

Indigenous Oral Poetry in Nigeria as a Tool for National Unity

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ABSTRACT The paper adopts the stylistic critical approach to the study of selected ethnic oral poetry in Nigeria. Its findings disclose ample insights into copious similarities in interests, thoughts, worldviews and values across the various ethnic groups in Nigeria. These findings constitute an effective tool for national integration, unity and development. The paper recommends the preservation, propagation, teaching and learning of Nigerian oral poetry across ethnic frontiers with emphasis on its unifying properties as a means to achieving national unity and development in the country.

INTRODUCTION

The paper explores and illuminates indigenous oral poetry in Nigeria as a tool for national unity. It comprises six sections, section one being this introduction. Section two focuses on a review of literature germane to the study, three on the critical approach used for the study and four on ten (10) selected ethnic poetic forms in Nigeria. The ten (10) items, obtained from resource persons and secondary sources, are analysed in pairs as follows: musical instruments and dance songs; names and greetings/oratory; proverbs and symbols/symbolism; divination and myths. Section five of the paper raises issues about the vexed questions of authorship, performance and language while section six deals with conclusion and recommendations.

Review of Related Literature

Copious critical works exist on Nigerian oral literature, a few on Nigerian oral poetry and few on the relevance of ethnic oral poetry in Nigeria to national unity and development. Certainly, none bears the title and contents of this study. Ime Ikiddeh (2005), in his *Historic Essays on African Literature, Language and Culture*, enunciates the fact that “literature, particularly of the oral mould, is a social product that has its roots in a defined cultural context” (59), by which he implies that oral literature of a people is intricately tied to the social, cultural and political aspirations and goals of the people which invariably encompass national unity and national development attainable through peaceful co-existence. Ikiddeh’s submission pertinently relates, though it bears no direct exactitude, to our study.

Luke Eyoh’s (2002) “Animal Symbolism as

Indicator of Cultural Unity in Nigeria: Similarities in Ibibio and Ijo/Urhobo Animal Symbolism in J. P. Clark-Bekederemo’s Poetry” published in *Essays in Language and Literature in Honour of Ime Ikiddeh at 60* reveals, through ample research, copious similarities in animal symbolism in Ibibio, Ijo/Urhobo and other Nigerian cultures. The work suggests that reading Nigerian poems “rich in cross-cultural animal symbolism stimulates and sustains national consciousness and unity in Nigeria” (61).

Three other works by Eyoh, like the foregoing, relate to this study: “Proverbs as Evidence of Ethnic Unity in Nigeria: A Study in Ijo, Urhobo and Ibibio Oral Literatures” (presented at Proverb Conference in Nigeria, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, August 1 – 5, 2006); “Cross-Ethnic Literary Semiotics in Nigerian Languages as a Tool for National Unity” (presented at First Annual Conference on National Development: Challenges to the Humanities in the 21st Century, organized by Faculty of Arts, University of Abuja, August 22 – 26, 2006), and “Nigerian Oral Poetry as a Source of Democratic Principles: A Study of Selected Ibibio Proverbs” (presented at 5th Faculty of Arts National Conference organized by Benue State University, Makurdi, on the theme: “Democratization and the Rule of Law in Nigeria: The Challenges of the Humanities”, 7th – 11th July, 2008). However, this study differs from those four in that it pursues an interest in specific forms of ethnic oral poetry in Nigeria, though in the same context of national unity and development.

In his contribution to the deployment of our national literatures to national unity and development, C. T. Maduka (1994) in an Inaugural Lecture entitled *Across Frontiers: Comparative Literature and National Integration* envisions

the efficacy of literature as a tool in nation-building and for national unity:

Literature enhances man's awareness of the interlocking relationship between human freedom, self-determination of people and progress in society and the necessity of erecting systems that sustain the life of social institutions. Each national literature encodes values which guide the people towards the development of effective mechanisms of response to the challenges of civilization in the modern world ... Our national life is in chaos because there is no poetry in the head of our leaders (17 – 18).

Maduka, however, expresses doubt about the capacity of Nigerian national literature in English language to foster unity and development in the country in view of its accessibility to only a negligible, elitist segment of the population.

