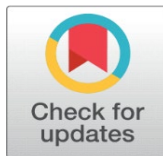


AFRICAN ORATURES AND VADAKKANPATTU: CONFLUENCE OF STORIES AND HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

People have an insatiable desire for stories about their own lives and the world around them, both living and non-living. Wars are often waged to honour their bravery, celebrate their accomplishments, and ensure their legacy endures. This paper analyses the early forms of historical representations from Africa and South India. Griots of Africa served the purpose of conserving the consciousness of the tribe and the death of a griot was mourned as if a library has burned down. Vadakkanpattu narrated the cultural history, legality, and social structure of certain regions of Kerala. These songs were popularised through movies and stories of the bygone days and continued to get preserved in the form of memory imprinted in the psyche of the people through their exaggerated visual representation on the silver screen. Postcolonial vindication of precolonial existence draws upon the oral traditions of the land for validation. Colonial interventions disrupt the linear flow of history, casing distortions, rerouting, and erasures. These can be understood by viewing written history as an extension or continuation of the original oral traditions.

Keywords: Oratures, Griots, Vadakkanpattu, Linear, Nonlinear, Memory, History

1. INTRODUCTION

In the prehistoric times documentation of human activities and natural life depended on oral literary traditions. In the oral forms of every community, the past and the stories of its growth are conscientiously conserved for the posterity. Despite the geographical distances, people across the continents adopted similar strategies for preserving their culture and the soul of their land. The study focuses on the oral traditions of Africa and the Malabar region of Kerala, the southernmost state of India. It is an attempt to join the fraternity of postcolonial resistance against the appropriation of history of the colonized lands. Colonizers, very conveniently justify their inhuman operations by effacing the legacy, traditions, culture and history of these lands. Oratures and the other art forms of the so called 'dark spaces' and 'uncultured lands' speak for themselves, unearthing the cultural diversity and the rich legacy inherited from their ancestors. History ideologically stands as a representation of people, land, culture and every complex and minute aspect that shape the individual communities. Ancient art forms emerged as an external

manifestation of the consciousness of the collective, though the identity of the creator shapes the contours of its externalities. Colonial revisions of history and modernisation of its documentation negated the traditional modes of narration and preservation of the stories of indigenous people and other their land. Modes of self-expression and greater vision for saving the precious moments in history and the epistemology of each social group happened in multiple ways. Oral anthologies became the legacy and pride of each community. Preservation and practices found its own natural ways to flow down to prosperity. Modern attempts to reorganise the effaced areas of history and tradition points to ancestral modes of communication that transcends temporal barriers.

Eurocentric evaluation of communities often devalues certain regions of the globe, especially places in Asia and Africa. A study on various indigenous practices stand testimony to the rich legacy of the lands under consideration. Early forms of cultural expressions and stories delve deep into the nuances of each community's traditions and the substantial intellectual activity resulted in its origin and revisions. Art forms, especially oral and undocumented forms of representations have greater significance in tracing the genealogy of each practice that is hailed as the essence of every community.

In, *The Rienner Anthology of African Literature*, Antonia C Kalu categorises African Literature into four parts:

- Part I - Oral Tradition
- Part II- Early Autobiographies: The Slave Trade
- Part III- The Colonial Period, 1885- 1956
- Part IV- The Postcolonial period, 1957 to the present

The Oral Tradition pertains to the period of pristine times of African History. In the absence of script or written forms, most of the African languages developed indigenous methods of cultural expression and preservation. "Africa is made up of peoples with differing languages and with a variety of cultural expressions in the verbal arts. Every part of the continent has long standing traditions while some countries like Egypt, has long established written traditions as well" (Kalu 1). Oral forms that dominated the cultural expression of the continent included forms like poetry, riddles, proverbs, rituals, diving/ healing, narratives, myths, legends, epics, songs, and dance. "Orature means something passed on through the spoken word...Orature is a strategic communication tool for nonliterate societies in their consolidation and socialization process, and its spoken nature guarantees its widest circulation" (Gikandi 415). African oral narratives, according to researchers, have simple structure and complex rhetoric. Oral traditions are referred to in different ways.

