

Children's Literature and Recentering Orature in Kenya

Obala Musumba

Introduction: Orature and Children's Literature

African Orature is an important pillar of children's literature in Kenya. Its relevance has been elevated by the ongoing debate on the reclamation of indigenous African epistemologies. Exposing African children to this knowledge at these early stages of their life is perhaps the most effective way of achieving this goal. The significance of this resides in the proclamation by many African scholars that indigenous African knowledge should provide a base on which all other forms of knowledge are anchored and nurtured in the African's consciousness (Diop 1974; Bitek 1974; Mugo 1991, 1994; Thiong'o 2007). The term orature was coined by a Ugandan linguist, Pio Zirimu, in the early 1970s "to counter the tendency to see the arts communicated orally and received aurally as an inferior or of lower rung in the linear development of literature" (Thiong'o 2007, 4). Okot p'Bitek (1974) articulates this concept by asserting that:

...it is through the study of African oral literature that the student will acquire a deeper knowledge of African language, which is a direct route to the thinking and feeling of our people. It is only through a thorough knowledge of the way our people think and feel that can speak to them on the same wavelength. (127).

It is on this plane of thought that I emphasize that African orature has much more desirable impact in one's life when introduced at childhood. The curators of literature in Kenya have since come to this realization and encourage the writers and practitioners of Children's compositions to integrate African orature in them.

Children's literature in Kenya targets children at all levels of the curriculum of education of the country starting from pre-primary to junior years at secondary school. The school curriculum is designed and supervised by Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) which also approves and recommends the kind of learning materials children are exposed to at school. Children's literature is important as it plays a big role in the child's all-round development. It acts as a pivotal cog "...in the process of building human beings that will have the wherewithal to live useful, productive and profitable lives within modern-day society" (Adesina 2021, 977). Today, children's literature in Kenya comprises both written material and orature and even in the case of written material, orature still retains a commanding presence through employment of oral features that define it (Muriungi 2021, 26). Orature comprises oral narratives, oral poetry, proverbs, riddles, puns among other forms.

One of the most remarkable developments in the realm of literature in Kenya was the campaign to abolish the English Department at the University of Nairobi in 1968. The campaign was led by, among others, Ngugi wa Thiong'o who passed away recently. Valorization of African orature occupies an important space in the raft of recommendations proposed in the letter. The letter emphasizes that the study of oral literature enables an African to enter deeper and broader understanding with a shift in the way s/he perceives knowledge, "... his familiarity with oral literature could suggest new structures and techniques; and could foster attitudes of mind characterized by the willingness to experiment with new forms, so transcending 'fixed literary patterns' and what that implies – ..." (Thiong'o 1972, 230). To prove that this was a Rubicon in Kenyan literature, the proceeding decades witnessed a flurry of creative and critical works that foregrounded orature departing significantly from hitherto marginalization that had been imposed by a colonial curriculum of education. Since then, orature has established itself in Kenyan literary canons as it has done throughout the African continent over the past decades. This has happened at different layers. The first one is the integration of orature into written genres of literature such as prose fiction, drama, poetry among other written works (Muriungi 2021). The other equally or even more important layering is where orature is served to the audience in its entirety: pure and unadulterated. At this level, there are a number of literary texts with collections of oral narratives, oral poems, proverbs, riddles, among other orature performances.

Closely related to this latter category is the centring of orature in the educational curriculum in Kenya through performance and activities related to

orature that are organized and sponsored by the Ministry of Education. These performances are organized all over the country starting from the smallest administrative units called zones. A few schools found in a zone compete to get the representatives at the next level, which is a sub-county. From there, the best performers move to the county, then the regions, and finally to the national level. These activities have been going on for many decades since Kenya's independence in 1963, although for children in primary school, it was introduced as a form of a drama in 1980. Emmanuel Tsikhungu (2011) highlights the contribution of drama performed at the annual school festivals to the development of children's literature in the country. Although his focus is limited to drama, the festival has since expanded to embrace almost all aspects of orature.