In his “Nigerian Literature in English and the National Question”, Maduka (1999) submits that the literatures of the various ethnic groups constitute the cornerstone of the Nigerian literary life and therefore calls on the various levels of government to accord recognition to Nigerian languages and literatures in them as viable tools for national development. He argues that Nigerian literatures in English “can only contribute something to the national development by harping on themes and forms that could orient the attitudes of the minority elite towards the cause of national unity” (114).

Maduka's other work, “The Clouds Are Gathering: Nigerian Languages and Literatures in National Development” (2003) calls for the use of “Nigerian languages and literatures for constructing bridges across the various ethnic groups in the country and establishing a foundation for the mutual co-existence of the ethnic groups” (16). Maduka's faith in the efficacy of our national literatures in national unity and development permeates all his contributions cited in this work. The language issue which rings in all his cited contributions will be revisited in this study in due course.

Further critical opinions on the role of oral poetry in nation-building and national development are expressed by such critics as Anyebe, Okoh, Ajuwon and Ojaide. According to Anyebe (2005), the ceremony for the resurrection of *alekwu*, which constitutes oral poetry among the Idoma people of Nigeria, is preceded by intensive preparations including cleansing whereby offenders against the land confess and make res-

titutions, as *Alekwu* would not eat in an unclean house (122). This scenario indicates the sanitizing function of the oral form: it abhors corruption and promotes uprightness, a feature of national development.

Nkem Okoh (2008) in his *Preface to Oral Literature*, reminiscent of William Wordsworth's “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads”, extensively enunciates and elucidates the importance of oral literature in Nigerian national life. As he puts it:

[...] oral literature has enormous didactic dimensions which can be channeled to the benefit of our society. In addition to being an art, oral literature constitutes a pleasurable mode of learning. In other words, there are other possibilities beyond this element of enjoyment (236).

Okoh further assures that oral literature in Nigeria deals with certain serious issues about life, man, his relationships with his environment and with other human beings, all of which are ... pertinent in the society today. Oral literature, as he concludes, “has an enormous role to play in national development” (236).

Similarly, as reported by Ajuwon (1981), the Yoruba *Ijala* oral poetry frowns against amassing wealth but sees the essence of life in the attainment of personal merit and in service to the society for which a place of honour is carved for one in the community (196). This honour is attainable through the principles and practice of industry, humility, integrity and heroism which *Ijala* oral poetry teaches. Apart from its entertaining function therefore, *Ijala* oral poetry contributes to society's stability and development.

Like *Ijala* oral poetry, the *Udje* dance songs among the Urhobo, as reported by Udoeyop (1973) and Ojaide (2001), check misdemeanours and vices in the society and therefore promote communal/national stability and development. We shall revisit the *Alekwu*, *Ijala* and *Udje* in this study in the segment dealing with selected forms of ethnic oral poetry in Nigeria. For now, we shall take on the views of such scholars as Liz Gunner, Abiola Irele, Isidore Opkewho, Mary Kolawale, Chike Aniakor and Wole Soyinka on the subject of oral literature and national unity. Gunner (2007) asserts that:

[...] orality need to be seen in the African context as the means by which societies of varying complexity regulated themselves, organized their present and their pasts, made

formal spaces for philosophical reflections, pronounced on power, questioned and in some cases contested power, and generally paid homage to “the word”, language, as the means by which humanity was made and constantly refashioned (67).

This role of orality need not be seen in the past; it is surely in force among the non-literate and minimally literate societies. Exploitation of this character of orality for the unity of the heterogeneous groups in Nigeria remains the vision of this essay and accords relevance to Gunner’s view in the context of the study.

Still in this connection, Irele (2007) for his part declares that:

Many oral cultures have developed various strategies within the complex framework of their semiotic systems ... In African context, one might mention the constant recourse to surrogates (drum language) and to other non-linguistic symbolic schemes, which ... give spatial resonance to human speech as well as ... extend the expressive potential of language (76).

All this underscores the complementarity of oral and literate (writing) cultures and the need to develop both in a typical human ecology. The author also stresses the capacity of oral form to cultivate and preserve the values in collective memory for posterity (76).

