

GENRES OF ASANTE ORAL LITERATURE: PRESERVING THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE ASANTES OF GHANA

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Abstract

The Asante society depended on oral traditions to go through their activities until formal education was introduced. Asante oral literature had almost completely been overlooked and almost forgotten with the influence of globalization and western culture where people would be aliens in their own motherlands. Therefore, the purpose of the research is to fill the academic vacuum through this study for oral literature to serve its purpose fully in the Asante culture by giving attention it requires as a discipline of humanities. The study focused on qualitative case study and phenomenological study exploring the genres of Asante oral literature and provided viable and appealing ways for preserving and transmitting them to the modern generations to come. Snowballing under purposive sampling was employed with data collection instruments of questionnaires, interviews, focus groups and observation generated from 18 conveniently sampled respondents. The outcome of the study showed that oral tradition could be a hybrid of traditional writing, visual and audio methods on CDs and DVDs to enhance the preservation and also be shared on almost all social media platforms to inform people about the traditions and customs of the Asante land. The study recommends researchers consider new trends of packaging oral literature to suit users.

Keywords: Asante Oral Literature, Asante Culture, Cultural Heritage, Digital Archiving, Ghana

INTRODUCTION

Oral literature generally described as verbal messages are reported statements of the past after the present generation asserted by Vansina (1985). According to Finnegan (1978), oral literature is part of a broad field of knowledge known as 'oral tradition' or 'orality', a system of communication in which information and messages are transmitted orally from generation to generation. Oral literature is the verbal art of traditional culture and the oldest type of literature, and it is valuable and meaningful to society in many ways. Emphasizing the importance of oral literature, (Njogu, 2009) noted that "orality was an important method of self-understanding that creates creative relationships and balances the body, soul and environment." Sone (2010) added that "oral literary forms such as stories, songs and proverbs are metaphors that guide moral choices and self-analysis. They are mirrors to see things in a certain way and serve as pedagogical tools for teaching values that guide the specific behaviour of children in society.

In oral tradition, stories and songs are powerful metaphors, similar to the living threads that weave through the cultural tapestry of a community. Just as these threads create intricate patterns and designs, stories and songs form the basis of community and identity, preserving its history, values and collective wisdom (Guillen, 2001). In many oral traditions, stories and

songs are honored as living beings that carry the essence of the experiences and beliefs of a community. They are handed down from generation to generation, just like heirlooms, ensuring the preservation and vitality of cultural heritage. In this way, stories and songs become metaphors for community continuity and resilience that transcend time and space (Bancroft, 2001). In a related argument, Dlamini (2000) indicated that oral literature was highly regarded in traditional education, for it was believed to shape morally sound citizens and encapsulate the essential values of the community. Also, through oral literature, “Africans take advantage of their ability to dance, sing, chant, narrate and use language in order to show the world how they lived, who they are and what they can do” (Sone, 2010). Oral literature has helped communities pass down values and systems throughout the generations. Oral literature such as song, storytelling and poetry which are aesthetically pleasant provides enjoyment and recreation. The functions of the aesthetic and the entertaining aspects of oral literature are intertwined with psychological and social systems that regulate human behaviour (Piskač, 2007).