Some oral tradition specialists like Isidore Okpewho refer to it as oral literature while others prefer terms like folklore or orature. ... Before the colonial period, narratives were passed from generation to generation through socialisation and informal apprenticeships. Although some stories are now in print, this remains the most effective method of learning, maintaining, and transferring the oral narrative. Most narrative performers start their training within the family with adult narrative performers or storytellers, who also encourage children to learn through active participation. (Kalu 3)

The different forms of African oral traditions are linked to each other, and it points to the interconnectedness of African culture. Tribes of Africa thrived as a single unit catering to each other in thick and thin. "Oral tradition is the backbone of African arts and letters. It is a living tradition that spans ancient and contemporary

periods and all aspects of African Life" (2). The mutual concern for each other formed the basis of their socio-cultural identity. They continued to keep the tradition alive and ensured uniform participation. Wisdom passed down to generations orally, kept the wheels of these principles rolling. Such narrations and teachings could be seen in the novels of the postcolonial writers and African American writers. "Another evening, the kintago told them how in one's village every person who lived there was equally important to that village from the newest baby to the oldest elder. As new men they must therefore learn to treat everyone with the same respect, and-as the foremost of their manhood duties-to protect the welfare of every man, woman, and child in Juffure as they would their own" (Haley 108). The trainer who moulds young men of the village passes the words and ideas of their elders to the new generation apprentices who are envisioned to adorn vital positions in future politics.

Oral narratives of Africa were translated and familiarized outside the continent by the missionaries, colonialists, travellers, and anthropologists. It did not gain a warm acceptance in the Western literary circle. In fact, the denigration common to colonial spaces affected the appreciation accorded to these narrations.

Initially these foreign recorders saw African cultures as quaint, primitive and esoteric, presenting them as not capable (or worthy) of being understood by non-Africans specially Europeans. Such views continue to dominate ideas about African cultures and traditions making it difficult for contemporary Africans to fully understand and utilize the wealth of Information and knowledge embedded in African oral traditions. (Kalu 4)

Prominent African writers like Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'O, Wole Soyinka and George Lamming recognised this denigration and resisted the tarnishing forced upon their people and continent. They lavishly employed oral narrations and songs in their text to reclaim their legitimate place in the world as normal human beings, contrary to the representations made by authors like Joseph Conrad. They included multiple narrations and stories to exemplify the African way of life and the logic that lies behind every practice in the society. They inserted proverbs abundantly and corroborated the claims of African people regarding their culture and traditions. The role of lore in assuring the continuance of traditions and knowledge is strongly acknowledged by most of the writers and they established the same through the utterances of their characters. In *Arrow of God*, it is made clear in the discussion. "Wisdom is like a goat skin bag; every man carries his own. Knowledge of the land is also like that. Ezeulu has told us what his father told him about the olden days. We know that a father does not speak falsely to his son. But we also know that the lore of the land is beyond the knowledge of many fathers" (Achebe 16).

Social issues were discussed in the African oral narratives, and they abound in the examination of issues like women's issues, family, nature, rivalry, and questions related to all the major challenges in the society. The contributions of the visionaries of their community and the colonial effacement of the crux of the culture and knowledge system get unveiled when the oral traditions are seriously examined.

Overall, the African storyteller is an abstract thinker and visionary concerned with balance in her / his world and encouraged by tradition to keep looking for signs of change and ways to predict and incorporate them into the present. However, since the main ideas of the narrative tradition were embedded in the socialization process in pre-colonial Africa contemporary formal educational strategies tend to ignore their existence and usefulness in the education of African children. The result is a prevailing assumption that African society today learnt the most of what they

know from Europeans during colonization. The stories here refute that assumption and only a small sample of the resources that Africa holds within its many languages and expressive cultural and art traditions. (Kalu 5-6)

Early communities celebrated their heroes and heroines through songs and narratives, and they served as inspiration and motivation to the generations that follow them. "In most African traditions the lives of these men and women are recorded for posterity in songs, poems, and narratives commemorated in festivals. In Africa, these genres survive in chants and songs making it possible for people to continue to believe in heroes and heroic behaviour and actions" (6). Though these narrations focus on heroes, they serve multiple purposes like recording history, the events that moulded the hero into the present stature and the stories of people associated with the hero. The equations of justice, resistance etc are preserved forever in these stories. Praise poetry is a feature of African epics. Somali, South Africa, Zulu, Sotho, Eritrea and almost all regions have a legacy of similar narratives. "Often, the main character's life and experience portray heroic deeds, acts of kindness, honesty and perseverance in ways that reinforce the group's values and beliefs. Always, the main character embodies ideals of the community while her or his excellent qualities are upheld by the community" (7).

