

Article

The Power of Song: New Historicism and the Representation of History in African Traditional Song Texts

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Abstract

The paper is a review of literature on the historical relevance of African traditional song texts from the perspective of new historicism. It sides with the argument that the traditional history-making criterion, historiography, is not as factual or faithful in history-making as historians often suggest. It further supports the views that history is an imaginative text and literature (imaginative literature) a text of history; African traditional song texts, though literary texts, are reliable sources of history; and that oral tradition is a good source of history and complements written sources of history. In the paper, copious literature on these arguments is reviewed. It is found that literature opining that traditional song texts are reliable sources of history and are at once literary and historical texts abound in scholarship. It is also found that scholarship is replete with literature contesting historiography's claim to faithful and factual recording of history. It concludes that as literary texts, African traditional song texts are weaved with materials drawn from society and, therefore, reflect the yearnings, experiences, and outlook of the society at the various historical moments and trajectories, making them not only historical texts but also good sources of history.

Keywords: African traditional song text, Historicism, literature, new historicism

Introduction

The idea of history and history's place in the making of imaginative literature (which song texts are part of), or vice versa, has continued to attract the attention of scholars for many decades. The questions that have been raised include: Is history fact or fiction? What are the sources of history? What is the relationship between imaginative literature and history? Does imaginative literature borrow from history? Can the knowledge of history be useful in the interpretation of imaginative literature? Can imaginative literature be a source of history? Can oral tradition or oral literature be a source of history? The answers given to these questions depend on one's ideological orientation. This paper reviews literature on the historical relevance of African traditional song texts from the perspective of new historicism, to highlight many of the convergent and divergent literature on the conversation, leading to the conclusion that literature abounds in scholarship with a convincing argument that African traditional song texts are weaved with materials drawn from society and, therefore, reflect the yearnings, experiences and outlook of the society at the various historical moments and trajectories, making them not only historical texts but also good sources of history.

The Impetus for a Newer Historical Approach

The nineteen eighties witnessed the emergence of a new movement in Anglo-American literary scholarship which was concerned with the historical nature of literary works that had been neglected over the past decades of Anglo-American literary criticism. Previous historical criticism, as observed by Kennedy and Gioia



(2007), was limited to demonstrating how a work was reflective of its time, the psychological background of the author, and other factors that influenced the work. In an extreme dimension, New Criticism and all formalist-oriented theories construed the literary text as an autonomous, self-contained work whose ontological status was devoid of external influences. The time had come to move literary criticism beyond this narrow 'formalistic' or 'text-centered' approach. New historicism, therefore, emerged, in Tyson's (1999:288) assertion, as a "rejection of both traditional historicism's marginalization of literature and New Criticism's enshrinement of the literary texts in a timeless dimension beyond history". New historicism, like formalism and new criticism, acknowledges the importance of the literary text, but its main concern is to analyse the historical in the literary text. In this regard, historicism presents itself as 'new', the latest way forward for literary theory in engaging in history, not as represented and recorded in written documents, but rather in history-as-text (Parry, 1995). Louis Montrose (1989:18) in capturing the practice of New Historicism asserts that 'the newer historical criticism is new in its refusal of unproblematized distinctions between "literature" and "history," between "text" and "context"; new in resisting a prevalent tendency to posit and privilege a unified and autonomous individual-whether an Author or a Work-to be set against a social or literary background.'

New Historicism and the Literary Text

According to Brannigan (1998), the arrival of New Historicism was announced by Stephen Greenblatt in 1982. Aram Veesser (1989) notes that Stephen Greenblatt, Louis Montrose, and Catherine Gallagher are recognized practitioners of new historicism whose contributions traverse the spectrum of cultural critique and highlight the internal fractures that make current academic cultural criticism so intriguingly various. As a theoretical construct and an ideologically underpinned concept, new historicism privileges, above all things, the social context of a literary text. In the new historical strategy of reading, literary texts are studied as material products of specific historical conditions. Thus, it approaches the relationship between text and context with urgent attention to the political ramifications of literary interpretation. Brannigan (1998) emphasizes that the new historicists treat texts of all kinds as vehicles of political and cultural formations insofar as texts mediate the fabric of social, political, and cultural formations.

As a new critical enquiry into literary studies, new historicism has developed numerous responses and interpretations from scholars in diverse areas of study. Most notable amongst them is Stephen Greenblatt, the main proponent of this theory. He locates the new historicist movement as 'set apart from both the dominant historical scholarship of the past and the formalist criticism that partially displaced this scholarship in the decades after World War Two' (Greenblatt 1982:5). In view of that, he defines it as the attempt to read all of the textual traces of the past with the attention traditionally conferred only on literary texts. Again, Paul Hamilton (2003) defines it as a critical movement insisting on the prime importance of historical context to the interpretation of texts of all kinds. Barry (1995) defines new historicism as a model of study in which literary and non-literary texts are given equal weight and constantly inform or interrogate each other. In expressing a similar idea, Jay (1990) asserts that what the new historicist does is to place the text

among the events of its own time, reconstituting that context and deciphering how history informs the practice of the text and how texts inform the practices of history. Montrose (1989) aptly comprehends it as a combined interest in the textuality of history and the historicity of texts. From a Marxist background, Brannigan (1998) defines it as a mode of critical interpretation that privileges power relations as the most important context for all kinds. As a critical practice, it treats literary texts as a space where power relations are made visible.

