

## TEACHING FOLKLORE IN A NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY: A TENTATIVE MODEL.

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### Abstract

One challenge confronting the Folklore scholar teaching in the Nigerian University is teaching the subject to students who may not have been acquainted with the subject before university education. Many of these students – of African Oral Literature course – had thought Folklore “unliterary”, and needed to know what it is all about; it has been the responsibility of the Folklore teacher to explain to them the rudiments of the subject. This has been the researcher’s experience. His knowledge of Folklore as a subject and scholarship came in the course of his one-session post-doctoral research in a British university, and on return to Nigeria he found it imperative to develop a syllabus on “Theories of Folklore” as a prerequisite for “African Oral Literature” for the Master of Arts degree in Literature-in-English. This paper is inspired by that syllabus and it includes the following: Definitions, Etymology, Growth, Scope and Methodology of, and Approaches to, Folklore scholarship; Functions of Folklore, the Interface between the Oral and the Written; Myth scholarship and the Heroic Ethos in Africa. It also includes seminar presentations by the students on African Achievement-oriented Names, African Cultural Bi-Sexual Names, Types and Functions of Stickers, Meaning and Purpose of Inscriptions on Motor Vehicles in Nigeria, Ghostlore in Nigeria, Types and Functions of African Legends, Cultural Jokes and Ethnic Slurs in Nigeria, Nigerian Culture-based Sloganeering, etc. Seminars delivered, discussed and revised constitute the Continuous Assessment for the course during the first semester, while an adjunct course, African Oral Literature, is taught in the second semester.

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## Preface

This writer was perhaps not aware of the existence of any discipline called “Folklore” even while taking a course on African Oral Literature under the distinguished Folklorist, Professor (then Dr) Oyin Ogunba, in 1974 in the University of Ibadan. While doing his Ph.D in the same Department of English in the University as a programme involving the literature of the Igbo people, it became necessary for him to study the Oral Literature of the Igbo. One thing led to another and after his doctoral programme, he found himself teaching African Oral Literature to his English Language and Literature class in Imo State University, Etti. Since then he has been teaching the course at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels in Abia State University, an institution that had metamorphosed from Imo State University, Etti/Okigwe.

The writer, thus, found himself studying African Oral Literature and other cognate areas at the periphery. He became a member of the Nigerian Folklore Society in the mid nineteen eighties and attended a number of its conferences. In 1987 he won a scholarship that enabled him to travel to the University of Sheffield, United Kingdom, as a Commonwealth Research Fellow in Oral Literature, a programme that lasted for one academic year. As circumstances would have it, he found himself studying more “Folklore” than “Oral Literature” not only in Sheffield’s Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language (CECTAL) but also in neighbouring University of Leeds that had an impressive library in Folklore. He sat in the Folklore lectures for M.A. students of CECTAL under the tutelage of a leading and much-travelled Folklorist, Prof. J.D.A. Widdowson.

One significant outcome of the writer’s research immersion in Sheffield was the designing of two courses for the Master of Arts students of Literature-in-English at Abia State University: “Literature and Oral Culture I: Theories of Folklore” and “Literature and Oral Culture II: African Oral Literature”. This was born out of the writer’s conviction that studying “African Oral Literature” at the postgraduate level needed a good knowledge of “Folklore” as an independent course, as that knowledge would prepare the student for a better appreciation of Oral Literature. The rest of this paper is an elucidation on the

“Theories of Folklore” syllabus and the kind of seminar topics the student of the course have to explore, write and present to their class.

### **Folklore and its Definitions**

Out of the twenty-one definitions of “Folklore” in Funk and Wagnall’s *Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend*, we can make almost a random choice of one of them, essentially because of its brevity. John L Mish defines “Folklore” as the entire body of ancient popular beliefs, customs and traditions, which have survived among the less-educated elements of civilized societies until today. It thus includes fairy tales, myths, and legends, superstitions, festival rites, traditional games, folk songs, popular sayings, arts, crafts, folk dances, and the like. (401)

One may want to pick holes with Mish’s emphasis on “the less-educated elements of civilized societies” and insist that the very educated in the society may be no less a folk. Indeed, Marion Bowman, whose definition is not in the mentioned Leach-edited dictionary simply because the dictionary predates him, there is a great deal of folklore even among the educated; he says:

