



A Thematic Exploration of Digi-orature: A Case of Zerato Tales

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ABSTRACT:

At the advent of colonialism in Africa, scholars in the field of literature dismissed the land of Africa as one that had no literature or which had the rudimentary type of literature. It was an accusation that other scholars such as Finnegan, Alembi and Kabira would take head on, proving that Africa had well-structured and developed literature in the form of oral literature; however, as societies develop, oral literature was seen as one which would soon be extinct as a literary form. This is not the case. Oral literature is dynamic and has taken on many forms in order to survive the onslaughts of modernity. One way in which oral literature has reinvented itself is through the use of the digital space. The literature on the digital space has been christened as digi-orature. The metamorphosis of oral literature has not only been in its form but also through content. The adaptation of modern oral literature also entails handling of thematic issues that are prevalent in the modern society. This not only helps it remain relevant but also versatile. The subject of this study is therefore to carry out a thematic exploration of digi-orature with reference to Zerato tales – a digi-orator who performs his skits in the Kalenjin language. The study uses the performance theory to unearth these themes and possibly mark out the evolution from the traditionally prevalent themes to modern ones. In this paper, we have demonstrated that African oral literary traditions have evolved. Technology has facilitated the creation of digi-oral literary forms. These digital materials are individual creations as opposed to traditional narratives that were largely associated with communal authorship. Zerato utilises the digital space and refashions his oral literary traditions to convey his message. His digital narratives are repackaged to suit the ever-growing demands of the contemporary Kenyan audience. He has acquired a sizable fanbase because his tales resonate with many youngsters today. The issues addressed in his digital narratives are also global in nature.

Key words: traditional narratives, modern narratives, theme, motif, story line, plot, performance, philosophy, transience, variants, oral tradition.

1. Introduction

The oral literary tradition continues to persist even in an ever-evolving society. As an art form, orature still impacts lives even in the modern societies. The impact on people stems from the fact that oral literature is dynamic; it adapts to changing circumstances in the society. The over-reliance on rote memorisation in order to pass down oral art from one generation to the next is something that can be said to be in the past. Oral texts can now be preserved in print and digital media. Contemporary societies have remodelled what were once primarily oral texts to make more suitable to the current generation. Certain changes, in terms of form and content, have been made in line with modern realities. The digital space has provided a good platform not only for the storage of oral literature but also for its performance and adaptation. 'Modern orators have risen above the limitations of memory and performed oral items that are well within the oral tradition and, at the same time, responsive to contemporary realities' Orina (2014).

One of the key roles played by oral literature is that it acts as a reservoir of communal history, values and traditions; however, some scholars have still equated oral literature as an art form that belongs to the fossil history of humanity. These scholars regard written forms of art as the only literatures that evolve in modern literary spaces. Oral literature, according to these scholars, belongs to pre-literate societies. Some of these misconceptions emanate from some of the definitions that have been used to describe oral literature. Ben-Amos postulates thus of oral literature:

The narrative as a genre traces back to the beginning of society itself. The pre-literate society with speech and symbols as its only tools of communication, used narration to both entertain as well as record and relay the society's values and philosophy. Such themes as etiology were crucial in appreciating and recording society's knowledge of its environment, myth to capture their history and origin and moral tales, fables and legends to communicate the core values the society esteemed. (Ben-Amos, 1975, p. 55)

Such retrogressive views on oral literature are not new; they have also not prevented more research on a dynamic field of literature. It should be noted that researchers have looked at oral literature in terms of a dynamic art form that continues to adapt itself in a rapidly changing society. Therefore, contrary to the views of such scholars as Ben-Amos, oral literature is not a preserve of illiterate societies of the world. It is still consumed by the most progressive people because of its adaptability, just like other art forms, as mentioned earlier in this paper.