This stance of exploring literary texts from an extrinsic point of view irked the critical legacies of some theorists, notably the deconstructionists and the new critics, who argue that literature is a self-contained work without considering external influences. In this regard, new historicism represented itself as a significant shift away from the kind of literary studies wherein the literary text was conceived to be 'an ahistorical linguistic structure or the literary text was measured against a crude historical background' (Brannigan, 1998:203). Along with some Marxist and feminist critics, and cultural materialism in Britain, new historicism came to be known as the turn to history in literary studies. This trend has, indeed, filtered into other areas of study such as gender and sexuality studies, or has given a new label to their work most especially in cultural poetics.

The new historicists began their inquiry by examining the textual traces of the past, premised on the notion that the past is available to us only in the form of a textuality that is also embedded in that of the present. The idea that the past as it were is irrecoverably lost is true. However, Barry (1995) rightly observes that this past is now superseded by the literary text that has come down to us. In essence, the textual record of the past replaces the world of the past. This line of thought is founded on aspects of the post-structuralist tenets especially Derrida's notion that there is nothing outside the text, in the sense that everything about the past is textualized. New historicism asserts that history is a text that can be interpreted the same way literary critics interpret literary texts and conversely, it considers literary texts as 'cultural artifacts that can tell us something about the interplay of discourses, the web of social meanings, operating in the time and place in which these texts were written' (Barry, 1995: 175). To corroborate this view, Lyon (1999:284) attests that history can be known only in textual form. Thus, histories can be deconstructed to reveal the limitations of their ideological assumptions. By implication, "history is thrice-processed through the ideology of its own time, the outlook of our own time and through the distortion web of language itself" (Barry, 1995: 175). The text as represented is another remaking of the past which the new historicists juxtaposed with a chosen document to arrive at a new entity. This presupposes that the idea of objectivity is irrelevant as the aim, Barry (1995) asserts, is no longer to represent the past as it was but to present a new reality by resituating it. Accordingly, new historicism entails an intensive close reading in the critical manner of non-literary texts.

Of Literature and History

One central difficulty New Historicism seeks to address is the relationship that exists between literature and history. New historicism seeks to erode the traditional opposition between literature and history. The new historicist ideology came into

prominence through its determined and courageous attempt at navigating the literary and factual entities as narrative categories; which was one major position rigorously contested by the formalist-oriented theorists who rigidly confined literature to its form, structure and its ontological status. It seems to us that the epistemological crisis that rocked literary studies in the eighteenth century is implicated in the ambiguous relationship between literature and history. The question of how literature is viewed in history without denying its autonomy was a lingering impact of the formalist aesthetic, which new historicism radically contested. The idea that literature derives its inspiration from prevailing historical realities is an undeniable fact. This close affinity that literature has with history became a touchpad for the new historicist to evolve a revolutionary concept, as far as England and North America are concerned.

Consequently, as part of its unsettling project, new historicism seeks to break down the simplistic distinction between literature and history and open up a complex dialogue between them. Myers (1989) asserts that the relationship between history and literature is seen as dialectic. The new historicist refuses to see the literary text against an overriding background of history or to see history as a set of facts outside the written text. Brannigan (1998:3) asserts that 'history within their context is not objective knowledge which can be made to explain a literary text. Rather, history is seen as a knowledge that a literary critic can use to fix a text's meanings.' To explicate more on this position, Joan Howard (in Brannigan, 1989:3) argues that literature and history operate in a binary opposition such that:

A common way of speaking about literature and history is just that way: literature and history, text and context. In these binary oppositions, if one term is stable and transparent and the other in some way mirrors it, then that other term can be stabilized and clarified too.

Brannigan (1998) while commenting on Howard's position notes that literature, as it were, is not a medium for the expression of historical knowledge, it is an active part of a particular historical moment or as Howard puts it, 'literature is an agent in constructing a culture's sense of reality' (Brannigan 1998:25). Therefore, for new historicism, the object of study is not the text and its context, not literature and its history, but literature in history. This is to see literature as a constitutive and inseparable part of history in the making and therefore rife with the creative forces, disruptions, and contradictions of history (Brannigan, 1998).