Many researchers of oral literature have tried to study this phenomenon in many different ways. Internationally, Scheub (1985) study delved into the review of African oral traditions and literature. The study expresses the unbroken continuity in African verbal art forms, from interacting oral genres traditions to such literary productions as the novel or story and poetry. The study emphasized the strength of the oral tradition, relationship between the oral and written word and the beneficiaries of the oral genres in early literally traditions. Also in Ghana, Abarry (1994) delved into the teaching of 4,444 Akan oral literatures in primary schools in Ghana. He highlighted ways to promote effective teaching of Akan oral literature in primary schools in Ghana. Agyekum (2000) also used the medium to study various aspects of Akan oral literature. His goal was to use the media to promote Akan oral literature. Agyekum saw that the media could play a key role in the promotion of oral literature in the absence of games and literary sessions in Akan communities (Agyekum, 2000). Agyekum (2011) in his book ‘Akan Kasadwini’ (Akan Oral Literature) wrote about the various genres of oral literature in the Akan language. The book contains a theoretical analysis of oral literature and a summary description of varieties of Akan oral literature. The study done by these researchers showed that there is a need to preserve and promote oral literature in Ghana. These scholars fully revealed the benefits of oral literature and its role in the past in their writings. Their methods of preserving oral literature do not make it attractive to the modern generation. There is still a lack of research that focuses on formulating preservation strategies for oral literature to make it attractive to the modern generations where contextually their research didn’t focus on the strategic tools in preserving oral literature tradition although geographically some research were related to the Akan. This study sought to save this oldest type of Asante’s literature from dying out completely. The aim of the study was to explore the genres of Asante’s oral literature and provide useful and attractive means to preserve and transmit them to the modern generation by identifying and explaining the various genres of Asante oral literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study adopted the theory of cultural heritage conservation asserted by Rouhi (2016). This employed theory of cultural heritage conservation emphasizes the importance of preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of a community. The Asantes oral literature is taken into consideration in the study where the theory of cultural heritage conservation serves as a blueprint for preserving the oral tradition of the Asantes. It aims to preserve traditions, artefacts and practices and ensure their continuity and meaning for future generations. This includes not only the physical preservation of historical sites and objects, but also the transmission of cultural heritage such as rituals, oral traditions like music and language. The theory serves as a guide for preserving Asante tradition of oral literature for myths, legends, folktales, proverbs, riddles, songs. The theory of cultural heritage conservation also involves community participation and empowerment, as local communities often play a key role in the preservation and transmission of their cultural heritage. In this case, the Asante oral literature is said to be the body of cultural expressions that have been transmitted orally from one generation to another helping in preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of the Asantes. This theory recognizes the value of diversity and the need to protect and celebrate the unique cultural expressions of different communities around the world.

Nuances of Oral Literature

Okpewho (1992) defines literature as a creative text that captures the imagination such as stories, plays and poems. He excludes factual texts such as newspapers, because they are not literature. Okpekiu further suggests that oral literature is literature transmitted through speech and argues that oral literature has certain methods that literature may not have. Haokip (2016) supports the view that oral literature, also known as folklore or oral tradition, refers to cultural material and documents transmitted orally from generation to generation through speeches, songs, folktales, stories, legends, epics and other folklore. According to Kurabe & Awng (2022), oral literature, also known as ‘orature’ is a form of communication based on spoken rather than written text. It includes a wide variety of genres such as folktales, myths, epics, folk music and proverbs that have been transmitted orally through generations.

Forms of Oral Literature

These forms of literature are transmitted orally across generations. The stories are majorly created from the immediate environment, though a good number of them involve fictitious characters and settings. Examples of oral literature expatiated in the literature review include folktales, myths, riddles and proverbs.

Myths and Folktales

Myths are found in every African society. These myths explain certain issues such as the creation of man, the origin of the universe among others. These existed before the Judeo-

Christian views of Creation were established (Esler, 1996; Kayode, 1998). Oral myths of African origin tell of the creation of the world and all creatures and the role the Creator played in instituting between all creatures and their functions. It is believed that in Ghana, myths typically explain the creation of specific significant symbols and resources. The accompanied mystery in the tales places some value on them. And that these myths are used to teach lessons that instill positive attitudes among listeners illustrated in (Figure 1). Myths are also old stories that describe how a certain group of people came to be and how significant events happened. The association with the supernatural constantly frightens people.



Figure1: Myths and folktales by Asante storyteller

Source: Photographed by researchers

Folktales

Angmor (1996) asserts that a folktale is an imaginative narrative, ranging from the very humorous to the very serious, even tragic tales. The well-known Ananse tale belongs to this type of narrative. The folktale may in fact be regarded as the prototype of the modern written narrative. In *Akan-Ashanti Folktales*; collected and translated by Rattray (1930), it mentions that folktales are performed only at night, before an audience as a source of entertainment. There is a narrator and actors who are often dressed in costumes. The performances were often done in the street before a seated crowd or in a traditional Akan home setting. According to Rattray, there are different genres of folktales, and they are often amusing stories with lessons at the end. This is classified as 'Anansesem.' These tales are neither factual nor historical but are meant to entertain. Folktales are an essential part of African culture and are narrated by elders to children at night and are meant to inculcate positive attitudes.