A deeper knowledge of African traditional culture, the discovery of the independent African values and their integration into universal culture can only take place if, on the one hand, we investigate the rich folklore of the individual ethnic groups as thoroughly as possible and, on the other, we continuously compare the new material with that already known as well as with other folklore phenomena of other peoples of the world. This can be done if we try to

accomplish a more and more exact, complex work, improving our methods, our way of think-ing and the points of view of our analyses; and if we are ingenious and inventive enough, imaginative and attentive enough to notice when we find something new, something different from what we have known so far. ... there is a possibility for a world-wide cultural integration ...' (Biernaczky, 2016, pp. 9-10).

When visual media made its entry into the scene, most people predicted the end of the use of audio media such as radio. Over time, they have been proven wrong as radio still remains one of the most popular means of communication even in the modern world. The same thing was predicated about oral literature when print media came on stage and became so popular. Most people thought that this was going to be the end of oral literature specially because it was seen as underdeveloped art form. Related to this was the assumption that adapting some of oral literature texts to written literature would make the oral ones extinct. This assumption has been overtaken by time as the relevance of oral literature can no longer be overstated. Alembi (2000) agrees with this assertion in *Telling Tales: The use of Oral Narratives in Religious Sermons in Kenya* when he states, 'Despite the development of information technology, some of the old methods are still used. These forms have been found to be valuable in terms of precision and effectiveness and are still drawn in business, politics, education and religion.' (p. 104)

Traditional oral narratives have been adapted in order to suit the existing realities. Alembi has agreed that there exist narratives that address virtually all the spheres of life from politics, religion, business and social life and so on. Kabira (1984) supports this idea in *Oral Artist* when he states that 'oral narratives have always been reflections of a people's worldview at any particular time within their dynamic and changing social spectrum' (p. 53). This view still holds true to the Zerato Tales which are the subject of the discussion in this paper. The contemporary themes in the Zerato tells are going to be discussed in relation to the themes in traditional oral literature texts.

2. Theoretical Framework

The aim of this study is to carry out an exploration of the themes in digi-orature with specific references from the Zerato tales- a Comedian who performs his skits in the Kalenjin language and posts them on various social media platforms such as TikTok, facebook, Instagram, twitter and Youtube. In discussing the thematic concerns of Zerato tells, the study will be guided by the performance theory as postulated by Levis Strauss on the structure of the myth. Levi-Strauss (1963) argues myth is not static, but it is a narrative that is constructed and sustained through performance. It is a product of what Levi-Strauss call symbolic thought. He coins the term 'mythemes' to describe the building blocks of myth. These building blocks comprise ways of thinking expressed formally through language, which is the essence of performance. Mythemes work through 'bundles of relations', which, according to Strauss, constitute ways in which myths fuse together events, character and theme. In the present study, orature is seen as one way by which society performs and subsequently sustains its mythical narratives. Through the use of performance theory makes it possible to capture various performative variances in narratives, and effectively assess their significance and impact especially in the modern world. Biernaczky argument resonates very well with our analytical framework:

We have to realise that African oral literature has some surprises in store for world culture, genre characteristics that must be considered as independent developments and that demand some modifications in the classical division of genres made by Aristotle. Several lyric-like song forms, the tale with songs, praise poetry or the heroic epic with song inserts cannot be classed [using modern parameters] ... On the other hand, the traditional rhythm and the verbal-musical manifestations connected to it form an independent, genre-like group that needs to be investigated separately, even if the classical Greek example, the *different, old and new African* cultural processes, changes, phenomena suggest that a natural path leads from the rituals through the popular festive customs to the popular drama (Biernaczky, 2016, p. 9).

In this paper, we seek to demonstrate that African oral literary traditions have evolved. Technology has facilitated the creation of digi-oral literary forms. These digital materials are individual creations as opposed to traditional narratives that were largely associated with communal authorship. Modern oral literary artists, such as Zerato whose works are the subject of this literary study, have refashioned oral narratives to suit the needs of their modern audiences. In doing so, they utilise their digi-oral platforms to address contemporary issues.