The Kenya Primary School Drama Festival was introduced into the festival in 1980 ... Since then, many Kenyan children have encountered well organized drama for the first time in their lives through this Drama Festival. The aim of bringing the Primary Schools participation to the Festival was to introduce the primary school children to drama so that they can learn through it as well as get entertained in the process. Drama was then and is still seen as a tool for socialization, education and entertainment (Tsikhungu 2011, 469).

These performance avenues and children's literature in general serve to nurture the young people's talent, and most importantly, expose them to their own African orature and other African people's cultural artefacts.

This paper interrogates how African orature, particularly the oral narratives, centre the child figure in children's literature in Kenya. It focuses on the trickster narrative, which belongs to a subgenre of oral narratives that illuminates the intricate interaction between children and the adults in a relationship that surreptitiously and humorously inverts known order.

Constructing the Child through Orature

Indigenous African knowledge captures a cosmology where the child is an important member in the sense that s/he holds the future of that world. Although this significance varies from one community to another at different levels, there are unbending facts about the subject of the child that cut across communities. For instance, an unborn child and an infant are the link between the living and the underworld. This link to the ancestors and gods dwindles

with the child's growth as s/he becomes more worldly. This spectrum of the value attached to the child inform the apparent ambivalence that African communities exhibit towards their children. An oral narrative, thus, plays the best role in expressing this ambivalence. For instance, whereas some narratives allegorize the child 'suffering oppression' in the world that is controlled by the adults, others refract the child as the main custodian of the community's continuity that should be protected at all costs. Simiyu (1973) captures the premium placed on children in the society.

Children are thus considered as a means of perpetuating life and culture beyond the short life of the parents and the living members of the society, and not as a means of production, although this aspect of the question is not ignored. They are precisely the link between the past (the grandparents), the present and the future. (Simiyu 1973, 180)

The need for the preservation of the community is what leads to the stringent measures that the child is put under in order to grow into a responsible adult of desirable character as designed by the society. To achieve this, strict disciplinary regiments are put in place. Indeed, there are many sub-genres of oral narratives that are designed to mould the character of the child into a law abiding, moral, and profitable members of the society. Monster narratives, for example, are such stories where an ogre transforms him/herself into a beautiful lady or man and positions him/herself at a strategic point to lure young men and ladies that do not follow the adults or parents' advice. Once such a young man or woman is lured by the beauty of the stranger, s/he is gobbled down. As Kimingich Wabende postulates, ogre stories "... therefore taught the young children about community values, which were mostly captured in the Ogre narratives and animal stories" (Wabende 2021, 960).

The entrenchment of African orature in children's literature in Kenya is an important step in the reconstruction of the 'child-subject' to refract the societal expectations while enjoying imaginary power over the adult members of the society presented in trickster narratives.

On the Art of Friendship: A Synopsis

In this section, I am interested in exploring trickster narratives which form the most popular sub-genre of oral narratives with children as the target au-

dience. The plots of most of the narratives allegorize the child pitted against the world of the adults. They are imbued with nuances of victory for children over the bullying of not so clever adults. Unlike the ogre narratives, trickster narratives are set on the backdrop of humor with the big animals displaying unmatched gullibility. The narrative selected for illustration is based on the relationship between small and big animals as well as between small animals. The story which is set among the Luo¹ community of Kenya is entitled "On the Art of Friendship."

"On the Art of Friendship"² is an oral narrative from the Luo community, which revolves around the relationship between the Hare and other animals and birds. It is a long narrative that begins with the friendship between the Hare and the Eagle who were close friends. The Hare visits the Eagle who prepares a meal for him. The Hare is surprised that the Eagle has prepared bread³ without the stew to eat it with. But when the bread is ready, the Eagle flies to the nearest village and comes back with a chicken to eat the bread with. Later on, the Eagle visits the Hare, and the Hare also prepares bread without stew. The Hare tries to imitate what the Eagle did by pouncing on the chicken, in the neighborhood, but the owner of the chicken sees him and chases him away. The Hare is frustrated and embarrassed for failing to provide stew for his visitor. He is humbled into requesting his visitor to intervene. The Eagle accepts and gets the chicken, which they prepare and eat the bread with. The Hare ends the friendship because of the embarrassment he suffers. The same trend is followed with the Tortoise, the Ant, and the Pigeon. All these animals and birds have abilities coming from their nature, which the Hare is portrayed to lack though he wants to compete with them and ends up fooling himself. However, the Hare's trickster traits are revealed when she befriends Onyang' Onyang', the Crocodile. When he visits Onyang' Onyang's home, he notes that Onyang' Onyang's wife lays the eggs on the veranda of the hut. The Hare cunningly suggests that he is better off sleeping on the veranda rather than in the