Proverbs

Addo (2021) defines African proverbs as “wise philosophical expressions, generally short and sometimes very funny yet makes the language rich, picturesque and expresses a hidden or obvious wisdom.” Asante (2002), quoting an authority in Asante-Twi, writes “Abebuo ye Twi kasa mu nkyene to” (i.e., Proverbs serve as salt that spices the Twi language cited in Manyah et. al. (2016). The Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary also defines a proverb as a “short statement, usually known by many people for a long time that gives advice or expresses some common truth. In short, a proverb is a brief statement full of hidden meaning and which expresses wisdom and truth. The use of proverbs can be found in all indigenous communities across Africa and Ghanaian communities are not exempted (Asante, 2011).

Riddles

Riddles are part of verbal dueling involving a victor and a vanquished; each wants to declare their superiority and academic capabilities over the contestant (Agyekum, 2009). There are two types of riddles in Asante culture asserted by Agyekum (2009) namely tone riddles and translational riddles. Tone riddles are referred to as ‘aborɔme’, meaning 'bore a hole in me' that is to dig out things about my personality or family. Tone riddles occur in languages where the significant feature is the tone. The questions and answers are marked by identical or similar tonal patterns. Translational Riddles is a type of speech play among the Akans where a lead performer gives a literal translation of an Akan word in English and asks the friend to give the Akan equivalent.

A riddle compares two unlikely things to make meaning. Thus, in making the comparison, a set problem is solved. A riddle basically involves questions and answers. It is a word game that stimulates mental and verbal skills in Asante culture (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Native riddles by Asantes
Source: Photographed by researchers

Significance of Oral Literature

In indigenous culture, certain elements are preserved for the sake of posterity. These elements are revered either because of their economic value or the sense of belonging they create within. It is well established and believed that oral literature plays a very vital role in the development of culture (Chesaina, 1991). Finnegan mentions that there is a connection between society and oral literature and that the relationship between them is too complex (Finnegan, 1978). Turin et al. (2013) expatiate more on what is prior mentioned above. To them, oral literature is the spreading of history, concepts or ideas and knowledge basically due to the mode of communiqué in as much as literature is a concern. This infers to the basic fact that; oral literature is highly used by society to maintain the cultural history and societal development from one generation to the other. In a nutshell, oral literature in Ghana is significant in that it is a rich tradition of storytelling, proverbs, and folktales that have been passed down through generations. These stories serve as a way to preserve history, convey moral lessons, and celebrate cultural identity.

METHOD

The qualitative research design aided in soliciting data collection through interviews, questionnaires and observation that helped the researchers in drawing valid conclusions on how Asante oral literature is transmitted and preserved for generations (Kumekpor, 2002). The qualitative research design also made it possible for the researchers to study the Asante oral literature in their natural settings and to make sense of it, and also to interpret those in terms of the meanings people bring using phenomenology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Kaplan and Maxwell (2005) argue that the goal of understanding a phenomenon from the point of view of the participants and its particular social and institutional context is largely lost when textual data is quantified. The phenomenological study also paved way for the researchers to engage in lengthy personal interviews and focus group discussions with the culturists and youth to find out the problems associated with the transmission of oral literature and to gain a deeper understanding of the strategies that can help in preserving oral literature for future generations. The Qualitative research design gave the researchers a unique depth of understanding which was difficult to gain from a closed-question survey. This approach also helped the researchers to understand the social and cultural contexts within which the Asantes live and also capture expressive information about their oral literature and the motivations that underlie their preservation administration using case study (Myers, 2019). The researchers intended to conduct an in-depth investigation into the Asante oral literature and bring to bear the strategies that can best help improve its preservation for posterity. Owing to this, eight communities in the Ashanti region were studied. The communities were Asem, Ayigyaa, Bantama, Beposo, Bomso, Ejisu, KNUST and Manhyia. Leedy and Ormrod (2005) explain that when only one area is studied, the findings may not be very accurate to generalize other situations. The case study was appropriate for the study because it helped the researchers to gain concrete, contextual, in-depth knowledge about Asante oral literature.