3. Methodology

We have adopted an analytical research design because this study is qualitative in nature. We acknowledge the demand a critical analysis of digi-oral materials to determine their thematic preoccupations. The findings and conclusions drawn from this paper are subjective as they deductive. Oral texts, which are drawn from digital literary space, have been purposively sampled for this paper. We critically listened to digi-oral texts, observed the performance of these texts and assigned codes to textual and extra-textual elements that deemed relevant for our appreciation of the digi-orator's engagement with contemporary issues. Our critical analysis was guided by Ogundice-Leslie's brand of African feminism and Spivak's subalternity. To reinforce our arguments in this paper, we have also made references to the works of other scholars whose ideas are relevant to our analysis and discussion. The focus here is how the digi-orator, Zerato, has refashioned oral literary traditions, particularly oral tales to convey contemporary issues or thematic concerns.

4. Analysis and Discussion

Generational conflict, the old verses the new, is one the thematic preoccupations of digi-orature. A study of the oral literature of the Kalenjin people reveal that behind the tragedies that are used by the various narrators to pass their messages, there is a certain degree of concerns that is some way reveal

the way the people lived, their traditions, values and culture. A narrative is not just a story for its own sake but a vehicle through which one can understand the community and what they hold dear to themselves. Some of the traditional themes in most of the oral literature of the Kalenjin would include the value of hard work, the value of honesty, trust, sacrifice, greed, strength of wit, greed among others. The vices that were frowned upon and were highlighted in the various oral literature forms include: jealous, envy, laziness, greed, lust, individuality, rudeness and disobedience.

It should, however, be noted that human nature and culture is not static. There is always a need to improve or change the themes in order to fit modern realities in our current age. The oral literary artists that do not adapt to modernity face the threat of extinction. Kabira avers that Oral literature forms belonged and were a product of the community. No individual would claim that a particular text of oral literature was his or her own. Authorship of oral literary materials was largely communal; however, in the modern age, performances by certain artists such as Zerato who is the subject of this study, are considered his intellectual property. For example, if another artist were to perform the skits that are created by Zerato, they would easily be sued for flouting intellectual property rights. If they post them on social media platforms such as YouTube or Facebook, the Zerato can easily report them and the posts would be flagged down the social media pages on against of copyright infringement. This shows how the field of oral literature has evolved over time. This adaption where a skit or narrative is solely owned by the individual can be said to have stemmed from the fact that oral literary forms have been highly commercialised; the artist who performs and creates these oral narratives have to earn a living from them and should another individual perform them, their financial reward is likely to be lower. Finnegan, in *Oral Literature in Africa* (1979), has talked about the resilience of the verbal art:

Oral narratives have never and will never be conservative. Contrary to popular assumptions, the possibility that folktales have been handed down through generations from the remote past in a word-perfect form is indeed very remote. Verbal flexibility of oral narratives in particular and oral literature in general, greatly empowers the competent narrator who can re-embroider a story to give it contemporary relevance as well as suit it to his audience and occasion. (Finnegan, 1979, pp. 318-9)

Finnegan's ideas resonate well with the positions we seek to advance in this paper. Oral literary art has significantly evolved. Contemporary artists have had to refashion their oral literary pieces to conform to the demands of an ever-changing society and an ever-evolving literary landscape. It is no longer possible to reach a wider audience by sticking to traditional mediums of delivery. Besides, the concept of individual, as opposed to communal, authorship is gaining currency in the contemporary oral literary space. Oral literature is elastic; performers can adjust their presentations in a number of ways to suit their audiences. These adjustments are made by an individual. In any case, their paralinguistic aspects of oral performance that have nothing to do with communities. Decisions on instruments and other musical accompaniments is usually made by the performer.