The new historicists claim that they have a new idea of what history is. New historicists reject the Western tendency to write history from the top down or in grand narrative strokes. To corroborate this view, Veesser (1989) affirms that new historicism rejects the earlier literary historiographers who tended to use totalizing or atomizing methods, rather they claim to establish new ways of studying history and a new awareness of how history and culture define each other. Being influenced by the writings of Michel Foucault, new historicism encourages a new definition of the boundaries of historical inquiry. Foucault refuses to see history as an evolutionary process, a continuous development from cause to effect, from past to present toward the end, a moment of definite closure. History, according to him, does not have a single cause; rather each event is tied to a vast web of economic,

social, and political factors. Foucault views history in terms of power: but unlike Marx, power is a repressive force rather than a complex of forces that produces what happens. The vehicle by which power circulates is through ideology. New historicists equally believe that there is no adequate totalizing explanation of history. There is, instead, a renegotiating exchange of power at any given point in time. No discourse is permanent; it wields power for those in charge. Thus, new historicism views historical accounts as narratives, as stories that are biased according to the point of view of those who write them. In view of this, new historicists claim that historical analysis cannot be objective; it is neither linear nor progressive. The past in literary text is unavoidably reconstructed from a tinged biased historical vantage. To unveil these biases, new historicism engages in a parallel reading of the text with another text. History can only be a narrative construction involving a dialectical relationship of past and present concerns. New historicism, therefore, succeeds in bringing this relationship between literature and history into the mainstream of literary studies. Veerer (1989) notes that new historicism renegotiates this relationship between literature and history by dissolving literature back into the historical complex which academic criticism has traditionally held at arm's length. Perhaps as observed by Brannigan (1998:203) the most important achievement that can be attributed to this turn of history is the 'recognition that the text is an event'. He says:

For new historicists, literary texts occupy specific historical and cultural sites, at which, and through which, historical forces clash, and political and ideological contradictions are played out.

The concept of the text as an event allows us to recognize the temporal specificity of the text, the definite and contingent function of a text in a particular discourse under particular historical conditions. Again, it recognizes the text as part of the process of historical change as well as constituting the historical change. This has indeed influenced critics from approaching the text as a simple reflection or refraction of historical trends, and has led critics to explore what Montrose (1989: 20) called 'the historicity of texts and the textuality of history'. Montrose (1989:20) explains that the historicity of texts specifies the cultural and historical differences at work in both the literary text and the critical text and that the textuality of history assumes that nothing exists outside language, outside representations:

By the historicity of texts, I mean to suggest the cultural specificity, the social embedment, of all modes of writing – not only the texts that critics study but also the texts in which we study them. By the textuality of history, I mean to suggest, firstly, that we can have no access to a full and authentic past, a lived and material existence, unmediated by the surviving textual traces of the society in question – traces whose survival we cannot assume to be contingent but must rather presume to be at least partially consequent upon complex and subtle social processes of preservation and effacement; and secondly, that those textual traces are themselves subject to subsequent textual mediations when they are construed as 'documents' upon which historians ground their own texts, called 'histories'.

The point being made is that new historicism is concerned with the role of a historical context in interpreting literary texts and the role of literary rhetoric in interpreting history.

The work of new historicism follows from and develops further the interests and beliefs of the previous generation of Marxist and historical critics who re-evaluated the stories that past societies had told themselves. Historicism understands the stories of the past as society's way of constructing a narrative that unconsciously fits its own interests (Brannigan, 1998). Marxist critics borrowing from the lessons about historicism, see history as the procession of stories favourable to the victor, the ruling class, with literary texts as much as historical texts taking part in that procession. Going by this, Walter Benjamin (1992) defines history as a context and, as a result, follows a radical revision of the notion of truth. Truth, for many nineteenth and twentieth-century philosophers, is no longer a stable category that is objectively knowable. Nietzsche, for instance, sees truth as a mobile army or metaphors, an image that operates not only as a flexible weapon defined by and acting in the interests of a ruling ideology but also as a rhetorical rather than an empirical phenomenon (Brannigan, 1998). Truth is constructed as a seemingly objective category, the contents of which are recomposed of unconsciously partial and preferential versions of the past. It is on this basis that the Marxist thinker, Louis Althusser, claims that literature is one of the institutions that participate in making state power and ideology familiar and acceptable to the state's subjects (Althusser, 1984). According to Althusser, literature reflects the values, customs, and norms of the dominant interests in its society, and so is mobilized mostly unconsciously, by the state as an ideological weapon, an army of metaphors that seek to persuade and manipulate rather than coerce. Expressing a similar idea, Greenblatt (1998) argues that one distinctive mark of new historicism in cultural studies is the understanding that the work of art is itself the product of a set of manipulations, that is, it is the product of a negotiation between a creator, equipped with a complex communally shared repertoire of conventions and the institutions and practices of society. To achieve the negotiation, the artist needs to create a currency that is valid for a meaningful, mutually profitable exchange.

New Historicism, Ideology, and Literature

New historicism builds on the Marxist approach to literary texts and at the same time is set against the formalist approach to literature which disregards historical contexts in interpreting literature. In part, new historicism is engaged in uncovering the historical context in which the literary text first emerged and was received, but it also means that they are busy interpreting the significance of the past for the present, paying particular attention to the forms of power which operated in the past and how they are replicated in the present. For critics such as Stephen Greenblatt and Alan Sinfield, literary texts are vehicles of power that act as useful objects of study in that they contain the same potential for power and subversion as exist in society generally. According to Meyers (1989), the new historicist does not grapple with history as a factual documentation of the past but with the ideology that informs and shapes the history which itself is shaped by the same history. Thus, the literary text is said to be a constituent part of a culture's ideology, not history. In this regard, new historicism tends to follow the post-Lacan and post-

Marxist view of ideology. Rather than conceive ideology as a false consciousness, the proponents of new historicism argue that ideology is part of the way we perceive the world and its workings.

