

STYLISTIC SIMILITUDE BETWEEN ORAL PERFORMANCE AND THE NIGERIAN GRASSROOTS POLITICAL CAMPAIGN STRATEGIES

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Article Info

Keywords: Oral Performance, Political Campaigns, Audience Participation, African Oral Literature and Nigerian Grassroots Politics.

DOI

10.5281/zenodo.17511032

Abstract

Virtually every bit of the content and practice of oral performance in oral literature belongs to society. As the subject of oral literature depends on oral performance for its manifestation and determination, the performance almost entirely depends on the audience for the final outcome or success of the performance. This paper is premised on some observable semblances between the stylistic peculiarities of oral performance in African oral literature and the realities of political campaign strategies in the Nigerian grassroots political arena. Participants in the theatrics of these two events operate on a seemingly relative modus, albeit to achieve different objectives. In recent times, political campaigns in Nigeria have acquired and reflected some elements of oral performance. The workings of political campaigns have shifted from the activities of a few party strategists selling their manifestoes to isolated electorates. The trend now involves a large crowd of performers engaging in a series of unscripted dramatic acts. Like oral performance, political campaigners tend to make the electorates the all-important audience in the configuration. A seamless interface exists between the real actors and the audience. Although real stages still exist in some campaign arenas, the boundary between the performers and the audience has been eroding. Songs have become a dominant feature in campaign performances that no longer depend on the outlines of the campaigners but on the whims and preferences of the audience. Contents of campaign programmes come through spontaneous creativity and audience play vital roles such as moderating and contributing to the performance's content. All these new trends are shared features of oral performance. Unfortunately, shortly after the elections, elected members of the society become isolated from the electorates. This paper thinks that electorates should take advantage of this campaign trend to enforce a broad-based accountable governance on politicians.

Introduction

Ordinarily, two full decades into the twenty-first century, one should not deploy too much vigour into explaining the subject of oral literature as scholarly publications over the years have been inundated with discourses from

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this vibrant art genre. However, it may not be completely out of place to make some points underscoring the relatedness or even the primacy of oral traditions, which are the superordinate components of oral literature to its written counterpart. Fashina (2005), citing the works of Ruth Finnegan (1977) among other relevant references, argues that the “trans-modal transition” of oral forms into written traditions is a result of the advancement in printing technology. He asserts that although written literature derives from oral literature, the latter still reflects a greater affinity to society than the former.

I will pin down the interface between oral traditions and Western literature with Alhaji Sikiru Ayinde Barrister’s popular analogy in the Album Music *Extravaganza* (1986).

Agbéré wa dé

Àwa ló lodù orin tuntun

Aròyé nisé ìbákà

Igbe kíké nişé ẹyẹ

Olóbùró lohùn orin

B’awòko o morin wa?

Àròyé kini Ìbákà ba maa wi?

Igbekike l’ẹyẹ yoo wulè ke lásán lásán

Ki lolóbùró yoo fohun orin kọ?

Trans

We have come with our music.

The foundation of modern music

The canary can talk

Various birds can cry

The pigeon has the voice to sing

If àwòko did not provide the narrative

What would the canary have discussed?

What do the other birds have to say?

What would the pigeon sing with its own voice?

Our interpretation of this analogy is that oral traditions are the foundation of all forms of literary and artistic oral practices. The novelist may know how to narrate stories, the poet may know how to express his emotions, and the poet may master his verses and his lines. However, without the basis of oral traditions, especially within the indigenous African context, all Western literary practices could not have originated from a void. This underscores the fact that oral traditions provide the basis for the content and style of artists’ creative works on the continent.

From all indications, the most basic component of the oral literature is performance. Therefore, there is no gainsaying that without oral performance, there may be no oral literature. Akporobaro (2004) observes that

The most basic characteristic of the oral literature is that it is a performed expression. We mean that an oral literary expression exists as a performance, as a speech act accentuated and rendered alive by various gestures, social conventions, and the unique occasion in which it is performed. Oral literary forms have their existence and qualities in the act of performance.