Kabira (1984), in *Reflections on Theories and Methods in Oral Literature*, (p. 51) confirms that in embroidering the story the narrator has a wide range of choices to pick from, they can decide to re-arrange episodes and events, cutting or increasing the number of characters, dealing with motifs differently and using authorial voice appropriately, in order to effectively deliver the message. Wanjiku's views are demonstrated by Chinua Achebe's confession of how he transformed an etiological story entitled 'How the Dog was Domesticated' to reflect the prevailing conditions in Nigeria during the Biafra war. These are the words of Chinua Achebe as captured in Ezenwa-Ohaeto's biography:

It just seized on my imagination and it went on changing and changing. It was almost like an obsession, and it was a totally different story. In the previous story the dog is the nice guy who became a slave. I don't like slaves so that is why I turned the plot around 180 degrees. It was shaped in terms of dialogues, narrative sinew, cultural notions and moral values in order to suit the envisaged readership-children while maintaining an appeal to adults. The title was changed to 'How the Leopard got His Claws,' ... The transformation of the story poses obvious symbolic implications. It reflects the devious and deeds that have led to the civil war while the lament of the deer reiterates the violence and dispossession associated with those deeds of social injustice. (Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 1997, p. 125)

Achebe's confessions demonstrate that oral literary materials can be repackaged to ensure that they reflect contemporary realities. Literary works are mirrors of societies. What an oral literary artist creates has to be in sync with social experiences. The concept of verisimilitude, which is drawn from Aristotelian aesthetics, is still a significant yardstick for determining the value of literary creations. The adaption of themes to suit modern audiences can be seen in Zerato Tales. For example, while in tales such as the 'Evil Step-mother' from the Kalenjin community portrayed women in a negative way – as being the source of all evil in the society – Zerato's modern tales. The femme fatales in his narratives are no longer evil stepmothers who punish their step children extremely while treating her own with favour and care. It is no longer the use of women as the source of human suffering. In a tale such as 'Why People Work,' a woman is given instruction on how to till the land by only taking the hoe to the farm and the farm will be tilled by itself but because a woman wants to impress her new lover, she is dissatisfied with the fact that the hoe only digs a small portion of the land. Therefore, she takes the hoe and digs the land in one day. The gods become angry with the community for disobeying their commands and, therefore, decides that from that day, humans must suffer sweat and pain by tilling the land in order to eat. This tale does not necessarily focus on a step mother, but it highlights what appears to be an allusion from the Biblical stories, particularly the genesis of man's suffering.

The aforementioned story is hinged on chicanery and hypocrisy that define contemporary human relations. Although Zerato does not take on the same archetype of the evil step-mother or the ambitious pride, he still paints women in a negative way by portraying them as materialistic. Perhaps this explains why, as a young man, he considers himself to have earned a Doctor of Philosophy in the field of seduction. He has learnt that without a forked tongue full of lies on what he owns, he will never have his way with the modern women. The women who are pressed down with the hard-economic times fall for his tricks. They gullibly believe that he is going to change their lives because he has a lot of money and power. They accept to be his lovers but as soon as he sleeps with them, he discards them and goes to hunt for other women to repeat the same tricks with them. Here women have been painted negatively as people who are not worthy of love and care but those who are after the men's wealth and therefore they lead to the suffering of the men as

they seek to make them happy. The women are objectified as they are mainly used by Zerato as sexual objects because he has discovered that through lies he can have his way with them.

Men, it appears, are afraid fully committing themselves to women because they cannot be trusted. The refashioning of this tale makes it suitable for modern audiences. As can be seen, the storyline has shifted but the idea that women are evil and can be blamed for what happens in the society still exists in Zerato's digital tales. Therefore, the theme of the femme fatale is still prevalent in this modern tales that are presented as digi-orature. As Oreno et al (2014) postulate, 'It is no longer tenable to argue that oral literature is passed from generation to generation without much of a change.'