It is not now necessary to locate some decrepit, rural, materially-deprived, preferably illiterate... peasant who has never been tainted by the media or travelled outside his/her community to find stuff of folklore. City bankers circulate legends about computer fraud, a graduate wears St Anne medal to discos to help her find a prospective husband; scientific research staffs worry about a haunted lab; nurses know not to put red and white flowers together in a hospital ward. Folklore is all around us, whoever and whatever we are, and we are all folk. (qtd in Bennett 10)

The Folklore definitions we have, both the ones in Maria Leach (edited) and those outside of the book, emphasized two branches of Folklore: material and verbal. Those “structures of the human imagination [which] frequently operate most powerfully when the groups of the individuals who constitute them are experiencing moments of crises” (James on in Leach 400) are “materials handed on traditionally” and may include “physical objects, ideas or words.... The folklore of physical objects” may include “the shapes and uses of tools, costumes, and the forms of villages or houses”, while

The folklore of gestures and games occupies a position intermediate between the folklore of physical objects and folklore of idea. Typical ideas transmitted as folklore are manifested in the customs associated with births, marriage, and death, with the lesser events of life, with remedies for illness and wounds, with agriculture, the trades and professions, and with religious life....

Verbal folklore includes words considered for their own sake and words occurring as connected discourse. Topical words that the folklorist studies without special regard for their own use in connected discourse and place names, personal names (both family and Christian names), and nick names. Folklore in the form of connected discourse includes tales of various kinds (marchen, jests, legends, cumulated tales, exempla, fables, etiological tales), ballads, lyric folk songs, children's songs charms, proverbs and riddles. (Archer Taylor in Leach 402).

Taylor goes on to emphasize a point which some definitions of Folklore have omitted, and that is that the terminology also includes its scholarship. According to him,

The study of folklore consists in the collection, classification, interpretation of these traditional materials, classification involves interpretation to some extent. Interpretation seeks to discover the origin, meaning, use, and history of these materials, to state and explain their disseminations, and to describe their stylistic peculiarities (Leach 403).

From the definitions so far as we have, we may now proceed to present a working classification of Folklore, based on that done by Herbert Halpert in 1971:

### **Working Definition**

W.J. Thoms' 1846 definition are:

1. The Traditional Learning of the people;
2. Material handed on traditionally, usually by word of mouth;
3. The common heritage of a group. All these include:

1. **Language:**

Regional and social dialects; occupational and other special vocabularies, blazon populaire; sayings, proverbs, rhymes and riddles; blessings, graces, prayers and toasts, place names and personal names; mnemonics; gestures.

2. **Children:**

Pre-school lore – lullabies, nursery rhymes, features-naming, etc, putoffs, evasive answers, teasing, threats, school-age lore-jeers, taunts, reproofs, retorts, calls, cheers, chants, mockery, parody, humorous stories, verses and songs, nonsense verses, linguistic play including abbreviations, epithets, euphemisms, insults, tongue twisters, brick languages etc.

### 3. Custom And Belief:

Calendar customs, rites of passages, social domestic and occupational customs, superstitions, luck, beliefs concerning the human body, social relationships, travel, cosmic phenomenon, weather, animals and plants.

### 4 Folk Narratives:

Folktales (Marchen), legends, anecdotes and jokes, personal experience narratives.

### 5. Folk Music, Dance And Drama

Traditional tunes and songs, dances and plays.

### 6. Material Culture, Work Technique, Arts And Crafts:

Vernacular architecture; traditionally made artifacts, traditional mode of work, manufacturing and domestic art and crafts.

From Halpert's Working Classification above, it is clear that much of what is verbal Folklore falls within the purview of Oral Literature and, added to traditional dramatic performances, constitute the concern of the conventional teacher of the subject. This means that the normal teaching of Oral Literature makes little or no provision for Folklore Theories and it seems to us that the subject, "Theories of Folklore", should be an entirely separate course, but designed in such a way that it precedes the Oral Literature course. This would enable the teacher to spend elaborate time on the Definitions, Etymology, Growth, Scope and Methodology of Folklore and its functions, relationship to Myth, the various Approaches to its study and such other topics as the Heroic Ethos in and outside Literature and the Interface between the Written and the Oral. This course, expressed by us as "Literature and Oral Culture I: Theories of Folklore", is what this writer had designed for the Master of Arts classes way back in 1988, and has consistently taught in the first semester as a prerequisite for "Literature and Oral Culture II: African Oral Literature", which is taught in the second semester of the same academic session.