In this way, the literary text becomes an important focus for contemporary attempts to resist power. New historicism can be seen using the past as an impetus for political struggle in the present and making it clear that the discipline of literary studies is not removed from the sphere of the polity. On this note, Brannigan (1998) defines new historicism as a mode of critical interpretation that privileges power relations as the most important context for all texts of all kinds. As a critical practice, it treats the literary text as a space where power relations are made visible. According to Veaser (1989), new historicism engages in Geertz's method of 'thick description' to explore an event or anecdote and re-read it in such a way as to reveal through the analysis of tiny particular behavioural codes, logics, and motive forces controlling a whole society. Thus, in Lyon's (1999) assertion, thick description is employed to describe history strictly as a matter of interpretation and not a fact that must occur within a framework of social convention. This aligns with the claims of the proponents of new historicism that all analysis is unavoidably subjective. This subjectivity, Lyon (1999) asserts, is shaped by and shapes the culture that produces it. The literary text is said to be a constituent part of a culture's ideology.

New historicism brings to the fore the issue of the plurality of voices in literary texts. This idea of a plurality of historical voices in literary texts is premised on the fact that critics employ both the primary and secondary sources of historical information to deconstruct the idea of a master narrative: that is, narrative from a single cultural point of view to privilege plurality of historical voices or what Lyotard calls little narratives. This is so because, the literary text cannot be determined by historical forces, precisely because the literary text is inseparable from history, and is part of what forms and shapes historical forces. The relationship between literature and history is dialogic. They are interrelated and mutually dependent but also double-voiced. For Bakhtin, the concept of dialogism referred to the 'double-voicedness' of language in the novel form. Bakhtin (in Brannigan 1998) analysed the incorporation of different social discourses- legal, medical, pedagogic- as voices in prose texts, and argued that they combined to make the novel a hybrid construction in which many languages were in dialogue- the language of the author, and the various languages which are incorporated into the authors' language. This plurality of historical voices accounts for the ideological underpinnings that influence representation. In this context, new historicism might be defined as the history of stories cultures tell themselves about themselves. This is to emphasize Lyon's (1999) assertion that there is no history but only representations of history.

Sacks (2003) observes that one of the preoccupations of new historicism is its reliance on anecdotes. Their use of anecdotes focuses on the way short, self-contained narratives draw, most often, from outside the realm of imaginative literature, to put literature and literary criticism in touch with the lived life outside the literary texts. Gallagher and Greenblatt (in David, 2003) assert that anecdotes convey a touch of the real as well as draw upon the imaginary. No matter how carefully they attempt to record the past they are still composed, made, fashioned in

the literary mode, and described within their context. Gallagher and Greenblatt further observe that an anecdote satisfies the desire for something outside the literary, something that would challenge the boundaries of the literary. It offers access to truth that is denied to the most eloquent of literary texts. They further argue that it also provides a way to interrupt what they call the big stories, that is, the master narratives. Anecdotes, then, become the basis for formulating what they call “counter histories” which could be counterpoised against more ambitious comprehensive historical narratives.

New historicism, therefore, presents itself as the most useful method in literary studies in exploring the relationship between literature and history and in demonstrating the ideological and political interests operating through the literary text. New historicists insist that all texts can be analysed as literary texts, just as any historical phenomenon, no matter how trivial or unimportant. To neglect the dynamic relation that exists between past and present, Weimann (1992) asserts, will lead to an unfortunate situation where the dead will bury the dead. Since there can be no present or future, in life or in art, if the past is not a living reality in its pastness (Weimann 1992) new historicism provides a touchpad for exploring the textuality of the history embedded in songs. New historicism provides insight into the historical circumstances affecting society, culture, and politics and aids an appreciation of song texts in their historical contexts. This is done not to validate the historical claims but to examine how the ideologies of people are represented in their song texts. In privileging the social context in criticism, new historicism informs the basis on which the social relevance of song texts is explored.

Traditional Songs as Texts of History

A song is a distinct musical composition that incorporates lyrics or words, primarily intended for vocal rendition. Characterized by a structured format that can vary across genres and styles, songs are crafted for vocal performance, encompassing a wide range of styles, including pop songs, folk songs, and hymns (Onwuegbuna, 2023). Traditional folk songs are songs that have been passed down through generations, often through oral tradition. They are typically characterized by simple memorable melodies and storytelling lyrics; often have regional origins and may be specific to a particular culture or community. Many traditional folk songs have unknown authors, as they have been passed down through oral tradition (Onwuegbuna, 2012).