Griots of Africa gain special mention in many African texts as the champions of orature. These narratives incorporate the corporeal as well as the collective consciousness of the concerned community. They served as the backbone of arts and history in certain regions of Africa. Watertight compartments of African tribal identity and societal construction ensuring human rights and dignity, get unfolded through these oratures. "African oral narratives reveal the variety and fullness of African life. They are used to entertain, inform, and teach not only children but the rest of the society as well. They explore the universe, life, death, the values of kindness, courage, love, honesty, the place of justice in society, and other areas that have interested humanity for millennia" (Kalu 4).

Primarily, oratures associate every member to the core of its history, culture, and values and binds them to the core of the community's consciousness. "Frequently, children are introduced to local and verbal art traditions through chants to the rain, clapping games, and songs and chants that accompany the rhythmic pounding ingredients for evening meals and other daily activities" (4). They imparted essential aspects, like life skills, maintenance of sustainable environment, mutual support, and survival skills endemic to each region, to every member of the community, in a uniform manner, keeping them united.

Among the various genres of African literature in the oral tradition, poetry is the most prolific form. Traditional praise poetry of Zulu, songs, and lyrics from all corners of the continent and personal poetry of Somalia are some of the instance's African verbal creativity. Epics spoke about the stories of heroes and their heroic deeds. The epics that hail heroes like Sunidata in West Africa, Liongo in East Africa, Shaka in South Africa, and Mwindo in Central Africa are among the most popular epics of the continent.

Folk tales were narrated and passed on from one generation to the other. Indigenous wisdom, moral lessons and the value system of each community get permeated into the entire framework of the society through these tales. In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, folk tales are employed for edification and rectification, by every member of the community in domestic and public spaces. Creation, diseases, marriage, witchcraft, family, humans and animals, man, and the universe etc were the themes of these tales. The collective psyche of the community could be comprehended through these tales. Fudukazi the tortoise (South Africa), Anansi the

spider (West Africa), Nadzikambe the Chameleon (Central Africa) etc are some instances of animals assigned as story tellers in these tales.

Drama tradition of Africa is highly developed in its oral form and is closely associated with the religious traditions of the local community. "In traditional Africa, festival drama represented the height of individual and communal self-expression" (15). Colonial intrusion curtailed the tradition of festival drama by prohibiting it for the new converts or by denying school admission. "In the colonial and mission schools, the systematic separation among African languages, oral narratives and multimedia expressive performances of the festival drama isolated western educated school children from their non- western educated counterparts" (15). The undoing of oral traditions happened along with the transformation into western models of self-expression.

Geographical expanse of early communities was smaller in comparison with the concept of nationalism, or the modern idea of global village constructed through technology. So, oratures ensured detailing of facts including family trees along with the recording of the major landmarks in history. The griots of Africa served a great deal in enriching the oral traditions. "Among the Mandingo of Mali in West Africa, the storyteller in charge of the epic, history, and legend is called griot...Griots are human archives...each griot is a member of a family mandated by tradition to keep people and their history alive in real life memory through story" (6). In the introduction to *Roots*, Alex Haley acknowledges the dimensions and magnitude of a griot's service to a community. "Finally, I acknowledge immense debt to the griots of Africa where today it is rightly said that when a griot dies, it is as if a library has burned to the ground" (Haley viii).

Haley authored *Roots* after engaging in serious research for twelve long years in the Trans- Atlantic route in search of his family history. The work created an interest in genealogical studies in the US and many other nations with a history of slave trade. Haley traced back to several generations, across centuries, returning to his ancestral village of Juffure in Gambia. He could locate his ancestors with the knowledge gained about them from the memory of griots. The linear narration of history of Juffure and Kinte Kunta, takes a nonlinear path after the abduction.

Then he began to recite for me the ancestral history of Kinte clan, as it had been passed along orally down across centuries from the forefather's time. It was not merely conversational but more as if a scroll were being read...spilling from the griot's head came an incredibly complex Kinte clan lineage that reached back across generations: who married whom; who had what children; what children then married whom; then their offspring. It was just unbelievable. I was struck not only by the profusion of details but also by the narrative's biblical style...To date things the griot linked them to events such as "-in the year of the of the big water"- a flood-"he slew a water buffalo. "To determine the calendar year, you'd have to find out when that particular flood occurred. (678)

Oral forms of similar nature can be seen among other communities across the globe. Indian subcontinent has a rich tradition of oral art forms. Folklore is a more common expression of the oral traditions in these regions. Folklore is a compound word combining the words folk and lore. 'Folk' refers to common man and 'lore' represents, according to the dictionary, "a body of traditions and knowledge on a subject or held by a particular group, typically passed from person to person by word of mouth" (web). The social life of specific regions or communities smaller in dimension was guided by their belief system. Folklore is a reservoir of knowledge amassed over generations of the community and is often described as the epistemology of the primitive. Dr. M. V. Vishnu Nampoothiri points out that folklore

concentrates on the knowledge gathered through the experiential learning of the previous generations, but it is not all encompassing.