Like Irele, Okpewho (2007) stresses the synthesis of oral and written literature in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular. Specifically, he identifies Soyinka’s works as rich in Yoruba mythology, particularly the aspects concerning the relationships between the divinities which disclose “the basic elements of Yoruba outlook on life” (91). Similar myths inform other ethnic groups in Nigeria, underscoring the notion of unity.

For her part, Kolawale (2007) puts her finger on a concourse of oral forms principally or solely practised by women in various African societies for the organization and development of such societies. Such forms include Akan dirges, Yoruba dirges, wedding chants and *rara*. They also include *ebitun* songs (Ondo); *olori* songs (Igede); *aremo* songs, Ago (Oka-Akoko); *gelede* songs (Egbado), *olele* (Ijesa); *alamo* songs (Ekiti) as well as panegyrics (64). All these find their equivalents in *ebre* and *ase* among the Ibibio, and *abang* among the Efik, etc.

Aniakor (2001) in his findings shows that the Igbo, Yoruba, Efik and other African communi-

ties share the common view of life “as a cosmic envelope using the technique of theatre as a process of integration” (63) – they apprehend life as a duality; things are made up of two’s as reflected in the various elements of creation: firmament/earth, men/women, man/spirits, etc.” (63). This illustrates the common origin, and common epistemological view of cosmogony among the different ethnic groups in Nigeria. A study of these details indubitably intensifies the ties and bonds of unity among the ethnic communities.

Soyinka in his *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976) posits that:

Man exists in Africa in a comprehensive world of myth, history and mores; in such a total context, the African world, like any other world, is unique. It possesses, in common with other cultures, the virtues of complementarity; to ignore this simple route to a common humanity and pursue the alternative route of negation, is an attempt to perpetuate the external subjugation of the black continent (xii).

Soyinka discusses here, the common origin of man on a global scale. The implication or deep structure in his discussion is clear: all ethnic groups in Nigeria exist in a comprehensive world of myth, history and mores which, if subjected to a keen and careful analysis, reveals the unity of the ethnic groups. For instance, the myth of creation in the fables of the different ethnic groups bears common motif and common imagination.

Having amply reviewed critical opinions of scholars on the subject, we shall now undertake a delineation of the critical model adopted for the study – the stylistic critical model – which is the subject of the next section of the paper.

TOWARDS A CRITICAL APPROACH: STYLISTICS AND ORAL POETRY CRITICISM

The stylistic critical model employed in this study has been defined as “a language-based [approach] which applies stylistics, the study of style, to literary – oral poetry – criticism” (Eyoh 2005: 38). Literary (oral poetry) criticism has been defined by Northrop Frye as comprising “the structure of literature and the cultural phenomena that form the social environment of literature” (25), the implication here being that literary (oral poetry) criticism involves judge-

ments in terms of aesthetic qualities and social relevance of works of art, both of which must be apprehended in the contexts of language, culture and extra-linguistic factors.

Austin (1979) defines stylistic criticism as “the study of the relation that holds in a literary artefact between its linguistic form and, in the broadest possible sense, its complete aesthetic form” (quoted in Eyoh 2005: 33), adding that in most cases, the former is subsumable within the latter, so that linguistic form may be said to contribute to a work’s overall aesthetic impact upon its audience. Stylistic criticism, according to Austin (1979), seeks to specify the nature of that contribution. The model, Austin cautions, does not restrict its practitioners to a particular formal linguistic theory in terms of the linguistic analysis; the critic may adopt whatever formal framework best suits his/her purpose (Eyoh 2005: 33).

Emmanuel Ngara’s elaboration and deployment of the model instruct that a work of art comprises content and form, the former being the subject matter of the work while the latter comprises the artistic structure and the linguistic format, the linguistic format being the sum total of minute linguistic choices divisible into linguistic features proper and paralinguistic affective devices – “symbolism, myth, allusion, allegory ... not analyzable in terms of normal linguistic description” (Ngara 1982: 17; Eyoh 2005: 34). Ngara identifies seven (7) constitutive elements of the stylistic model as follows:

1. The model concerns itself with content and form in a literary text.
2. It describes and analyses a text at the phonological level of language use.
3. It describes and analyses a text at the lexical level of language.
4. The model studies a text at the grammatical (syntactic) level of language use.
5. It delineates and analyses a work of art in terms of the paralinguistic affective devices employed by the writer.
6. It studies a text at the level of tenor of discourse, and,
7. The model studies a literary text at the graphological level of language use.