The jealousy father and gullible son motif has also been remodelled in Zerato Tales. In the Kalenjin Community, gullibility was frowned upon by all means possible. The oral literary compositions aligned with this motif cautioned young men against trusting strangers, and some familiar people too, too quickly. In one of the old oral narratives, for instance, a young man is tricked by his father to follow him to a hunt. The father has promised the young man infinite riches and everything all the inheritance that is the preserve of the first born. The young man accepts the offer even though he knows he is not the first born. Part of the catch in the storyline is that the young man has to kill his father's brother whom the father has been having a dispute over land with. The young man kills his angle and in the end the father denounces him in front of the community. The young man is then stoned to death.

In an almost similar storyline with the same motif Zerato tells the story of a friend of his who has asked him to accompany him on a seducing mention. When they finally met the beautiful girl, Zerato asks his friend to close his eyes as he heaps praise after praise on the man who is interested in the beautiful lady. But unknown to the Youngman, Zerato accompanies each praise to the young man with a gesture asking the lady to love him instead because he has fallen in love with her beauty. He also uses the gestures to give the beautiful lady his phone number and also direct him to his social media pages where she will be amazed at the huge number of followers that Zerato has and the achievements he has as he has travelled the world performing to different audiences. They soon leave and Zerato's friend is convinced that the young lady has fallen in love with him. But soon after, he sees Zerato in the company of the lady, they are in the process of preparing for their traditional marriage. He tries to stop the marriage but it is too late as the young lady has already fallen in love with Zerato.

These stories demonstrate the dynamism of African cultures and the growing concern over cultural erosion. In an almost similar story, a young man who sees Zerato as his mentor in the game of seduction approaches Zerato to help him seduce a lady he has deeply fallen in love with. Zerato, the trickster, tells him that in order for the lady who is highly educated up to university to fall in love with the young man, he has to speak English. The young man does not know a single word in English and asks Zerato to teach him the language; however, Zerato insists that the lessons in English have to be taught in the presence of the lady. The young man brings the lady to Zerato every day and because he does not understand English, Zerato uses the power of his tongue to sing the best poetry to the young lady who also falls in love with him and they are soon married. The young man discovers that he has been cheated and decides to attack Zerato but members of the public discover his scheme and attack him, wounding him so badly.

As can be seen in the above narratives, although the storyline has shifted to be relevant in the modern age, the motif of the jealous father and gullible son still remains. Zerato the master seducer can be equated to the father while the young men that approach him for help in seducing the young beautiful ladies can be said to be the sons. The concepts of modernity are brought in through aspects of education where the young man does not have education and is therefore disadvantaged and the use of technology in the first instance where Zerato uses gestures to give out his phone number and also direct the beautiful lady to his social media pages where she is amazed by his achievements and falls in love with him.

Furthermore, Zerato experiments with the treacherous woman motif to explore contemporary social experiences. In traditional Kalenjin narrative, one of the most recurring themes is that of the treacherous wife. In one of these narratives, a young bride is left home by his husband who goes out to look for pasture for his cattle during the dry season. This would take days and, sometimes, months as the husband was trying to locate water and pasture for his cows. Unfortunately, the wife is impatient for a lover. Instead of waiting for her husband to come back, she takes a dog for a lover, makes it lie on her husband's mat and serves it some of the juiciest meat that was reserved for the husband. The husband comes back and, on lying on the same mat, is beaten by fleas that were left by the dog. He finally lays a trap and catches the dog in action with his wife. He kills the dog and sends the wife back to her parents. This story deals with sexual perversion, which is an issue of serious concern in modern societies.