Aspects of the growing field of oral literature have in recent years concentrated on the use of oral tradition as a tool for the reconstruction of history, as is evident in numerous scholarly works. Most notable among such works are those of Vansina. In his introductory work, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology* (1965), Vansina made a remarkable effort to establish the validity of oral tradition as a source of history and further explores the means by which its reliability can be tested. He claims that oral tradition is an important source of the history of people without writing and therefore, differs significantly from other sources of history. In his view, oral tradition is a chain of testimonies that is transmitted. His major concern on the issue of transmission borders on the notion that it sustains its preservation as well as ensures the inalterability of its testimonies. In his analysis,

Vansina demonstrates that, unlike other sources of history, such as archaeology and linguistic evidence, oral tradition contains a kernel of truth. For the kernel of truth to be maintained, Vansina advises that the cultural anthropologist and historian must be acquainted with two factors namely, a thorough knowledge of the language in which the text is composed and a thorough knowledge of the society which has produced the testimony. A careful application of these factors will ensure a comprehensive and balanced interpretation of oral texts. In exploring the various typologies of oral tradition, Vansina argues that historical songs are composed only for propaganda purposes and are encapsulated in allusions that can no longer be interpreted. By privileging the political structure that produces the song, he argues, the value of historical songs in the reconstruction of history is questionable because room is created for the distortion of facts, making the songs unsuitable for use to represent the history they purport to describe. In holding this position, Vansina undermines the importance of the social context in the appreciation of oral literature. Historical songs are culture-specific and as such reflect the historical sentiments of the people. To rigidly narrow the role historical songs play to propaganda blurs other important functions of these songs in society.

In *Oral Tradition as History*, Vansina (1985) takes the study further by interrogating the concept of oral tradition as a process rooted in the collectivity of human memories which contains the total of past human experiences. Vansina defines oral traditions as 'verbal messages which report statements from the past beyond the present generation. This message must be spoken, song or called out on musical instruments only.' This definition establishes oral tradition as a distinctive form from other sources of history such as eyewitnesses, hearsay, news, and so on. However, he points out that not all of tradition transmits history. For instance, he argues that tales unlike poetry are incapable of retaining historical truth. Finnegan (1970) corrects this view by affirming that not all oral arts were produced for historical purposes some were produced for education and entertainment. Vansina observes that the 'preliterate peoples have highly developed powers of memory, and hand down their tradition by the use of rhyme or other formulae for linking the materials together'. Conversely, songs, unlike tales, are a special category of traditions and are seen as poems or a set of speech that is memorized. As memorized speech, the song does not give room for variations. Furthermore, the song quality of the message enables a faithful transmission because the melody acts as a mnemonic device.

To suggest that oral tradition does not yield a full and precise history and therefore needs to be cross-checked with the written source for establishing their authenticity presents oral tradition as a lower-order reliable source. This is because there is no way to measure precise and detailed history whether in the written account or the oral tradition. Oral tradition remains invaluable in correcting evidence and biases of foreign historical accounts regardless of the fact that they are written. In summation, Vansina cautions scholars who are in the habit of engaging in oral tradition to ensure that they are conversant with the language and culture of the society as this will enable them to give an accurate interpretation.

Joyner (1979), while commenting on the importance of the social context to the understanding of historical study, asserts that context is very relevant in presenting

an accurate picture of a culture. He advises that scholars should not divorce oral tradition from its social and cultural context as it would affect any meaningful interpretation of it. Joyner observes that most scholars are not schooled in the cultural context of the society they study; hence, they infuse their customs and interests into their interpretation. This is one major challenge faced by scholars while employing oral tradition to reconstruct history. In his supposition, oral history is a communicative event bound up with the changing values and institutions of a changing society and to achieve unprecedented historical ends, the historian must adopt folklorist strategies. However, Joyner in recognizing the changing nature of the society fails to explain this change in the light of the artist's role within the society. This is because society determines the role an artist performs and this role changes with the changing values and taste of the society. Bamidele (2000) corroborates this view when he observes that when society changes, new roles and new attitudes are assigned to the artist and art. In a similar vein, Finnegan asserts that the oral artist is dynamic and as such must reflect in their art the dynamic nature of the society they find themselves. When society changes the artist gives expression to the new forms. Thus, scholars who delve into oral tradition must be conversant with prevailing experiences surrounding the artist and his art to arrive at a comprehensive interpretation of their historical engagement.

Ruth Finnegan is a scholar whose engagement in oral literature has contributed to bringing together for the first time so many valuable materials hidden in dusty journals and trying to make a coherent meaning out of them. *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context* (1970) is an attempt to summarize and give shape and meaning to all that has been published in traditional African poetry. Finnegan endeavours to refute several misconceptions imposed on African oral poetry by Eurocentric scholars which do not give a true picture of what poetry is in Africa. She endeavours through her detailed discussions of poetry to subvert the idea that African society is still at the evolutionary stage, consequently, the type of poetry found in the Indo-European culture is the one found in Africa. Putting issues in their right perspective she reveals that the nature of the African society, to a large extent, determines the role of the poet. For instance, in monarchical societies, the function of poets entails the glorification and eulogizing of kings, as well as recording and preserving historical records and genealogies. Also, she attempts to refute the misconception that African oral literature has no other purpose than entertainment. Finnegan illustrates this by using the poetry of the Rwandese to explicate that African indigenous poems are a conscious product of a learned and specialist intellectual tradition.