While the substance of the course as described above is being taught, the students are expected to present seminar papers, at times once in the semester, sometimes twice, depending on the numerical strength of the students enrolled for the programme. Each presentation attracts reactions from classmates and the teacher, and thereafter each

student is expected to rework the paper and submit to the teacher for grading as Continuous Assessment.

The seminar topics include the following:

1. Achievement-oriented names in a named culture in relation to their gender, values, cultural and creative contents;
2. Studying a repertoire of superstitious beliefs in a community or area in relation to the people's rational and irrational order in their universe;
3. Studying myths of a community or culture, assessing their functions and literary worth;
4. Collecting forms of children's folklore in a culture and studying how they contribute as instruments of pedagogy;
5. Collecting and studying a large repertoire of bisexual names in a culture in relation to their gender values, cultural significance and creative possibilities;
6. Studying recreations and games in a typical folk community with respect to their simplicity or complexity, context, medium and literary content;
7. Examination of a corpus of significant verbatim collection of ghost stories in an African community in relation to (i) their patterns of narrative, (ii) the interplay between the facts and fiction the stories contain (iii) their thematic preoccupation and (iv) their other literary values;
8. Collection of as many graffiti as possible from identifiable environments and examining their meanings, possible functional relevance and aesthetic worth;
9. Collecting and analyzing the nature, structure and meanings of dominant forms of stickers in the contemporary Nigerian environment;
10. Collecting the inscriptions on vehicles and examining them as illuminating sources of folk sensibility;

11. Collection of occupational and commercial vocabularies and slang in Nigeria and studying them as reflections of dominant attitudes of the Nigerian folk towards tradition and change;
12. Studying some legends in a culture in relation to their functions, themes and other characteristics;
13. Collection of a repertoire of names of communities and places and discussed in relation to the communities'/places' history, communal ethos and literary possibilities;
14. A discussion of the heroic lore of a people, with reference to the history of the people, gender inclinations and literary potential;
15. Collection of as many jokes as possible in a culture and discussing them in relation to their value as humour, literature and possible positive or negative effects on the culture;
16. Gathering of ethnic name-callings/slurs in the Nigerian society or sub-cultures and discussing their positive and negative influences on the society.

### **Reflections on the Seminar Topics**

An examination of these seminar topics would reveal that they all involve serious researches requiring the student to move into the society not only with tape-recorders but also some computer-based gadgets/audio-visuals that would enable the researcher gather both aural and visual evidences that would enrich the scope and depth of the research. Since this exercise is a continuous one in the sense that the classes of students come and go as session succeeds session, the frequency of the experiments is ensured, thus updating the knowledge that arises from the researches. Topics like those dealing with stickers, inscriptions on vehicles, graffiti etc involve studying Folklore not in its primary, quintessential forms but using secondary materials involving writing, inscripting, carving, engraving or drawing. Indeed, the gathering of most of these materials for study involve cassette tapes, cds, cameras, phones and other audio-visual equipment, implying that both primary and secondary orality are involved in the study. The 21<sup>st</sup> century Folklore scholarship, as Mobolante Sotunsa has opined, depends on secondary orality and thus shows that the increasing digital society of the century requires the dynamism that is inherent in handling materials that are no doubt resilient, refusing to be obliterated but necessarily adapting to the electronic conundrums of the age. According to Ong, in the present

century when population adjusts to the technologizing of the word, orality, rather than give way to the electronic intellect, instead re-adapts to this inevitable new waves of computer domination, and generates new forms, new ideas and fresh orality modulated by a non-fleeting but uneasy consciousness.

It has been argued, for instance by Jack Goody, that whether at the level of the pictograph of Egypt, the logography of China, the consonantal syllable of the Canaanites or the Phoenian-derived alphabet of Greece, the significant fact remains that writing is a phenomenon of the

“technology of the intellect”; it is not merely a consequence but also a motivator of commerce, urbanization, doctrinal religion, history, philosophy, numeracy, etc and, ultimately, science. The origin of the alphabet made possible the advancement of, and precision in, incremental, communicative and cognitive knowledge. Oral cultures are not, of course, devoid of these forms of knowledge, it has been argued, but structures of orality made possible the emergence of that kind of framework and system based on ordered thought and analysis in which future generations are enabled to build on stored precedents. The alphabet not only led to the emergence of a class of specialists in the art and techniques of writing but also to an intellectual approach to reality, making it possible for knowledge to be articulated in terms of universals, using as instrument the abstraction of definite laws and principles.