The data collection instrument of interview was used for data collection. In the study, the researchers used unstructured questions to obtain enough information on Asante oral literature and the focus group was on the selected youth in the communities understudied. Participator observations were used for data collection. The researchers first designed a checklist to guide them on the various items and scenes to be observed. To determine the validity and reliability of the data gathered through observation, copies of the checklist were then given out to colleague of Doctor of Philosophy students and some Lecturers at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) to examine, correct and make constructive suggestions to improve it. Questionnaire designed were self-administered to the various respondents of the population sample. Most of the questions were the open type of answering in which the respondents have the opportunity to express themselves.

The snowball sampling technique under purposive sampling was used to recruit hidden populations such as the preservationists, culturists and elderly persons, who were experienced and had the expertise in oral literature and very knowledgeable in issues concerning Asante and oral literature. The sample percentage for the study was 30%. This is in line with Busha and Harter (1980) contention that for quality research, thirty percent (30%) of the total respondents were accepted. The study which had 60 respondents including Traditional Authorities, elderly persons, *Asante twi* teachers, parents, scholars, culturist and preservationist had a sample of size of 18 due to the 30% representation illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Distribution of the Accessible and Sampled Population of the Study

| Status | Accessible Population | Sample size 30% |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|
| Traditional Authorities | 15 | 4 |
| Elderly Persons/Parents | 10 | 3 |
| Twi Teachers | 10 | 3 |
| Parents | 10 | 3 |
| Scholars | 3 | 1 |
| Culturists | 3 | 1 |
| Preservationists | 3 | 1 |
| Youth | 6 | 2 |
| Total | 60 | 18 |

Source: (Fieldwork, 2021)

Ethical considerations were honoured where pseudonym of respondents and confidentiality was observed as such, and the participants were fully informed that the information they would give would be documented in a book for posterity. They were also told that their information would be produced in this thesis and its resultant journal publications. Thematic content analysis based on the research questions was constructed; this included analysing transcripts and identifying themes within the text, and it was used to evaluate the qualitative data obtained from the interviews (Barbour, 2001).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Identification of the Genres of Asante Oral Literature

For the purpose of this current research, the genres of Asante oral literature have been generically classified into three. This is in accordance with Mutiso (2018) and Atuahire (2012) who variously grouped oral literature according to the nature and characteristics of its composition as well as its performances. The three broad classes include Narratives or stories (mainly in spoken form); Short fixed forms like proverbs and tongue twisters; and Poetic forms (recitations and songs). Asante oral genres that are narrated (Oral Narration) are fascinating way to share stories and traditions. These include fables, tales, parables, legends, myths. Asante short formulaic forms or language game includes Riddles (Abisaa), Tongue Twisters (Tɛkyeremma Kyim), Pun (Nsengorɔ), Proverbs (Ebe). Lastly oral genres that are sung or recited include Akanfoɔ Nnwom (Songs) and Anwonsem (Poetry).

The Relevant Role of Asante Oral Literature in the Society

Asante genres mirror the Asante society and allow each member to better understand the domain they find themselves. In order to find out the impact of oral literature in the Akan society, Asante to be specific, it was stated indisputably by some culturists and preservationists that Asante oral traditions, transmitted in the form of tales, myths and legends, songs, especially epic songs and poems, proverbs, riddles and other genres, form an important treasury of Asante people's cultural heritage even today. On the relevant roles of Asante oral literature in the past, most respondents were of the view that these genres were used to pass along their history and to teach young people morals and values. Adding that Asante oral tradition and history have long been valuable tools for preserving cultural and historical memory. Some traditional leaders opined that Asante oral tradition to them, in those days preserved knowledge and fed the minds of the new entrants into society. This contributed to answering the how and why of human actions were in the form of stories, poems, songs, dialogues and speech games.

Some traditional leaders noted that in reciting Asante oral literature, certain distinctions and value such as interjections, intonations, facial expressions, and gestures are exhibited that can never be portrayed in written literature. A valuable tool for preserving culture as a means of reminding the whole Asante community of their ancestors, heroic deeds, their past and the examples for their customs and traditions; guidance to their morals. These roles are in agreement with what Sone (2018) opines that oral literature preserves a community's heritage and traditions.

