

THE PERFORMER AS HEALER IN ORAL LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

This study is an examination of the Performer as Healer in Oral Select masquerade Songs in Ijaw. It is a literature of performance through word of mouth and enhanced by its utilitarian values. It is posited in the words of Okpewho (2003) that, “a performance-centred conception of verbal art” (6). The care giver of every oral art is the performer. The concept of Performer as Healer in Oral Literature has received tremendous attention but not enough has been done from a scholarly point of view, and that is the focus of this study. The performer takes different strategies as the arouser, and interpreter of emotions, situations to transport the audience to different spheres. Both physical, psychological and so on, by healing individuals of stress and boredom. This endues the performer as healer in oral literature. The study uses Victor Turner’s strand of “Performance theoretical” approach and psycho-analysis as a concept in the analysis of selected Ijaw masquerade songs as sample, showing therapeutic effects in oral literature. The methodology is analytical since the data will be subject to critical evaluation. The study concludes that the performer as healer in oral literature helps in treating psycho-pathetic and emotional situations, just as the Physician, Nurse, Councilor, alike. The performer is a healer of society of social ills through oral literature (performance).

KEYWORDS: Performer, Performance, Therapeutics, Healer and Oral literature.

INTRODUCTION

The paper explores the Performer as Healer in Oral Literature. Despite the controversies over the affective congruence of oral literature; not enough scholarly research has been carried out in this area and which underpins this study. Literature is a product of culture like every other activity, informed by certain innate sensibilities that arouse and attract the emotions or the psychology of the audience during performance. Oral literature “is not just a product of culture but also absorbs so many aspects of its culture

for its self- validation” (Ojaide, 2018p.xiv). The commitment of the performer for entertainment, preservation of the art through performance are dictates of the artist that are passed from one generation to the other. The performer is an artist who impersonate a character to actualize the purpose of a particular performance. He is “conceived as an artist who is fed and or propelled by egoism or self-assertion. There is the pride and desire to be acknowledged as the best – the talented and creative actor.

The honour challenges the performer into inventive and artistic creativity that can be identified as his own style of characterization or self-assertion” (Anigala, 2005 p.32). In African festival performances, this self-assertion is aided by spirit possession. This noble idea is corroborated in Clark J.P (2006) as he attests that, “this is the attainment by actors in the heat of performance of actual freedom of spirit from this world, a state of transformation...” (123). The transformed performer loses grip of his original self and envelopes a new role until the end of the performance in the African world view. In this circumstance, the performer’s concern is to promote the therapeutic and affective nuances of the human condition in the society. Significantly, the performer of oral art becomes the healer just as the paramedics, and others alike. The study encapsulates the psychological affection and the aesthetic values through performer: using oral arts exemplified in the form of Masquerade songs (Owu Duma), chants and rituals in Ijaw. Since there is no fixed authorship, this literature turns out to be collective and communal, which goes a long way to impact on the literature. According to (Nkem, 2008 p.87) “Oral literature is sustained fundamentally by performance”. The performer and performance as healing to the traditional society is found in the selected songs. The imagery, idiophones and meaning it evokes at the deep structure level of the vernacular and the impact resulting from the texts are all mode of communication. Therefore, this results from the quality of affective impulse created by the song performer in the lives of the

audience in society as a product of oral literature.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The care impulse of every oral art is dependent on the performer. This concept of performer as healer in Oral literature has received scholarly attention but not enough has been done and that is the focus of this study. The performer takes different strategies as the arouser, and interpreter of emotions, situations to transport the audience to different sphere.

METHODOLOGY

In terms of the method employed in the collection of data, the study is a conglomerate of primary and secondary data. It is qualitative in nature, being that, it is analytical. The primary data was collected from Orubiri, Burudani, and Olobiri Communities in Kolokuma/Opokuma Local Government Area of Bayelsa State between June to August, 2023. This study is meant to clarify and project the cultural heritage and arts of the localities among the Ijaw people. As a result, custodians in the Owu masquerade song tradition were interviewed. The questions asked were such as:

- (i) What are the affective impulses of the Owu song performer on the audience?
- (ii) Do the performer’s songs have healing effects?
- (iii) If it is affirmative, how?