This Goody argument suggests a qualitative judgement in which the culture of writing and its consequent “technology of the intellect” stands unarguably superior to the culture of orality. But it is important to note that any comparison of the two should be based not on a paradigmatic relationship but on a syntagmatic one, which enables orality and writing stand vertically side by side, each attracting its own cultural peculiarities that may compete one with another but not one displacing the other. The oral culture is not likely to be displaced by the ICT; instead ICT is modulating orality into new shapes that will last as long as ICT navigates its course through the diverse branches of Folklore remarkable for its resilience and dynamism.

Let us go back to some of the seminar topics listed in our model. The Achievement-oriented names often echo one form of achievement or the other, and their bearers represent one kind of achieved status or the other which a man or his forbears had brought to himself/themselves in the past. A name like “Ekwueme” (“Doer of what he Say”), in the Igbo culture, means the man has a habit of translating his words/thoughts into action. The name is very likely to have been a title name by an old family member, but, with time, has been canonized to an ancestral name. In modern times an offshoot of the man could be a

businessman who can register his company as “Ekwueme Motors”, suggesting his fleet of buses is, for instance, the product of perseverance, determination, astuteness and hard work resulting to a fleet of vehicles for transportation purposes. The name, “Ekwueme”, though birthed in the past, is very much in the present where the bearer has achieved great status as a businessman: this business could be launched into the future when the bearer of the name hopes to traverse the whole community, nation and abroad, establishing chains of businesses with an organization that has given dignity to the person, community and nation. Ekwueme as a name may not immediately suggest its other meanings, but Folklore would enable the researcher dig out these facts.

The second topic in our seminar list deals with the collection of superstitious beliefs of a people by the M.A. Folklore researcher and attempting to explain some of these beliefs against the background of the people’s rational and irrational order of their universe. It is easier to assign such beliefs to the credulity associated with the so-called primitive people of the past, but some of these beliefs have survived in diverse forms up to contemporary times. For instance, it is believed among some Igbo group that when a snake bites a person, he/she can survive the venom by running about, seeking for the snake, and finally locating where it has left its molted remnants. This is obviously superstitious, but there might be some rationality surrounding the belief. It has been argued by some experts in toxicology that when a person bitten by a snake has the presence of mind to jog about for a period of time following the bite in spite of the pain, that person is, perhaps inadvertently, causing the venom to circulate around the body and possibly setting in motion some anti-toxification by some enzymes in the body; this antitoxification can reduce the efficacy of the venom, thus making treatment and cure easier. Here, we find an ancient belief subjected to an analysis that assumes a biologically scientific rationalization, and this rationalization may not, in fact, be alien to the traditional herbalist who bases treatment on a rational order shrouded in mysticism aimed at deceiving the patient and other “outsiders”.

Topics numbers three and twelve relate to myths and legends, and modern study of them will reveal that they have survived over the ages to the present only because their narrations and explanations have been subjected to environmental changes, to the extent that they now possess differences in versions, depending on who tells them, the nature of their hearers (audiences) and the historical circumstances. Internet explorations these days reveal that some legends and myths have been modulated and mediated upon to suit the digital

temperament. A retelling of the Oduduwa myth/legend with, perhaps, a Chief Obafemi Awolowo as the heroic personality in the mind of the narrator, is likely going to alter the ratio of the myth/legend combination one at the expense of the other. Similarly, a story among the Igbo that features the personality of Zik (Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria) could become more like legend than history depending on whom the narrator is and the nature of his listeners.

Similarly, children's folklore, which is the subject of the fourth topic, has been updated to suit modern times; tales by and for children which are narrated on radio and television where their instructors/teachers are professionals adept in aural and media techniques. Stories are adapted to suit motion pictures characteristic of the film not in the same way as they are structured for radio listeners, and these media versions use other technological devices to simulate semblances of the three-dimensional reality reminiscent of primary orality.

Bisexual names (of topic five), in the Igbo culture for example, were not many in the previous centuries before the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>; gender divisions in those earlier centuries were rather rigid and unamenable to fluid changes. But with the onset of modernity and increasing rise in feminist dispositions, more female persons have come to be given, and some matriarchs to acquire, names/praise epithets that used to be male preserves. Creative writers, especially the women among them, have increasingly given what used to be male names to their female characters. For example, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie allows one of her female characters to name a child "Afamefuna", ("My Name Will Not be Lost" (214), a name usually associated with males who are so-named because they are expected to perpetuate the ancestry of their male primogenital family. This is an aspect of Onomastics which branch of lexicology has assumed a sociological and literary dimension that has gone digital.