As is well-known, the content element is subsumed in the other six elements.

For the purpose of this study, element number 5, paralinguistic- affective domain, is adopted, alongside element number 1, content. This

element is apt for the study in view of the oral character of the texts in issue. As is well-known, at the paralinguistic affective level, content is discussed at the subunits of symbols, icons, proverbs, songs, folklore, imagery, myths, and all forms of figures of speech. These forms embellish and sustain oral poetry during and after performance. Generally, the stylistic model suits the study of oral Nigerian poetry because most of the other (Western) models would lead to absurdity in their application to Nigerian oral poetry; for, as Ikiddeh (2005) has cautioned: “it would be wrong to imagine that every genre of oral literature in Africa has a ready equivalent in Europe and that literary terms are automatically transferable” (2005: 100). Certainly, models such as Formalism and Structuralism are not suitable for the study of African (Nigerian) oral poetry. As earlier enunciated, the paralinguistic affective domain of the stylistic model which comprises various extra-segmental devices listed earlier constitutes the tool for the apprehension of convergences or similarities in divergent, selected ethnic oral poetry in Nigeria which suggests national unity and cohesion, as demonstrated in the next section of the study, which focuses on indigenous oral poetic forms in Nigeria as tools for national unity.

SELECTED INDIGENOUS ORAL POETIC FORMS IN NIGERIA AS TOOLS FOR NATIONAL UNITY

Each ethnic group in Nigeria has rich oral poetry heritage comprising such forms as musical instruments, dance songs, names and naming systems, greetings and oratory, folk songs, work and occupational songs, praise songs, proverbs, symbols and symbolism, divination poetry and myths. Strikingly, these forms enjoy ample similarities in function, subject matter, shapes, origin, the worldview they project, the values they emphasize, the vices they condemn, the philosophies they propagate, and the manners in which they are performed. These similarities strongly suggest common origin of the various ethnic groups in Nigeria and need to be apprehended and appropriated for national unity, national integration and national development. This section of the paper discusses ten (10) of these forms common to some ethnic groups in the country, beginning with the poetry of musical instruments and dance songs.

Poetry of Musical Instruments and Dance Songs in Ethnic Groups in Nigeria

Samuel Akpabot's (1986) study of *Foundations of Nigerian Traditional Music* has revealed that most Nigerian ethnic groups have more or less similar musical instruments in their various music traditions and performance. A discussion of some Nigerian music instruments drives home the point very clearly. The xylophone, an instrument with varying notes, made of wood, is common to many ethnic groups in Nigeria. The Igbo have two types of xylophone, namely, the *gedegwu* with two notes and the *ekwe omaba* of 4 notes. The 8-note xylophone of the Ibibio is called *ikon eto* (xylophone made of wood) while the same instrument with 15 notes among the Hausa Fulani is called *kundun*. Whatever name or variety each group's instrument takes, it is used as instrument of entertainment in choreographic orchestras and in poetic rendition. It should be noted that music and poetry are inseparable. Certainly, the oral poetry of a people resides substantially in the people's music traditions and instruments. The common origin and common goal and functions of the instrument discussed here underscore the unity of the various groups that use it.

Another type of musical instruments common to ethnic communities in Nigeria is the idiophone, comprising gongs or wooden drums. Akpabot's findings show that the gong known in Igbo as *ogene* or *alo*, in Ibibio as *nkwong* and in Yoruba as *agogo* is common among ethnic groups in Nigeria. By whatever name it is called, the instrument is used as "solo in ritual ceremonies or in orchestral ensembles to perform rhythmic (poetic) and colouristic functions" (15). The rattle, another idiophonic instrument is ubiquitous in ethnic groups in the country. The Yoruba call it *sekere* or *agbe*; the Ibibio call it *ekpat obon* while the Hausa call it *shantu*. In each case it is used as part of the group's musico-poetic ensembles. Its presence across ethnic cultures points strongly to the cultural affinity/ties which should unite the groups.