-
- 1 The Luo people are found in many parts of Africa. The ones referred to in this paper are found in the western part of Kenya.
 - 2 This narrative was first rendered in Dholuo, the language spoken by the Luo people, and it was translated by Okumba Miruka.
 - 3 The bread in this narrative refers to stiff porridge, popularly known in East Africa as ugali which, though a Kiswahili word, has entrenched itself in the English of the region. It is a popular meal in western parts of Kenya, and it is made from flour of a mixture of dried millet, sorghum, and cassava.

hut with his hosts when time for retiring to bed comes. He uses the bonfire outside to roast Onyang' Onyang's eggs and eat. The sweetness of the eggs makes the Hare unable to control himself and breaks into a song expressing his wonder at how delicious Onyang' Onyang's eggs are. Onyang' Onyang' whose hearing is a bit impaired asks the Hare what he is singing about. The Hare changes the song in praise of the veranda's serenity and how conducive it is for sleeping, which lulls Onyang' Onyang' to sleep. The following day, Onyang' Onyang' carries the Hare on his back across the river to his home but while in the middle of the river, Onyang' Onyang's family discovers that the Hare has eaten all the eggs on the veranda. They shout to Onyang' Onyang' with the news, but because of Onyang' Onyang's hard of hearing, he asks the Hare what the message his family his family is relaying could be. The Hare tells Onyang' Onyang' that his family members are urging him to hurry across the river to avoid the rain that is about to fall. The family members keep on shouting their message until Onyang' Onyang' gets it clearly enough. He grabs the Hare's foot, but the Hare tricks him that it is a log that he has grabbed. Onyang' Onyang' leaves the leg and grabs a log instead, while the Hare swims to freedom. The story thus ends with a mischievous Hare fleeing to freedom Scot free.

The Hare as the 'Child-Hero' in the Adult World

This narrative is a composite of many shorter stories normally told to/by children among the Luos and many other communities in East African region. The Hare is represented in the narratives as the protagonist trickster. It is equivalent to Ananse, the Spider, in the West African trickster narratives (Finnegan 2012, 277; Adesina 2021, 978). However, it is important to note that the Hare is mostly symbolic of the child character when pitted against the big animals such as elephant, buffalo, lion, leopard, crocodile, rhinoceros, among others. This may not suffice in the case where the contest is between the Hare and other fellow small animals, in which we see it being portrayed as a morbidly envious animal, always seeking to compete with his friends and wanting to be seen as the best among his peers. In this portrayal, he consistently makes a fool of himself with his unsuccessful tricks on these small animals. For example, in the story, Onyoso (a black ant with massive deposit of fats in the abdomen) produces oil by melting the extreme end of his buttocks. The oil is a necessary ingredient for the bitter vegetables that he has prepared for his special visitor, the Hare. Instead of appreciating this rare ability from his friend, the Hare promises to

do the same when Onyoso visits him next. Indeed, it does not take long before Onyoso, at the insistence of the Hare, visits; the Hare prepares the bitter vegetables, heats the rod, and attempts to melt the end part of his abdomen in imitation of Onyoso. The results are not only disastrous but utterly embarrassing. He scolds himself seriously and has to plead with Onyoso to melt his own buttocks for them to complete the meal. This kind of embarrassing imitation is repeated with the Eagle and the Tortoise.