A similar adaption of this treacherous woman motif in Zerato tales can be seen when Zerato narrates the story of a young lad in the village who has successfully been recruited into the Kenya defense forces. He is appointed as part of the troop that will go to Somali to fight the rebellious Al-Shabab. However, before leaving for the war-torn Somalia- he gets married to a beautiful woman and together they promise each other that they will remain faithful. But two months after the young man's arrival in Somalia, the young blood of the bride starts to boil. Rumours of his sleeping with the village idiot, a person who is despised by everybody, are heard all over the village. One year later, the young military officer comes back and finds that his wife is pregnant. She lies that the pregnancy is a result of the sex they had before he left for Somalia but the soldier does not buy her story. She finally gives birth and the soldier leaves for Somali again. But unbeknown to his wife, he comes back unexpectedly two months later and finds the wife in bed with the village idiot. This story chastises marital infidelity.

This story also reveals the devastating effects of sexually transmitted diseases in modern societies. He kills the village idiot and soon discovers that his wife has contracted the deadly HIV/AIDS disease and has also infected him. The young man is overcome with anger since part of the money he was paid before heading to Somalia was used to build a house for the parents of his wife and also educate her siblings. As a result of this, he shoots the wife fourteen times. He is arrested and imprisoned for fifteen years. The question that Zerato asks in this tragic narrative is: was prison the cost the young soldier had to pay for love? This digi-oral tale highlights the challenges that military officers face in their families and psychological trauma that they go as a result of marital unfaithfulness. It partially explains why disciplined forces fall prey to domestic violence in the contemporary Kenyan society.

Even though this are different characters in the story, the aforementioned story has been modernised to suit current perspectives. The introduction of a soldier in place of a farmer and a village idiot in place of the dog communicates the same message. The fleas that were on the mat of the cattle farmer can be said to represent the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the modern world. Zerato has carefully modernised an otherwise traditional narrative to suit the interests of the modern world. In the narrative, young men are warned against over trusting and young women are advised to remain faithful to their husbands otherwise they will face the tragedies of this life. Zerato also introduces modern themes such as lust and the HIV/AIDS scourge. Infidelity in modern societies has led to death and family break up as has been witnessed in most love triangles not only in Kenya but world-over. Old storylines are used to capture modern issues. Afrax (2005) articulates this in *Rural Imagery in Contemporary Somali Urban Poetry: A Debilitating Carryover in Transitional Verbal Art*: 'The skilful and conscious use of certain elements of tradition and legendary characters...could be useful in terms of linking the past and present, especially in the case of a society experiencing the transition from a traditional to a modern way of life.'

Zerato also uses his narratives to comment on some of the most pertinent issues in the modern world. For example, in one of his digital narratives, he tells the story of one of his friends who has no meaningful employment but only spends time in the gym in order to build stronger muscles and attract old women into sexual relationship where he hopes to benefit materially. He manages to lure the old women to bed but the result is that he finds it difficult to relate with women of his age. He is, therefore, unable to marry. Married men plan and attack him for sleeping with their wives. Finally, he is diagnosed with the deadly HIV/AIDS. Through such this tale, Zerato is giving a modern commentary on the importance of spiritual values and the danger of unearned material success. He warns against obsession with material possessions. The value of hard work, resilience and patience is emphasised in this tale.

5. Conclusion

The idea that oral literature will one day be extinct has been debunked in this study. Oral literature, as has been seen in Zerato tales, has a way of adapting to modern realities not only in the manner that they are presented in digital format, that is, techno-rature or digi-orature, but also through adaptation to modern social realities such as perverted sexual behaviour, insatiable appetite for material possessions, marital infidelity in the modern world, lust, globalisation and climate change among others. A narrative, as discussed in paper, is aimed at bringing to the fore the realities of the place and time in which it has been produced. That oral literature is becoming extinct is, therefore, a misconception. In a bid to make old narratives fit new realities, performers will make certain adjustments in terms of content and form in order to stay relevant. Zerato utilises the digital space and refashions his oral literary traditions to convey his message. His digital narratives are repackaged to suit the ever-growing demands of the contemporary Kenyan audience. He has acquired a sizable fanbase because his tales resonate with many youngsters today. The issues addressed in his digital narratives are also global in nature.

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