Like idiophone, the aerophone exemplified by the trumpet and whistle as well as the flute and horn is common to various ethnic groups in Nigeria and similar in form and functions. Among the Hausa, the trumpet (*kakaki*) is used poetically to announce the arrival or exit of the Emir from his domain. Strikingly, this instrument

retains its name (*kakaki*) and function in the Yoruba ethnic group. The whistle and the bell, believed to have entered Nigeria through trade contacts in the 16th century (Akpabot, 15) are common to the people of Ibibio who call it (*nananika*); Igbo who call it (*ozigene*) or (*une*) and to Ijaw. Virtually all Nigerian ethnic groups use flutes and horns in their musico-poetic performance. Flutes and horns have local origins. According to Akpabot, they are made from wood, bamboo and brass. Horns are made from dried-out gourds, elephant tusks, horns of deer and teeth of large wild animals (16). Called (*algaita*) by the Hausa/Fulani, (*lara*) by the Yoruba, (*oja*) by Igbo; (*amada*) by Tiv; (*ikpeziken*) by the Edo, the flute is used in most cases to accompany dancing. The *uta* gourd horn is found among the Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom State who call it *odĒ uta*; it is also found among the Igbo who call it (*opu*) and among the Yoruba who call it *eyinerin*.

In the case of membranophone – drums – it is difficult to imagine an ethnic group in Nigeria without one form of drum or the other. In addition to other forms of drum, "the large skin drum (common to various ethnic groups in Nigeria) is used symbolically when played solo as in the case of (*tambari*) of the Fulani which is struck 12 times to signify the crowning of a new Emir of Katsina" (16). There is the *igbin* in Yoruba, *nsingobon* among the Ibibio, *yogume* among the Itsekiri, *igba* among the Igbo and *emoba* among the Edo. In most cases, the drum is used for ritual music in the various groups. As Akpabot (1986) puts it, different drum categories span all ethnic groups in the country" (19). Drums may appear in their varieties of type, but they are drums all the same. They serve as a symbol of the common origin of the nation. Our ethnic nationals need be challenged by this simple reality to forge strong unity across ethnic frontiers in the nation.

Just as musical instruments, certain dance songs are common to the various groups in Nigeria. Apart from the aesthetic functions of such songs, they help to sanitize the society and to foster unity among the people. The *Udje* dance song reported by Tanure Ojaide (2001) and N. J. Udoeyp (1973) among the Urhobo readily comes to mind. According to Ojaide, "central to *Udje* dance songs are the principles of correction and determent through punishment by wounding words" (44). Among the Ibibio, such dance songs as *Uta*, *Ebre* and *itembe* capture the principles

of *Udje*. There is no doubt that various other ethnic groups in the country have similar corrective instruments. These should be emphasized across ethnic groups for national unity. The next segment of this section discusses names and greetings which, like musical instruments and dance songs, are rich in values which promote national unity.

NAMES, GREETINGS AND ORATORY

According to Ruth Finegan (1970), “metaphorical names, elaborate greeting forms, serious conversation ... and rhetoric (oratory) play an indispensable part in oral literature in Africa as they add figurative intensity to poetry” (470). For his part, Edet Ukpog (2007) in his work, *An Inquiry Into Culture; Ibibio Names*, opines that the naming systems of most African [Nigerian] societies, are similar” (20). Certainly, names, like proverbs, are symbols expressing the philosophy, worldview, and general culture of the people from whom they emanate. Names, therefore, are part of the oral poetry of the people.