In not limiting her scope to the typologies of oral poetry, Finnegan further identifies that there is a marked difference between panegyric poetry and historical poetry despite the vague generalization it has been subjected to. In her view, a detailed knowledge of history becomes an indispensable element of panegyric poetry. Although praise poetry serves to give historical events an expression, most times, they are employed as political propaganda tools, pressure, or communication. These roles, however, vary from one community to another.

Okpewho (1979) observes that the artist manipulates tradition and its values in such a way as to give them fresh relevance, fresh meaning, and fresh being. The aim of

this manipulation is what he calls the 'aesthetic principle' which involves a slight tilt of the balance in favour of beauty over truth. This supposes that the idea of history, for the unlettered artist, as an account of what happened, or what is fabled to have happened is not possible with the oral epic. This is because the heroic song is described as an ever-living oral form that is constantly reworked to reflect the period during which the song is realized. However, Okpewho was silent on the aspect of the past that is unreliable, whether it is the contemporary incident reworked and infused into the structure of the heroic song or the past event that has been brought into a living presence. What Okpewho, like other scholars, appears not to understand is that the artist is a chronicler of events capable of fully expressing his time and the mode of being of a whole nation. The writer/artist does so with the consciousness of the nature of the audience before him. Thus, to imply that the reworking of heroic poetry into an ever-living form undermines its ability to reconstruct reliable history is unfounded.

From a divergent critical view, Chukwuma Azuonye (1984) identifies two epic forms that exist in Africa, namely, the historic epic and the romantic epic. The historic epic deals with heroic tales of a type whose essential features can be subjected to scientific verification for factual content while the romantic epic fuses the features of myth to the factual recitation of real events. The dimension of fancy over reality serves as a point of difference between the two. Also, at the level of language and style, historic epic and romantic epic differ greatly. This is because historic epic employs the use of epithets that identify heroes in terms of significant events or achievements in their lives that mark them out; romantic epic makes use of a superlative form of overstatement to create an eerie otherworld atmosphere.

Azuonye suggests that epic is a living poetic form in the repertoire of Ohafia Igbo oral tradition. The epic songs of Ameke Okoye of Anambra (1984) and Ohafia oral epic (1989) are valid illustrations that prove the existence of oral epic in Africa. Azuonye insists that epic is not the sole property of the West; it has been one of the powerful forms of oral tradition and it embodies all features of an epic that focuses on a cultural hero, his unusual birth, and heroic deeds. To further support his argument on the existence of epic in Africa, Azuonye reflects on the original Greek meaning of the word *epos* which is oral utterance, in order to insist that epic is a convenient word in Africa to denote tales of great moments concerning heroes of the past regardless of the distillations of meaning it has acquired over the years. Nevertheless, Azuonye in his categorization does not explain how the literary aspect of the historical epic and the romance epic impinge on the reliability of the history they mirror.

Alan Merriam (1967) attempts to verify the possibility of using music to define and give an inventory of people at a particular time and place. He argues that in reconstructing history, we must take into consideration the music which was represented by sound and musical instruments. In exploring the historical uses of songs in Dohomey he discovers that songs are prime carriers of history among this non-literate folk. It is used for ritual essence to reveal the souls that were sacrificed on the altar of slavery. The singers of these tales are regarded as keepers of records, with their memory aided by musical instrumentation. Merriam (1967) concludes that music has contributed immensely to providing a new and wider variety of

analytical tools for the reconstruction of history. Such music-based study has been reflected in anthropological and historical theories and its great contribution can be seen in the extent of the statistical analysis to which it has been subjected. However, Merriam's investigation is merely limited to demonstrating how the description of musical instruments and sounds tell us much about the changes and development in forms as well as of continuities and discontinuities through time. He is silent on the matter of the extent the song texts produced from these music and musical instruments could serve in preserving historical events.

The attempt at arriving at a detailed chronology of the past in non-calendrical societies such as Africa is one major concern of Henige (1974). That Africa has a weak chronological base and is vulnerable to falsification and distortion of facts is one idea Henige aims to present in this work. In order to forestall this no evidence from a single person is taken as an established fact. We disagree with him on his assertion that the preliterate society was never conscious of documenting their past but were rather more concerned with preserving and transmitting aspects of the past that were deemed important. We cannot dismiss the fact that most oral traditions reflect situations and issues that are important in society. This does not, however, translate to absolute dating in the real sense of the word not being considered. In traditional societies, the past is not measured in linear, sequential, or even chronometrical forms. As noted by Mbitis (in Heinge, 1974), numerical calendars in African traditional life are both impossible to measure and meaningless. He argues that time is two-dimensional with a long past, a present, and no future. Time as it were has to be experienced in order to make sense or become real. Hence, the idea of chronology is of calendrical-based society bias but has been uncharitably imposed on African tradition. However, Heinge, in not understanding the peculiar nature of African society, tries to explore the African perception of time from a Western standpoint. This generalization is uncharitable to African's idea of chronology and undermines the oral tradition as a source of historical reconstruction.