In the narrative, where the Hare duels with a big animal, Onyang' Onyang', the Crocodile, the Hare is represented as a clever and witty animal. The crocodile on the other hand is assigned symbols of weakness, cognitive frailty, and clumsy psychomotor abilities. The big animals represent the adult figure while the Hare stands for the child. The Hare's successful trickery of the Crocodile is symbolic of the psychological victory of children over their overbearing and patronising adult keepers: such as parents, aunts, uncles, older siblings, teachers, etc. The Hare does his tricks through wit, persuasion aided by a sharp tongue and mind. These representations are also vital tropes in the child's identity formation.

On top of the symbolic significance, there are other functions of narratives including tricksters such socialization and entertainment. Narratives are important instruments of socialization as stories are designed to inculcate societal norms into the young mind of the child. According to Afolayan (2021), oral narratives help children to appreciate cultures from both their communities and other communities equipping them with the ability to acknowledge diversity that entangles the global communities. He also emphasizes their appeal to emotions and their use for catharsis.

They help people to appreciate other cultures. Storytelling helps students to recognize the unity in diversity among the various cultures of the world ... the global understanding that folk narratives bring ... Its power to break down barriers and explain the reasons for those barriers we tend to protect ourselves with, is both unique and interesting." (Afolayan 2021, 1002)

The selected narrative is an allegory of friendship between small animals and small and big animals. The narrative opens with a comparison of friendship between small animals, which are taken to be equal. It emerges that when there is no advantage overdetermining the friendship, the important and defining element of friendship becomes one's character. This story is thus interweaved by the motif of friendship, which is an essential purveyor of the communal

philosophy that is the fulcrum of the African society. Friendship is weighed on a continuum metric of values ranked at its extreme ends, and yet dissolving the borders, that separate “people” based on their insignificant differences. The Hare who is ontologically different from the Eagle is thus able with ease to forge a friendship just as he befriends the Pigeon, the Ant, and the Crocodile. The pillars of this friendship in the narrative are conceived to be, among others, trust and reciprocity. Trust and reciprocation are exhibited when the Hare meets with his friends in their homes as well as his own home to eat and make merry. Contrariwise, outstanding obstacles to friendship in the narrative are flagged as negative competition and betrayal. When these two vices are admitted, friendship is sacrificed with effect that the community is hard put to stick together again. The story is thoroughly humorous and entertaining, but it is also imbued in didactive nuances for the young people. One reads caution to the children in the narrative that unnecessary competition can lead to frustration, disillusionment, and even injury.

Another important element that emerges in the narrative is the setting. Narratives are often set in the immediate environments of the communities in which they are rendered. In the selected narrative, all the animals used, Hare, Eagle, Tortoise, Pigeon, Ant, and Crocodile, are common phenomena in the country of the Luo people of Kenya. In the story, you also find the features of the environment such as the sky, tropical rains, assorted grains like sorghum, millet, cassava, maize, among others. There are also vegetables like *akeyo* and traditional oil. All these are important tropes of the way of life of the people in which the narrative is set. The animals, birds, and insects used as characters are highly symbolic. The star protagonist, Hare, is associated with intelligence, wit, innovativeness, and alacrity. He is also a symbol of cunningness and mischief, which makes him appealing to the child readers or audience when the narrative is woven around his stratagems. Eagle, in the Luo community, like in many other communities where it is found all over the world, is a symbol of courage, strength and resilience. It is the king of the birds because of these qualities and commands a lot of respect from other animals whenever it features in the oral narratives. The tortoise symbolizes longevity, patience, and wisdom. It is mythologized to be the germane of just law such that when it bows its head it is presumed to be always legislating and not sleeping. Because it can live for up to one hundred and fifty years, it is bequeathed with custodial powers over wisdom like that which is attributed to the sagely elders in a given community. “The Swahili name for the Tortoise is *Mzee Kobe* (*mzee means elder*) implying the Tortoise is wise” (Wabende 2021, 971; emphasis added). Its

patience permits endurance of harsh and unpredictable occurrences in the environment such as stormy rains, prolonged dry seasons, cruel animals, among others. Staying for over one and half centuries surely calls for that kind of patience. His shell does not only provide him with shelter and protection but also aids him in getting food when it is the last option. Akuru, the Pigeon, is a symbol of peace. In the story, he is equipped with the supernatural powers to command the grains to pack themselves in various granaries when the heavy rain is just about fall.

