relationship.



From the above illustration, it is convenient to assert that the performer or the oral artist occupies the most central position in any performing art, coordinating the verbal

material in tandem with the occasion and holding in trust, the audience by responding to their expectations. See the plate below.



**Plate 2**

### **2.5 The Audience in an Oral Performance**

In oral literature, performances are not done in abstraction. There is the need of a living audience. In fact, the performer brings out his best when the audience is active and overwhelming. In most cases, the audience in an oral performance is participatory. In the case of Ogoni new yam festival, the performance of ‘Waal’ or ‘Karikpo’ is total in terms of audience participation. However, there are other instances where the audience could best be described as “watching” or “spectating” audience. In such cases, the audience acts as judges; commenting on the performer’s overhaul performance. In Ogoniland, the performance of “Koo Dancers” can be used to illustrate what we called the “watching audience.”



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1. Instances where there is a clear division into audience and performers.
2. Where audience and performers are to some extent, separate, but without the clear physical barrier.
3. Where there is a separation between audience and performers, but some active contributions by those who perform an audience role are allowed
4. Where different members of the audience may come forward at different times to tell stories.
5. Where there is little or no separation between audience and performers as in choral singing or joint recitation during rituals (91-92).

### 3.0 A Search for Critical Theories for Nigerian Oral Literature

It is possible to liken the place of theories in the interpretation of works of literature to Achebe's view of proverbs serving in the African context as "palm oil with which words are eaten" (5). In reading and in appreciation of works of literature, theories serve as the cornerstone of interpretation and of appraisal.

Unfortunately, Nigerian oral literature or verbal arts are still being studied amidst conjecture theories. When the need for critical appraisal of Nigerian oral literature arises, theories are imagined. There is just no matching theory for the interpretation of the various performances within the verbal arts domain. This situation has made the task of researchers into the various components of Nigerian oral literature very laborious and irksome. Apart from the written literature by Nigerian authors which existing literary theories can be used to explicate, works in the oral medium require definite and matching home grown theories that would provide the premise for the assessment of varying performances, using the oral artist or performer, the oral material(s), the context of delivery, the type of oral genre and audience participation as critical areas of theory formulation. Other factors which should be taken into cognizance in the formulation of such home grown theories include: the worldview of the people of Nigeria, historical background of the performing verbal arts, expertise and the disposition of the oral artist or performer. These factors are important to fashion out workable theories because they would serve as windows in addressing issues such as targets of performance, occasion for performance, what social and cultural conventions inform the performance? What aesthetic or artistic considerations are to be given premium? What societal values are stressed? And what impact that would have created?

A search for critical theory for Nigerian oral literature must not only emphasize general criteria for assessment, the specific situations are very important to be included. An approach such as the one suggested by Benson and Hughes under the name "ethnomethodology" (1983) is simply too general but very fundamental. Again Benson and Hughes ethno methodology is not exclusive in terms of the verbal arts, it is rather concerned with literary texts. Yet another scholar had suggested the theory of "performer-centrism" where the oral artist is seen to be at the centre of every performance. The scholar argues that an attempt to understand an African oral performance which does not recognize the central role of the oral artist or performer is only likely to yield superficial results.

To be unbiased, both the "ethnomethodology" as suggested by Benson and Hughes and "performer centrism" as suggested by Joseph Muleka are approaches that should be developed further to assume the status of theories to be used in the interpretation of indigenous oral literature. In addition to these approaches however, this paper suggests yet another approach which is considered germane to the study and evaluation of Nigerian oral literature. This is the "oratural eclecticism" approach.

### 3.1 Why Oratural Eclecticism as an Approach?

First and foremost, this approach emerges from two words-‘orature’ as coined by Poi Zirimu and “eclecticism” which is the noun form of the adjective “eclectic.”

The word “orature” is a blend of oral and literature. The implication here is that an approach such as the one suggested by this paper can be used to explicate what is oral as well as what is written, all of which constitute literature. On the other hand, the word “eclecticism” as thought of in this approach means “taking from different sources what seems most suitable for one’s purpose”

By these explanations, ‘oratural eclecticism’ offers itself a laudable approach to use in the interpretation of Nigerian literature whether oral or written. The beauty of this approach lies in the fact that orature, from which the word “oratural” is coined, is seen as the beginning of the literary tradition in all cultures. Thus, the experiences of the people in the forms of proverbs, rituals, songs, telltales, dance, recitation, incantation, myths and festivals to mention a few, could be the subject matter of any performance or written work of literature. On the basis of interpretation therefore, the oratural eclecticism approach could be used. This approach is dynamic because it is unlimited. All that is required is for the critic to identify the genre and by using the approach of oratural eclecticism, should be able to do justice to the appraisal of the oral material or written work in question.

### Conclusion

The question of an appropriate theory or theories for Nigerian literature, be it oral or written has been a thought most difficult to dismiss. Scholars, especially, of the field of oral literature have been groping for matching theories in their research endeavours. What is in vogue rather is a situation where the 20<sup>th</sup> century western theories are used unwillingly by researchers because of want of suitable theories as theoretical framework for Nigerian literature. These arts, in their home based nature, are not captured. And again, they are at best only text bound. Against the foregoing therefore, this paper advocates for the use of ‘oratural eclecticism’ as a theoretical approach to appraise Nigerian literature in the oral as well as in the written modes.

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