In an attempt to contend with numerous scholarly assumptions on oral tradition in Africa as a tool for historical reconstruction, Finnegan (1970) asserts that the issue is fundamentally conceptual. Oral literature has been erroneously conceived as something unitary and self-evident, which is one factor that has indeed affected its use as a source of history. By holding such a wrong view, Finnegan affirms, these scholars see oral literature as a source without apparently considering the need to describe and analyse it as a literary product. To resolve this misunderstanding, Finnegan categorizes oral tradition into oral literary forms, generalized historical knowledge, and personal recollections. Finnegan notes that scholars' problem begins with their inability to distinguish between these categories. In highlighting them, Finnegan suggests that each of these categories has its peculiarities and limitations; therefore, scholars using oral tradition as a source of history must explicate the particular category they want to use. In a brief survey of the oral literary forms, Finnegan suggests that poetry in non-literate societies is not only illuminating but relevant to the history of the time and useful in other aspects of society, provided that the historian engages in a more critical analysis that takes into account the characteristics that mark it off as a literary product. Furthermore,

Finnegan refutes the notion that oral tradition does not engage critical canons of historical research. This position was perhaps taken based on its nature as an oral form that can only exist when rendered by word of mouth. In making a case for oral tradition, unlike written sources, Finnegan asserts that oral sources are influenced by several factors such as the nature of the audience, the performer, and the nature of the composition. These influences result in many changes and versions of the oral text in a very complicated way. However, according to Finnegan, the idea that oral tradition is susceptible to all kinds of influences of which the historian is warned to take cognizance is false. Rather, Finnegan advises that oral tradition by nature is dynamic and, as such, susceptible to such influences which the historian must especially account for.

Richardson (2002), in his attempt to privilege oral tradition as a reliable source of history reveals the inadequacy of the written document. He insists that so much emphasis should not be placed on written records in reconstructing the history of a community. We can agree with Richardson in his observation that most of the written documents omit vital information about a people. Thus, he is accurate to state that not all history is recorded or preserved in written form and to rely solely on written records undeniably ignores the value and experiences of entire cultures whose history are retained in oral tradition. In his engagement with the African-American history in Vinton, Virginia, Richardson discovers that the written account was silent about the experiences of black Americans during the Jim Crow era. Oral tradition, thus, becomes valuable in keeping issues alive; issues that were never acknowledged much less addressed or resolved in local historical records. He, therefore, submits that to deny oral tradition its rightful place in the reconstruction of history will result in a chronic legacy of histories that are incongruent with the reality and truth of a nation or society.

However, Law (1976), in his exploration of Yoruba historiography contends that both written documents and oral accounts are seriously marred by inconsistencies and incompleteness. As it affects oral accounts, particularly due to the varying versions of history in which such accounts have evolved over the years, most scholars are doubtful of their reliability. This position corroborates the Eurocentric view of African oral tradition as incapable of generating a chronological history as a result of their unsystematic method of dating. However, contrary to Law's assertion, Finnegan (1970) argues that rather than treat these versions as variations, literary historians should take special account of them. Law further admits that the nature of historical engagement is narrow and limited to a particular geographical town of the historian rather than the history of the whole region. This, indeed, has contributed immensely to presenting a distorted version of history. The possibility of going back to the oral sources for verification is unattainable and impossible, he suggests, unlike other scholars who recommend the complementary use of both oral and written texts, the need for a rigorous intertextual comparison in order to identify and isolate the genuinely original material. Law's position has an added critical lapse in the insistence that the writer should write from the history of the whole region instead of that of a smaller social unit. This is because a literary historian writes from the experiences of his immediate society. The larger society as it were may play very little role in his work since he is not directly influenced by it.

Thus, to expect a writer to write from the angle of the larger society is to give more room for falsification of history since he will depend so much on speculations rather than on facts.

On the issue of definition, Cohen (1989) discovers that scholars' definition of oral tradition is a major factor that impedes historical reconstruction. He challenges the formalist definition of oral tradition which he maintains strips it of its ability to reconstruct the African historical experiences. In exploring the historical knowledge of Busoga of Eastern Uganda, he observes that oral tradition goes beyond the limitation of the deeds of people of a passing or past culture, handed down from one generation to another orally to involving every aspect of the people's life. All these, he affirms, add to a detailed knowledge of the past. In this regard, Cohen opines that historical knowledge is shared; it is not a personal property but a collective property preserved by every member of the society hence, it is quite difficult to bifurcate this historical knowledge into close experience and general experience. Old people's account, he suggests, indeed infuses a fresh insight into the special text of written Bugosa history.