Conclusion

This paper has been able to show the value attached to children in Kenya as shown through efforts to recentre the indigenous African epistemology that not only acknowledges the presence of the children in their midst but also nurture them into seamless members of the society. African orature, which is an essential branch of this epistemology, has been examined in the context of the children's literature in Kenya where its functions have been foregrounded. Though not interrogated from its cultural dimension, African orature has been proved to be a pivotal signpost of epistemological emancipation of the African consciousness. In addition to its aesthetical superiority, African orature also boasts of almost unlimited functionality. Oral narratives are used to inculcate societal values in the young people, teach the cultural practices of their communities and of people from other communities across the global. It is the unifying factor of diverse outlooks to matters related to culture. It is also a source of catharsis and entertainment. Although African orature can be termed as a late entrant in the children's literature institutionalized in the curriculum of education in Kenya, its impact cannot be gainsaid.

References

- Adéèkó, Adélékè. "Review of My Mother's Poem & Other Songs by Micere M. G. Mugo: African Orature and Human Rights by Micere M. G. Mugo." *Research in African Literatures* 30, no. 2, (1999): 222–227.
- Adesina, Damola. "Orality and Early Childhood Education." In: *Palgrave Handbook of African Oral Traditions and Folklore*, edited by Akintunde Akinoyemi and Toyin Falola, 975–993. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.

- Adesina, Damola. "Orality and Early Childhood Education." In: *Palgrave Handbook of African Oral Traditions and Folklore*, edited by Akintunde Akinyemi and Toyin Falola, 975–993. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.
- Afolayan, Michael. "Teaching Folklore and Oral Traditions: The Folktale Medium as Pedagogy." In *Palgrave Handbook of African Oral Traditions and Folklore*, edited by Akintunde Akinyemi and Toyin Falola, 995–1110. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.
- Bitek, Okot. "The Crisis of Teaching Literature in East African Universities." In *Writers in East Africa: Papers from a Colloquium held at the University of Nairobi in 1971*, edited by Andrew Gurr and Angus Calder, 122–130. Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1974.
- Diop, Anta Cheikh. *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*. Trans. Mercer Cook. Laurence Hill Books, 1974.
- Finnegan, Ruth. *Oral Literature in Africa*. London: Open Book Publishers, 2012.
- Miruka, Okumba. *Oral Literature of the Luo*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 2001.
- Mugo, Micere. *African Orature and Human Rights*. Institute of Southern African Studies, 1991.
- Mugo, Micere. "The Woman Artist in Africa Today: A Critical Commentary." *Africa Development / Afrique et Développement* 19, no. 1, (1994): 49–69.
- Muriungi, Colomba. "The Use of Orality to Invoke Setting and Thematic Aspects in Children's Stories." *Ngano: The Journal of Eastern African Oral Literature*, 2 (2021): 27–38.
- Simiyu, Vincent. "Traditional Methods of Education in East Africa." *Présence Africaine* 87 (1973): 178–196.
- Thiong'o, Ngũgĩ. "Notes Towards a Performance Theory of Orature Performance Research." *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts* 2, no. 3, (2007): 4–7, DOI: 10.1080/13528160701771253
- Tsikhungu, Emmanuel. "Style and Child Centredness in Five Kenyan Plays." In *East African Literature: Essays on Written and Oral Traditions*, edited by J. K. S. Makokha, Egara Kabaji, and Dominica Diop, 469–491. Berlin: Logos Verlag, 2011.
- Thiong'o, Ngugi. *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics*. Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1972.
- Wabende, Kimingich. "Restaging Oral Narrative in Civic Education." In: *Palgrave Handbook of African Oral Traditions and Folklore*, edited by Akintunde Akinyemi and Toyin Falola, 959–974. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.