The ideas were deliberated upon before arriving at a logical conclusion. This enabled the researcher to broaden the scope

of his experience on the subject matter under study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There are several theoretical approaches to oral literature. Thus, for purposes of this discourse as African oral art, the researcher employed Victor Turner's brand of performance theory to analyze the sample songs. Performance takes the centre stage in the understanding of human from ethnographical view point of Richard and Turner. The significance of performance was revealed through ritualized routine in the courtrooms and courtship among College Students in America. Richard (1985) and Turner (1982), all embraced the significance of performance. However, Turner's brand emphasizes on the African supernatural of spirit possession; which is seen as a must adopt approach in dealing with African oral literature. Richard Schechner's (1985) view of performance as a core of the universality of cultural affirmation of races and traditions of the World is a germane example for other scholars to follow. On the other hand, Victor Turner believes on the "ordered set of actions across cultures, but culturally conservative, which means that two cultures must not display the same performance or activities" (Friday and Ayebanoa, 2021 p.2). Turner (1982), considers such "activities liminal anti-structure, opposing the structure of normal cultural operations and liminoid devoid of imitation as opposed to liminal activities" (22-23). The liminoid activities are such that a performer is possessed or performs unexpected actions. The pre-planned activities that are not under any

influence such as dancing, singing and so on, are the liminal activities, according to Turner. This liminal and liminoid strand of the performance theory suits the discourse; performer as healer in African oral literature; being that in the analysis of the songs and chants, it is such that it is culture-bound, liminal, liminoid and conservative.

The affective or healing aspect hinges on, Sigmund Freud's psychological theory. Freud's idea of man is sick rather than villainous, which offers a scientific terminology for interpreting man's motives and actions. Ojogan (2015, p.228), avers that "the psychological approach to his descriptive kind of criticism in which the critic tries to interpret a work of art based on the unconsciousness of the artist ..." has three dependence. Based on this unconsciousness, three basic ways the unconscious controls the conscious as identified by Freud; "Id, Ego and the super Ego. According to Emeka (2022), "the Id, Ego and super Ego, through its structural concept but only one becomes more useful than the others which is Id as the reservoir of the biological urge to operate on the pleasure" (56). Therefore, in the harmonization of the psychological or the affective of the performer as healer serve as anti-dote, drug in oral literature for those affected or infested with worries of the mind and other physical-cum-emotional situations in the society.

THE ANALYSIS OF ORAL TEXTS

The performer as healer in oral literature borders on the role of the artist during performance. "The affective state which is a reference to the emotional reactions ..."

(Segun,2017. p.28). Through performance, he heals the disease infested minds of individuals in a society. This becomes the crux of the study. The performer in oral literature, performs through word of mouth and demonstrates his utilitarian function which cannot be over emphasized. The performer as healer in his aesthetic function could be illustrated through the Owu song as follows:

Sei buo gba Dance step revelation.
Mie miemagha ‘Worth doing, worth doing.’

Owubii muni ndenabuo sei. ‘The masquerade should dance its step.’
Owubiideinmomodeinmomo ‘The masquerade has won, and its steps dominated.’

Owubii muni ndenabuo sei. ‘The masquerade should dance its step.’

This song in Owu tradition of the Orubiri people, depicts the dance step as an integral part of the performance activity by the performer. The non-verbal communications together with the costumes of the artist, are all the prevailing modes at the moment of performance. All these, add to the psyche of the Owu song poetry. Therefore, the performance is more than mere verbal creations. These verbal creations are therapeutic as it affects the emotions of the audience. It is this affection that Nwahunanya (2012), refers to as “the literary medication which the creative artist (performer) provides after a careful analysis and accurate diagnosis of the society’s ailments. The artist is thus a healer” (354). The performer as healer in oral literature

creates laughter which is truly the best medicine that makes us feel good and release happy chemicals in our brains. When an individual is praised with humour, the person seems to act positively as a result of happiness. “Speech itself is considered to contain this energy as it denotes the expression: nyamabekumala which means, the energy of action is in speech. When a praise song is sung for someone, his energy to act is augmented thus, forewing him to act” (Bird,197 p.98). In the same vein, Anigala (200) quite agreed with Birds affirmation as he avers that: “...songs play on words- powerful, influencing and fearful words that can turn the most powerless man into a warrior or makecowards to recoil in fear. These words are composed and sung in such a way that they spur the listener into a spontaneous action” (100). The sample Owu (masquerade) song below, illustrates the characteristics and therapeutic effects which are also considered germane:

Owuebiyema ‘Splendid is the masquerade’
Beni perekpoebi ‘King of the river is handsome.’