Names strike similarities, as Ukpog has stated, among the various ethnic nationalities in Nigeria, underscoring the common origin, common worldview, common sensibility and aspirations of the people. Such similarities are found in the generally patronymic character of the naming systems: naming based on peculiar circumstances of birth, and naming people according to season, according to day, and according to noble and brave animals. A resource person, Mallam Abubakar Bello of Gombe State, a Fulani, informed me that among the Hausa Fulani, as indeed among various other groups in the country including the Ibibio, Efik, etc., such names as *Damina*, *Tambaya*, *Anarua*, reflect plenty, drought, and rain respectively. Among the Ibibio, these names are respectively, *Uforo*, *Akang*, and *Edim*; similarly, *Laraba* (Wednesday), *Danjuma* (Friday), *Zaki* (Lion); Mohamadu (First son) and Aisha (First daughter) have equivalents in the other ethnic groups – *Ita* (Ibibio) for Laraba; *Ekpe* (Ibibio) for Zaki, *Akpan* (Ibibio) for Mohamadu; *Opapa* (Igbo) for Akpan; Ada (Igbo) for *Adiaha* (Ibibio).

Like names, greetings constitute a factor that unites the various groups in Nigeria. Greetings are art – poetry – because their primary aims are to give and take pleasure. The peculiar manner and style of greetings in our different cultures

roll into one fact – greeting is a manifestation of love or goodwill in normal sense. We ought to borrow the affection and sincerity which enrich normal greetings and use them for building bridges across frontiers. The culture of greetings among the Hausa and the Yoruba in particular is worthy of emulation. While the Hausa encoder will ask the decoder virtually all the state of affairs about the decoder, the Yoruba encoder will generally prostrate, particularly where age is in issue. Other groups like the Efik the Ijaw, the Ibibio, to mention just few, show such delight and open-mindedness in greetings that enhance trust. All this is brick which should be deployed in national unity and nation building.

Similarly, oratory has poetic functions capable of uniting the people. Each ethnic group is blessed with orators. The role of orators should transcend occasional ceremonies but should be used in regular informal situations to teach the young ones the philosophy and values of the community, which invariably are those of the nation. There are such orators in the traditional society across our ethnic groups who should be encouraged to make a living. The point about oratory readily throws up the idea of bards and praise singers, which forms part of the next segment of the section.

FOLK / WORKSONGS AND PRAISE SONGS

Folk, work/occupational, and praise songs constitute another tool of ethnic/national unity in Nigeria. Folksongs in particular disclose in their varieties and aspects, the common origin of the various groups in Nigeria. Such songs, like tales, contain in their aspects moral lessons and values in addition to the entertainment they provide. They invariably teach obedience, honesty service and hard work. Such songs taught and learnt across frontiers certainly promote national unity and cohesion.

Work, occupational and praise songs may be occasional but they contain values capable of promoting national unity. Zurmi (1981) has widely discussed the value of praise songs among the Hausa group of Nigeria. His evidence is amply corroborated by Ibrahim Yaro Yahaya (1981) in his “The Hausa Poet”. Ajuwon (1981), earlier cited in the study, has given graphic account of the regulating and integrating functions of the Ijala praise singer. Similarly, Anoka (1981),

Emenyonu(1978), etc. have testified to the strong social values which Igbo praise and occupational songs propagate even as Iyowuese Hagher (1981) has revealed to us about Tiv oral poetry. Proverbs and symbols which constitute the subject of the next segment of this section, like folk, work and praise songs, teach and foster national unity in their messages and forms.

PROVERBS, SYMBOLS AND SYMBOLISM

Hagher (1981) identifies proverbs as one source of Tiv oral poetry. The author diagrammatically demonstrates the unity of art in Tiv oral tradition where all art forms issue out of integrated arts (39). According to him, proverbs with other art forms assume a unique status among the Tiv as an exclusive language of elders in the society. Emenyonu (1978) makes the same point about the status of proverbs in Igbo ethnic group. Among the Ibibio, proverbs abound which stress the principle of national unity. For example, the proverb: “*Obong ebet nsue; ibede enin*” (The king is immune to insult; not to argument) challenges the arbitrariness of the king and underscores the value of the rule of law in the society, an ideal necessary for national unity. Among the Hausa, Fulani, such proverbs as: *zaman lafiya zana dan sarki* (When there is peace, then somebody comes out as a leader) underscore the importance of peace in forging national unity.