Folklore concentrated more on oral traditions but later more of 'Folklife', including visual and imitative forms like regional drama, dance, theyyam, cooking and written forms like magical chants were brought under this umbrella term. Veerapattukal celebrating heroes and heroic deeds, Vadakkanpattu, Thekkanpattu, Kanipattu, Theyyam, Thottam, Thira etc are some of the early forms of cultural expression. Multidisciplinary knowledge of a community in its entirety, is not stored in folklores, but it is inevitable to comprehend the soul of a community.

Anthropologists consider culture as an extension of the study of human beings and folklorists try to understand culture based on the process by which humans evolve. Vadakkanpattu is a major branch of Malayalam folk songs. Percy Mc Queen, curator of Madras record office, preserved more than 400 songs. Chelanaad Achutha Menon who compiled and published Vadakkanpattu had great discontent about the grave negligence to this treasure that can unlock the nuances of the culture in these regions. Several attempts were made to conserve these authentications of cultural ancestry. Puliparambil Govindanashan published a compilation of twenty-one Vadakkanpattu from Thrissur. S. T Rediyar also published a collection of twenty-four Vadakkanpattu. Dr SK Nair published two volumes of Vadakkanpattu which were conserved in the Archives of Tamil Nadu.

Vadakkanpattu was a popular art form practiced mainly by a group of singers called Panar. There were many legends regarding the origin of these people. The first mention of these singers happens in Tholkappiyam. In Keralathile Pananmar Pattukal, G Bhargavan Pillai elaborates the stories and evidence regarding this community. Tholkappiyam documents panar as agents of communication between estranged lovers and were trusted to handle even sensitive family issues. They also undertook tasks of Greater magnitude like singing about the glories of valiant kings and their courageous deeds. They used different instruments which are similar to modern violin, harp etc. Based on the instruments used they were categorized as Eshaipanmar, Yalpanar and Mandepanmar. They had slight class differences among them on account of the way in which they practiced their art form.

Eshaipanmar used an instrument like violin. They were on top of the hierarchy among different groups of panars. Yalpanar used an instrument like Veena and were categorized as Cherupanmar and Perumpanar, depending on the size of the instrument used. They had greater acceptability among the three categories; they even had the privilege of serving as witnesses in the war field and were respected by both factions in the battlefield. Great poets, singers and scholars belonged to this group of panars. Mandepanmar were nomads who travelled across the lands singing and they seldom had a stable income or permanent residence.

Panars went around the land singing of the major events, wars, war heroes. They compose the lyrics that speak volumes about these milestones in history and serve the purpose of documenting history. They sang in courts and influential families, chronicling the life of the distinct and respectable souls of the land. It is believed that they had a respectable position in the courts of Chera, Chola, and Pandya Courts. Panars popularized Vadakkanpattu, which sang of the great heroes and events of Kerala.

Vadakkanpattu is the folklore tradition of the Malabar region of Kerala. They are songs sung mainly by people engaged in the traditional vocations of the region and the nomads who are associated with certain rituals. The songs usually speak of the regional heroes and occasionally about the inappropriate approach of the amorous landlords or the resistance of the women who are targeted. The chronicles

of heroes and heroines of Puthuramveedu are the most popular among Vadakkanpattu.

Elaborate narrations of 'payattu' or combat forms part of the songs. Poetic description of men and women, heroic deeds, treachery in combat, tragic end of heroes etc are repeated themes. Thacholi Othenan, Aromal Chekavar, Unniarcha, Kunjikannan and Kolathiri rulers are the most celebrated characters in these songs. The events that necessitated the combat provide a glimpse of the socio-political issues of the period. The intricate family relations, joint family system, child marriage, concept of beauty, morality, feudalism, governance, and the lifestyle of the times are recorded with poetic beauty and embellishment in these songs.