Reasons for the Decline Rate of Asante Oral Literature

In their views on why Asante oral literature was dwindling, respondents gave the following reasons, migration from the villages to the city. They stated that villages are homogeneous and the natural setting for oral literature as a communal art. The urban areas are on the other hand heterogeneous and offer other forms of entertainment such as newspapers, journals, radio, television, the internet and the cinema, which not only compete

with oral literature but dominate it. Others blamed it on themselves as parents and children. Thus, to say, while they as parents (older generation) are busily going about their various duties to earn a living for home, the children (younger generation) seek out alternative entertainment; electronic media, such as television, the internet, online games, online videos streaming, etc. during their leisure periods. In short, today's youth live in the generation of computers, laptops, CDs and DVD which have faced out oral traditional literature. Introduction of churches and their doctrines; cultural practices are taught in church as fetish hence depriving the younger generation of learning them. Foreign influence through social media and other platforms, people tend to imitate other practices instead of learning theirs. Foreign languages are used in officiating major programmes and events. Lastly, the use of foreign languages not our native language in nurturing kids at home.

Modern Strategic Tools for the Preservation of Asante Oral Literature

Asante oral literature is transmitted and preserved through storytelling by the elders whose knowledge of lore is mandatory and may variously reveal it to the appropriate recipients. But with the advancement of new technology, the collection, preservation, documentation and dissemination of Asante oral literature would be much more rewarding, as suggested by some respondents (scholars, culturists and preservationists). The inputs of respondents proposed that this could be done in various ways: by transcribing oral works, dramatizing the stories into video forms, and giving education generally in our homes, through durbars, events and official functions. This can be shared on almost all social media platforms to inform people about the traditions and customs of Asante land. It was additionally acclaimed that curating and collecting stories and events that matter to the people of Asante using a hybrid of traditional writing, visual and audio methods would enhance the preservation.

This, they believe, is making many indigenous people complain about the fact that social media is policing and restricting cultural practices that were around long before their (social media) existence. These same media like Google and Facebook outlets can be used positively to restore the esteemed cultural practices thought of as being sabotaged by current trends. As posited by Bancroft (2001) cited in Sone's (2010) study expresses that at the present time it is now possible and desirable and economically feasible to make full use of the digital recording technology in the archiving and preservation of oral literature performance combining audio-visual technology with print mediums for delivery, in the combination of book/CD format, online computer formats by CD, or in museum exhibits as is now occurring worldwide. Lastly, a digital archiving system or preserving Asante oral literature. This system will be an online platform that stores and provides access to digital collections of oral literature and related materials.

CONCLUSION

The study sought to identify and explain the different genres of Asante oral literature; to find out the relevance and role of Asante oral literature in the Asante kingdom, and to

provide a modern framework for preserving Asante oral literature. Not forgetting their current dwindling and the quest to find solutions to this phenomenon. Responses indicated that Asante oral literature included their narratives (stories), poems, songs, riddles, histories, proverbs, language or word games and other expressions. All of this form an important treasury of the Asante people's cultural heritage from the past till even today. The field work was conducted in Asem, Ayigya, Bantama, Beposo, Bomso, Ejisu, KNUST and Manhyia communities in the Ashanti Region of Ghana through interviews, observation, questionnaire administration and focused group discussions for the required data.

It was noted that the Asante Oral Literature is dying and if a language dies it affects the palace. As a result, Otumfoɔ who is the custodian of the Asante culture and the Asanteman Council should put a policy in place which would bind all Asante people (especially parents to be mindful of the use of their local language at home), in order to salvage this dying Asante oral literature. For the Asante people's oral literature to survive, every genre must be used when it is required. The Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture in collaboration with Kumasi Traditional Council should organize festivals, competitions, workshops, and exhibitions that showcase the Asante oral literature. Researchers should consider new trends of packaging oral literature to suit users both at home (local) and abroad (international). The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) should include (Asante) oral literature content in its digital repository and insist that each library does same according to their respective locations.

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