As shown in “Animal Symbolism as Indicator of Cultural Unity ...” (Eyoh 2000) cited earlier, most ethnic cultures in Nigeria attach similar symbolism to various animals and plants in Nigeria. This fact points to the common origin of the people. These symbols, symbolism and proverbs need be shared across ethnic frontiers in literature and music as a means to fostering national unity. We shall now take the last pair of the oral poetry forms in the next segment: Divination and myths.

DIVINATION AND MYTHS AS SOURCES OF ORAL POETRY

Divination and myths provide common sources of ethnic oral poetry in Nigeria and constitute an indicator for common origin of the various groups. As Maduka and Eyoh (2000) have indicated: divination poetry is a kind of poetry practised by experts in various ethnic groups in

Nigeria. This poetry is known by various names in the various ethnic groups: *afa* in Igbo; *duba* in Hausa; *eba* in Nupe; *epha* in Urhobo, *ifa* in Yoruba, *iha* in Bini; (*ikwo/iko/akam/ uwa*) Ibibio, etc. These forms are basically religious, existing side-by-side with other religious sects and underscoring the principle and practicability of religious tolerance as a necessary tool for national unity.

Each ethnic group also has myths, some of which strike archetypal status, being common among the groups. The *abiku* myth, common among the Igbo, Yoruba, Ibibio and other ethnic groups in the country, suggests common world-view among the groups. Nnolim (1987) has discussed myth as a common motif in Nigerian fiction, underscoring the ubiquity of the motif in Nigerian literary heritage, culture, and world-view. Myths of creation which explain certain enigmas in the society also cut across ethnic boundaries. Ikiddeh (1997) in his *The Vulture's Funeral* ... discusses, through myths, the Ibibio cosmology regarding the origin of the bald-headedness of the vulture; each ethnic group has its version of myth explaining creation and other phenomena; myths therefore remind us of our common origin, hence the need for national unity (see Soyinka cited above). This section of the paper has demonstrated the tools of national unity which ethnic oral poetry in Nigeria throws up. The next section briefly raises certain perennial issues that need revisiting, namely, authorship of oral poetry (literature), performance, and the language question.

AUTHORSHIP, PERFORMANCE AND THE LANGUAGE QUESTION

The issue of communal authorship requires a reassessment in the light of the development and expansion of oral literature. Many practitioners of literature still argue that oral literature has communal, therefore, no individual authorship. Adeboye Babalola (1981) in his “Ijala Poetry among the Oyo-Yoruba Community” avers that “No author can validly claim the authorship of an *ijala* piece which he is the first to chant” (8). I believe that since oral literature, like language, is dynamic, authors of oral texts may be forgotten in time but poets/artists who produce their texts currently, like musicians, are entitled to the authorship of their texts.

The second issue relates to the argument by

some critics against existence of oral texts outside performance. According to this view, oral literature owes its life/existence to performance; outside performance there is no oral text to talk about. To pursue this argument may be tantamount to excluding human memory from the literary enterprise, written or oral. The truth is that while oral art comes alive in performance, it resides in the individual and collective memory of the artist and the audience and can be re-enacted as/when the need arises. That is why it is possible to write about oral texts.

Finally, let us revisit the vexed question of language. Maduka and others have expressed strong doubts about the capacity of Nigerian national literature expressed in English to contribute to national integration and unity. They have therefore called on governments to accord "recognition to Nigerian languages and literatures in them as viable tools for national development" (Maduka 1999: 114). We submit that what is needed is for Nigerian ethnic literatures to be published in the indigenous languages and in English to foster cross-ethnic intelligibility and national development. The reality of our national literatures in one or two Nigerian languages appears remote if not unattainable.

CONCLUSION

The paper has reviewed related literature and shown its uniqueness in conception. It has described and deployed the stylistic literary model in its paralinguistic affective aspect. It has discussed some oral poetic forms which can foster national unity in Nigeria if properly studied and investigated. Finally, it raises the issues of authorship, performance and language in relation to oral literature and calls for a reassessment of the issues.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It hereby recommends the teaching of indigenous literature in its aspects in the primary and secondary schools in the country and a cross-ethnic approach to publications on and propagation of Nigerian ethnic oral literatures.

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