Kimi kpo ebi
‘Handsome is the man too.’

Iselebibein ‘A mouth full of red.’
AhanOwuebiyema ‘Splendid is the masquerade.’

Uh! Uh! Uh!
Uh! Uh! Uh!

Praise singing is part of owu song tradition. They have their own laudatory epithets which refer to the characteristics of the masquerades. Therefore, the performer entertains the audience through the masks to create laughter as medicine for us to feel

good and momentarily ease our stress. Thus, the performer serves as healer in oral literature.

The performer as healer through drumming generates rhythm and rhythmic sensations that touch the heart, brain, imagination and soul of the audience. The drumming portrays social criticism, “the plots are quite simple and assume the audience’s familiarity with the situations portrayed. Although highly entertaining, they can convey social criticism or instruct people on proper behaviour” (Alagoa, 1995 p.155). However, song, dance and drumming are the purest and commonest forms of emotional, “psychological and social entertainment in performance and in the African World, and indeed in all culture” (Akporobaro,2012 p.310). It is a mode of healing through the performer in oral literature.

The Performers engages in educational performances that stimulate the minds and IQ of the audience by learning something new which can both be entertaining and interesting. For example, in the song titled; “Bou duo bo” (Come from the forest).

Ogoriboubou duo bo. ‘Buffalo comes from the forest.’

Ogoriboubou duo bo. ‘Buffalo comes from the forest.’

Mani
ileimodeinsinghankpobunugha. ‘It does not allow me to sleep in the night.’

Oputoru duo bo you
kponumugha. ‘The big eye did

not come from the physical realm’

Bou bou duo bo.

‘It comes from the mythical realm.’

The triumph and excitement of a successful kill and its aftermaths, family feelings especially the emotions of pride and grief, the thrill of pursuit are made manifest through the Owu songs and macabre or frenetic dance steps. The hardship and danger of hunting are not forgotten, and they are the lessons learnt from this kind of educational performance. It is a means of healing our psychic and physical pains by massaging the Egos of the audience; teaching and learning the skills and lessons in hunting.

The performer exercises the affective mode of healing in oral literature by telling stories, which makes audience feel as though they are in an adventure or fantasy. It takes the audience to the imaginative world which is a source of escape from the real-life stress without making the individual too anxious. At this juncture, the performer is “but a building being with an architectonic sense, a being who takes pleasure, delight, and psychological satisfaction in inventing, creating, arranging, organizing ideas, thoughts and experiences into impressive and marvelous formations for others to see, hear, and wonder at” (Akporobaro,2012 p .263). Therefore, a very good conception of this is *The Ozidi Saga*, an oral Epic of the Izon People which takes seven (7) days narration. The heroic story of a warlord killed by his kins men for being too powerful. It is also a story of revenged

tragedy perpetrated by his son Ozidi junior. This story takes the audience through an adventure of the mind's eye and the imaginative world, escape from real life stress by healing our daily pains, to the delight, psychological satisfactions and boredom.

CONCLUSION

Performer is an actor in oral literature, who promotes and circumvents the activities of the performance. It is the performer that is conceived as the prime-mover, who is propelled by egoism or self-assertion. In this circumstance, he entertains and performs psycho-therapeutic functions. Therefore, it helps as healer to ease "emotional tensions and express, dissolve and resolve repressed anti-social passions of anger, hatred, jealousy, etc, telling stories about these negative passions the mind of the individual is as if it were cured of its neurosis" (Akorobaro, 2012 p. 70). Therefore, oral literature is a production of culture through words of mouth that sustains its utilitarian value. It is a literature that optimally upholds African traditional way of life, which tends to be collective and communal in nature. The study has succinctly examined the performer as healer in oral literature.

FINDINGS

There are some findings realized from the study. They are as follows;

(a) The artist as healer, helps to ease emotions, anti-social passions, maladjustments, by curing every five-

minutes neurotic imbalance of humans in the society.

(b) The study also reveals that the performer tells the socio-cultural background and history of a given society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the researcher recommends that: the performative arts should be encouraged either by Government or Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) at all levels. The encouragement of this art form will go a long way in averting our stress-induced illness. This will help in ameliorating and moderating anti-social behaviours in our societies. The rich and philanthropes should come to the aid of the performers of African oral literature to create festivals of arts exhibitions; since they serve as sources of escapism and entertainment. Thereby, healing our emotional tensions and anti-social passions etc.

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