Ghostlore scholarship (topic number seven), popularly known as the "hitchhiker" tradition of Folklore in Europe (see Bennett), is an aspect of folklore that commands an impressive bibliography and has also gone digital. It properly belongs to the area of legend scholarship and boasts of an association known as International Society of Contemporary Legend Research. This area of study reveals an amazing concern of modern humanity for what could happen to life after death and how contemporary society is burdened by the after-life of the human, mortal, world. Modern burial rites and the contemporary undertaker industry are evidences of the amount of resources which, even in a supposedly scientific civilization, man is prepared to devote to the dead.

The Graffiti culture can be traced to the world that predates Christ, and the presence of this culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a tribute to the necessity of art and the kind of art forms that interest us as humans. Researches in this tradition reveal the diverse manifestations of it, and how its practices are generated in the different populations of the human society. This form of informal calligraphy is of academic and philosophical interest to the modern mind.

Stickers and inscriptions on motor vehicles (topics nine and ten) transcend primary orality, and they do reflect a great deal of the character of secondary orality. They are expressions that dominate the mind and thinking of contemporary folk; both village and urban dwellers recall them at moments of serious conversations and speeches, and they are found struck on house and office doors, daily-used books like the Bible, all types of vehicles, and many other private and public walls. They illustrate patterns of thought that people cling to in moments of sadness and joy; they re-echo the past and predict the future.

Slang and occupational vocabulary, along with jokes (topics numbers eleven and fifteen) are mainly rhetorical instruments which modern populations rely on for their humour, and professional comedians are repositories of this stock. They add glamorous humour to talks in

halls, sermons in church auditoria, anecdotes in lecture-rooms, etc; they are the life-wire of public assemblies, meetings and even legislative and legal chambers. No doubt they occupy a significant space in the internet, and one can argue that life would be very dull without slang, professional registers and jokes in the ancient and modern centuries.

Lastly, let us discuss briefly the repertoire of community names and ethnic name-calling/slurs. Among the Igbo and many other African communities, there are certain names owned by people that are located in various other places of a culture. A community in Anambra State of Nigeria may be named "Umunachi", but elsewhere in Imo, Abia and Enugu States, there may be other Umunachis. It is tempting to suggest that there may be some ancestral links connecting these communities across distances far and near, especially in a situation, as with the Igbo culture history, where there has been a great deal of migratory movements connecting most settlements in the culture during the pre-colonial and colonial periods. We may, in this regard, make reference to communities in the United States of America, Canada, Newfoundland, Iceland, New Zealand, Australia, and others whose names suggest migratory connections with similar settlements in Britain, Ireland, France, etc. There are indeed historical evidences to authenticate these migratory links, even in the Igbo situation where history of migrations has mainly remained conjectural and where not so, ineffectual. With respect to ethnic slurs and name-callings, they are world-wide, extremely unnerving and in some cases

only mildly tolerable. They are often indices of hate-speech and xenophobia, but they are worth studying since they are aspects of both positive and negative manifestations of Folklore, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Conclusion

We began this paper with a **Preface** which explains how this writer's model for teaching the M.A. course, "Literature and Oral Culture I: Theories of Folklore" in a Nigerian university arose. His highlights of the course outline include Definitions, Etymology, Growth, Scope and Methodology of Folklore, Functions of Folklore, Myth Scholarship, the Heroic Ethos, Approaches to Folklore Scholarship and the Interface between the Written and the Oral. Then follow the sixteen Seminar Topics to be presented by each student in the Folklore class, which will form the Continuous Assessment after corrections based on reactions from the other students and the teacher. The paper then proceeds to reflect briefly on each of the topics in relation to the dynamism and resilience of Folklore. These seminar topics are by no means exhaustive since further topics may be generated based on the perspectives of other would-be teachers and students of any M.A. Folklore class. This writer's reflections on the Folklore seminar topics reveal aspects of the scholarship that establish the inevitable continuity of Folklore, from Thoms' antiquarianism to Ong's "technologizing of the word". We may end this discourse with a

reiteration of the conclusion by Marion Boman: that "Folklore is all around us whoever and wherever we are, and we are all folk". (qtd in Bennet 10).

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