While it is easy to identify and classify Western written literature into generic components such as prose, drama, or poetry, this kind of generic identification is not possible in oral literature without putting the literary contents into the act of performance. The difficulty emanates from the fact that the genres of oral literature overlap and are interwoven. Citing Ruth Finnegan, Akporobaro (ibid) observes:

In the case of written literature, a literary work can be said to have an independent and tangible existence in one copy, so that questions about, say, the format, number, and publicizing of other written copies can be treated as secondary. There is a distinction between the actual creation of a written form and its further transmission. The case of oral literature is different. The connection between transmission and existence is a much innate one ... an unwritten literary piece cannot easily be said to have any continued or independent existence at all.

Okpewho (1990) emphasizes the significance of oral performance in his reference to the works of Bronislaw Malinowski:

As we have seen, the story's interest is vastly enhanced and it is given its proper character by the manner in which it is told. The whole nature of the performance, the voice and the mimicry, the stimulus, and the response of the audience mean as much to the natives as the text.

Ojaide (2014) observed the incursion of the oral tradition performance into the written culture in the following comments:

Whether the Yoruba *Ìjálá* and *oríkì*, the Zulu and Tswana *Izibongo*, or the Urhobo *Udje* and Ewe *Halo*, many modern African poets have studied and absorbed some of their features into their own writings poets such as the Ghanaian Kofi Awoonor and Kofi Ayidoho, the Nigerian Niyi Osundare, Ademola Dasylva, Akeem Lasisi, and Remi Raji-Oyelade and various South African poets have imbibed the traditional oral poetic performance features into their poetry and performance

Since the genres of oral literature cannot be successfully divorced, it is reasonable that the influence of oral tradition is not limited to poetry but also cuts across all other genres.

Political Campaigns in Nigeria

In his fictive space, *Just before Dawn* (2003), an art piece he styled "faction" because of his deft admixture of facts and fiction, Kole Omotoso attempted to chronicle Nigeria's emergence as a nation state fabricated through the wild and selfish imagination of European encroachers into Nigeria's socio-cultural space. Omotoso's position is that all the attempts to democratic Nigeria before, during, and after the so-called political independence were futile efforts beyond the Nigerians' reach and comprehension. Although political campaigns were simulated during these periods, they were rather rudderless and calculated to meet the pre-meditated desires of the Colonial masters. Ikeanyibe, Ezeibe, Mbah and Nwangwu (2018) are of the opinion that the process of democratization in most African countries was renewed in the 1990s.

Since many political commentators refer to the new wave of democratization in Africa as nascent, research and publications on the process, including political campaigns, remain sparse and scattered. However, this does not imply that they are non-existent. Scholars within and outside Nigeria have made notable efforts to comment on varying aspects of political campaigns in Nigeria. Some of these include Warlu (2007), Omozuwa and Ezejideaku (2008), Amadi (2013), Stromback and Kiowis (2014), Ojekwe (2016), Adeiza (2016), and Omilusi (2020).

Omozuwa and Ezejideaku (2008) provide a background to the stylistic leaning of political campaigns in the following opinion:

Language use in political campaigns has certain characteristic features that differentiate it from other common varieties of language use, as some of these features may be in everyday situations; they remain very unique with politicians and politics. The language of political campaign embodied in propaganda and rhetoric is persuasive. Politicians adopt these linguistic devices to cajole the electorate to vote for them and their parties by presenting themselves as the only persons capable of the job.

The pattern of political campaign from independence in 1960 was fashioned after the British style because, as observed by Adesote and Ofogbor (2018), "the Nigeria nation that emerged was more or less a replica of the colonial one in terms of orientation and political disposition." In the words of Amadi (2013), "The democratic

system of governance is a legacy supposedly bequeathed to humanity by Europe”. Nigeria not only inherited the European style of democracy at independence but also the campaign style. The idea of issue-based campaigns had to give way quickly in Nigeria because of the high level of illiteracy among the electorates. Amadi (ibid.) also observes that

Where the majority of the electorates are ill-informed, politicians take advantage of such anomalies. Nigerian politicians prefer unintelligent campaigns. They are drawn to it because they know that the majority of the electorates are ill-informed. Ill-informed electorates cannot distinguish polished communication campaigns from clumsy ones.