In the study of North American Indian oral tradition and their possible contribution to the reconstruction of the past, Day (1972) contends that the memories of older people contain a considerable body of culture, including mythology and historical traditions. This position, indeed, extensively deconstructs the long-held assumption that the memories of old people are marred by forgetfulness which culminates in falsified or incomplete testimonies. The reminiscence of these historical accounts as enunciated by the old people has been known to coincide with known historical accounts or at least compatible with them. This, however, engenders a new and fresh insight into these events as well as enlarges our knowledge of them. Again, that oral tradition complements written documents by validating historical data suggests that oral tradition resolves inconsistencies inherent in written historical documents. In exploring the French and Indian War conflict, Borneman (2006) demonstrates how oral tradition stands out as a good internal coherence and consequence with history. It does this by a careful and deliberate form of training which the younger generations undergo as the older people pass these traditions onto them. He concludes that oral tradition is trustworthy and should be taken into account in the reconstruction of past events.

In a penetrating study of music in Igbo culture, Ifionu (1982) points out that music is one vital aspect of Igbo oral tradition that has received scanty attention from scholars in the reconstruction of history. He demonstrates vividly that music is used in Igbo social life and the context of music in Igbo society covers all aspects of human activities. He further observes that besides the entertainment and aesthetic functions music serves, it can be employed for the purpose of preserving culture by linking the past with the present. However, in Ifionu's categorization of Igbo music, he omitted war music, that is, music sung during a war situation. War music is one major category of Igbo oral tradition that serves as a tool for reconstructing the past. This, it does, by recounting past heroes who displayed bravery and valour in a war. War songs inspire a sense of patriotism in the warriors.

Another example of the use of oral tradition in reconstructing history is presented by Aluede and Braimah (2005). In a succinct and in-depth study of Edo folksongs, they disclose that among the other functions that folksongs serve in the Edo community, it is a vital source for reconstructing history. To vividly establish this point, they affirm that these songs tally with historical dates and thus help in the reconstruction of an authentic sense of the historical process. They further observe that in the typologies of Edo folk songs, historical songs form a major part of the palace political structure. Accordingly, in the palace, there exist court musicians who are repositories of the people's tradition. This corroborates some scholars' position, notably Vansina, that preliterate societies have highly developed powers of memory by which they transmit their historical experiences from one generation to another. They do so by the use of rhyme or other formulae to link materials together. Aluede and Braimah conclude by affirming that Edo songs like other communities provide accurate accounts which can be further treated in historical and anthropological surveys.

In exploring the various challenges that face scholars who attempt to use oral literary data for historical reconstruction, Alagoa (1968) observes that oral literature is relatively inaccessible. As a result, the possibility of using it as a source of historical reconstruction entails that it be first collected, assessed, and analysed as literature. As literature, oral tradition retains historical events and personalities in figurative or symbolic language. For instance, the proverbs of Nembe of the Niger Delta are vital illustrations of the importance of oral tradition in historical reconstruction. Proverbs are pithy sayings at the time of the incidents or years afterward which are compressed and abbreviated in the rendition of historical facts. He submits that proverbs are a distillation of historical experiences that enable them to be remembered. Nevertheless, one aspect that Alagoa failed to establish is to what extent the literary content of the proverb helps to construct a history that is authentic and reliable.

Another challenge to historical research as observed by Ogboni (1968) is the problem of identification. According to him, there exists confusion in determining legendary events and that which is historical. Although he does not resolve these issues as they add to the intricate nature of oral tradition, he observes that distortions abound in accounts that have historical intentions. In a comparative study of the historical accounts of Igala and Northern Nsukka Igbo, he attempts to explicate his assertions by insisting that these intentions behind historical accounts tend to privilege a particular account over the other thereby furnishing a set of possibilities that might constitute a contribution to the history of that area. Ogboni is indeed right in his affirmation that historical reconstruction is highly ideological. This is because a writer of history writes from a particular viewpoint depending on how the story influences him. Thus, these ideological standpoints, rather than being a limitation, as he observes, are contributions to the history of the time.

Conclusion

The paper reviewed, with new historicist leaning, literature on the historical relevance of imaginative literature and history's place in making and reading literary works. Its particular focus was traditional African song poetry which it

considered as literary output. Twenty-eight sources were reviewed; twelve of them were on new historicism's view of history, while sixteen sources were on the historical relevance of African traditional song texts. The review highlighted many of the convergent and divergent literature on the conversation and privileged new historicism over historicism in the evaluation of literary works and traditional history's claims to factuality. The conclusion is that literature abounds in scholarship with a convincing argument that African traditional song texts are weaved with materials drawn from society and, therefore, reflect the yearnings, experiences, and outlook of the society at the various historical moments and trajectories, making them not only historical texts but also good sources of history and reconstruction of history. We would not pretend that all that needs to be said in the subject has been said; it is evident from the review that the place of African traditional song poetry in the reconstruction of history needs more of the attention of African cultural scholars.

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