Vadakkanpattu archives history as well as regional languages. Raghava Varier mentions some of these terms that are specific to Malabar region in Vadakkanpattukalude Paniyala. "Ada(there), eda, uda(here), eda(when), oru(when), engi(you), enna(your), enak(yours), engi(you), ente(your), ninga(your)...ennuemaale(today our)"(35). These songs are enriched by references from the epics, Ramayana, and Mahabharata. Puthuram Pattukal in these category employs the bird as the narrator. Numbers have special significance in these songs, each number having specific semantic dimensions. Seven is the frequently used number in these songs. Description of distances and place names in Puthurampattukal are arbitrary or fanciful in nature. The place names and regions mentioned in Thacholi Pattukal is realistic and familiar. Exaggeration is another feature of the songs, claiming the impossible like Thacholi Othenan executed 330 Portuguese people single handed. Determining the calendar dates of the events require extensive research. Social practices like feudal dominance and inequality, seeking solutions through astrology, sorcery, necromancy, dark magic, belief in ghosts and witches etc were narrated in these songs. A slice of the society and the flavours of the land were locked safely in these songs.

Paraphrasing a study on Vadakkanpattu, it is mentioned that these songs can be considered as a reflection the social life or history of those days. But the reflection is not a mirror image. It is like an image through a prism. Society's outlook towards history is highlighted in these songs. The writer's imaginative capacity gives added colour to the image of the society like the enhanced image through a prism (Varier 64).

According to historians, Vadakkanpattu has a history of around five hundred years. Panar, who sang Vadakkanpattu, depended on the rich and the influential for their existence and some families had their personal Panar to keep their legacy alive. They were cunningly clever to extract secrets and strategical information even from the inner circles of families. The stories collected thus becomes songs and records of history in the oral form. Dr. V. Shoba describes the Vadakkanpattu as lyrical stories of valiant history in Nattrivu Pattukal. According to her, the ancestry and cultural legacy of a community can be traced through the proverbs of their language. It illuminates the spirit of every aspect of life in the group under consideration. Vadakkanpattu has a rich and varied fund of proverbs that highlight the life of the people in the northern region of Kerala. Proverbs in Vadakkanpattu enriches itself through metaphors /similes, expressions of edification, pointers of character expectations from all genders, nature/ life, and love. These proverbs in Vadakkanpattu intervened and guided the people of the region to mould themselves to fit into the general structural expectations of the community.

Colonization effected a diversion in the linear progression of history and these songs became estranged from the mainstream of life. The regional habits and lifestyle were replaced by colonial ways of life and education. The stories that

narrate the history embedded in folklore often became the theme of movies and other popular art forms in the visual and print media. Palattu Koman (1962), Thacholi Othenan(1964), Othenante Makan (1970), Ponnapuram Kotta(1973), Thacholi Marumakan Chandhu (1974), Thumbolarcha (1974), Kannappanunni(1977), Thacholi Ambu (1978), Oru Vadakkan Veera Gadha (1989), Kadathanadan Ambadi(1990), Puthuram Puthri Unniyarcha (2002), and Mamamkam (2019) are some of the popular movies based on the historical narrations in Vadakkanpattu. They were extremely successful productions in their respective times, and they continue to entertain the masses as their soft copies are available in the social media sites.

These attempts not only kept the spirit of the songs alive, but also made them popular in the distant lands. A revived interest in these documents of history became popular following postcolonial attempts to undo the damage done to regional communities through colonial masters. Herman Gundert, missionaries, and some British officials collected and documented these songs with the help of the local people. It was archived by the Madras government, and it remained unnoticed in the record room. Late Dr. Chelanad Achutha Menon published selected songs from this collection. Legendary Malayalam writers like Ullur and Nrayana Panicker acknowledges the socio-cultural relevance of these songs in their creative and critical output.

An objective analysis of African Oratures and Vadakkanpattu leads to the inference of a kinship among oral traditions despite the regional differences. Oratures as well as folk lore traditions of Vadakkanpattu maintain their integrity in the treatment of their themes, and they serve a common purpose of conserving the history and lifestyle of human beings in the days prior to recorded history. Extend of inclusiveness of data varies with the forms or the genre. In general, the collective consciousness of the community, its integrity, independence, traditions, belief, rituals, music, dance and the stories of its people and events, are unfolded through these expressions. Moreover, they validate the claims of the postcolonial attempts to falsify the justification of the of the colonizers. Researchers of early African and Indian art forms unanimously consider them as authentic records of indigenous expression of a community's rich and varied heritage and legacy.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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