Amadi (ibid) also quotes Reuben Abati on the shift by Nigerian politicians from serious-minded, issue-based campaigns:

Meanwhile political parties have been busy with campaigns of personalities rather than issues: the parties are almost clones of one another. One week before the elections, the public has no idea where the polling booths will be. There has been no systematic enlightenment of voters.

Oral Performance and Political Rallies in Nigeria

The inability of Nigerian politicians to effectively sell their candidacies to the electorates through informed media and technologies must have led to the shift to popular mega rallies and carnival-like campaigns in the Nigerian political establishment. Political campaigns are now taken to the doorsteps of the electorates at parks, market places, roadside, village squares, town halls, and other places of public events. These meeting points set the stage for a re-enactment of oral performances in an indigenous setting, such as epic performances or popular satirical dance performances. Like in oral performance, politicians and their supporters form the class of oral performers and their accolades. The electorates form the audience group, and the stage is set for the performance.

In an oral performance, although the actor has a significant influence on certain contents of the performance, the greatest determinants of some crucial elements of performance depend on the audience. Unlike in the performance of a Western drama where the audience is a passive onlooker whose only activity may be to applaud the performers occasionally, the audience in oral performances is given very active roles in the performance. Some roles or activities of the audience may be classified as follows:

a. The audience plays an active role in the performance. Unlike in Western dramatic practices, where roles are only given to a specified number of actors, spectators in the audience of an oral performance may come into the tray to play very active roles. This is reflected in many campaign rallies in Nigeria today, where electorates who attend such rallies jump on to the podium to “campaign.” Apart from the practice where politicians summon known or unknown party supporters to join the campaigners, it requires the heavy presence of security personnel to prevent the audience from invading the campaign podium in many campaign rallies across Nigeria today. The audience also participates in all sing-song activities that constitute the dominant content of campaigns in Nigeria today.

Lágbájá a di Gómína

Gbogbo aye lo tigbo

Kò dígbà tẹẹ ba fa poster ya

Kòdígbà tẹẹ ba yada yòbe o

Lágbájá a di Gómína

Gbogbo aye lo ti gbo

Trans

Lagbaja will be the Governor

The whole world has heard

Not until you destroy the posters
 Not until you draw the cutlasses and knives
 Lagbaja will be the Governor
 The entire population has heard.
 It may also be a very popular chant that insinuates the unassailable popularity of the candidate.

Lai ti ẹ dibò

O ti wolé

Trans

Even without voting

You are elected

b. The audience may interrupt the process to correct, moderate, or re-direct the performance's focus. A chanter in the audience of an oral performance may cut-in to moderate what another chanter that is an actor has said. In political campaigns, the electorates often become so zealous as to introduce a song to interrupt the speaker at any point or to correct the political campaigner's wrong impression.

Láyé Olúgbón, mo dá borùn méje

Ẹsì ma sèwé lórin

Láye Arèsà, mo dá borùn mēfà

Ẹ sì ma sèyen lórin

Láye Àrè mú baba Layinka

Mo rà 'rán, mora sányan baba aṣọ'

À fòlẹ ló le pé lẹ yíi ò dùn

Kó kẹrù kó gboko wọn lọ.

Trans

In the days of Olugbon, I made seven mufflers

You can make that a song.

In Aresa's days, I made six mufflers

You will also turn that into a song

In the days of Aremu, Layinka's father

I bought velvet, I bought Sanyan the best cloths

It is only the lazy people who can say this land is not pleasant.

He should vacate this land and relocate to his hamlet.

Another peculiarity of oral performance is that it does not depend on any prepared script. Rather, it depends on spontaneous creativity. Akporobaro (2014) refers to it as a product of the raconteur's "personality."

The performer's personality not only recreates but also mediates between inherited core forms and his living performance and audience, coloring the received version with his personality traits ... Although he is a recreator, he is never indifferent or objective.

In political campaigns nowadays, politicians pay trained comedians who feature as actors in rallies. Apart from recreating what they have heard from their politician patrons, they also recreate from issues and situations occurring on the campaign grounds. To them all is fair.

The wits of a former Premier of the Western Region, Sir Ladoke Akintola (SLA), come to mind. He went to the country home of one of his political opponents. He asked, "Where is the house of so and so?" Knowing that the opponent had no house in his country village. He then asked, "is that the kind of person you want to follow?" The person whose integrity would make him "tegiriti" (only fail to build a house using even cheap mud bricks?) In

another campaign at the village of another opponent, SLA asked, “What are these?” The people answered, “electric poles and cables.” He then said, “If you people are not mindful of which party you vote for, you will end up using these for drying your clothes,” as electricity may never reach the village.

Political campaigns in Nigeria have also shared the feature of oral performance, where the originality of contents gives way to the ingenuity of the performer. Rather than preparing party manifestoes based on convincing arguments to sway the electorates, actors in political campaigns now adapt or adopt the slogans and even the manifestoes of previous politicians. It is now in vogue to see every politician in the south-west part of Nigeria claim to be an Awoist (a follower or believer in the political philosophies of late Chief Obafemi Awolowo [1909-1987]) and promising to build on the legacies of the late Chief Obafemi Awolowo even when some of them have never seen a page of Awo’s political philosophy. Many of these politicians adorn the Awolowo’s cap, eyeglasses, and dress patterns to create the impression that they belong to the *Awoist* class of politicians. They adopted the slogans “Free Education, Free Health, Free This, Free That,” even when those provisions were not present in the manifestos of their political parties at any level.

Indeterminacy in the duration of oral performances is another feature shared with current political campaign practices in Nigeria in recent times. Typically, a campaign session is scheduled and planned. The absence of a script and the immoderate involvement of the audience/electorates can unduly prolong or shorten the duration of a campaign rally. For instance, if the party is not popular in the environment, or the affected contestant has a more preferred opponent in the ward, violence or resistance may occur, leading to the campaign’s untimely termination. Similarly, the audience may prompt the campaigners to depart with the song.

Ẹ sée, Ẹ sée ò, Ẹ sée ò.

Ẹ wá maa lọ.

Trans

Thank you. Thank you.

Please take your leave.

Songs as a prominent stylistic component of oral performance is another similitude between African oral performance and Nigerian political campaign rallies.

Olugbamigbe (2019) recounts the significance of songs in oral practices. Since most political campaigns now imitate the forms of folk narratives, campaign rallies generally feature lyrical forms such as ballads, lullabies, work, or war songs depending on the people’s lives discussed. As observed earlier and in line with Akporobaro’s (2004) view, songs can be introduced by either the actor or the audience. According to Finnegan (2012:413), songs may be introduced to sustain the attention of the audience or to prevent boredom. Nowadays, live bands and sophisticated music gadgets are usually part of the campaign teams in Nigeria to ensure that music and good songs are not lacking at any point in the campaign process.

Songs are used to praise or to abuse contestants, political opponents, or other participants during such campaigns. For instance, during a period in Ondo State, a gubernatorial candidate was nicknamed Iroko after a very valuable economic tree in the rain forest zone. During campaigns, his supporters would sing the following:

Gbogbo igi ló nbe ní gbó,

Ká tó f’irókò j’oba

Ìrókò ni baba igi

Trans.

Various trees are found in the forests

Before Iroko was crowned the king

Iroko is the chief tree

The above lines sing of the purported supremacy of that particular candidate over and above others. However, his opponents at some other campaign rallies would also reply:

Ìrókò tó gbà bòdè, gígé la ó ge

Trans

An iroko that corrupts shall be cut down

The response is to counter the claims of the Iroko supporters and to assert that as valuable as the iroko may be, he will be dispensed off if he is no longer considered beneficial or relevant.

Conclusion

We conclude that the trend of political campaigns in Nigeria has largely shifted from the Eurocentric elitist dimension of the past to a more populist African background. The electorates and the grassroots populace are now more involved in political campaign issues and processes than in the past. However, it is recommended that the people should explore the opportunities presented by their recent involvement in campaign rallies to interrogate, challenge, and possibly move against candidates that indulge in false political promises during campaigns. The periods of campaigns should also be used by the electorates to evaluate politicians' performances and to be more objective in their voting behaviour.

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