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Expanding Frontiers of Inter-Disciplinary Methodology: Literature as a Source of African History

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Abstract

Scholars of literature have often recognized the fact that the understanding of the literature of a people at a given period is tremendously enhanced by a thorough grip of the historical dynamics of the era as well as society. Literary scholars can thus be excused if they also tend to believe that historical verisimilitude may be given some weight through a careful sifting of the historical evidence immutably present in literary works. Put differently, there may be some validity in the reconnaissance that certain aspects of literature may be inherently relevant to the verification as well as interpretation of historical data. The writer intends to draw attention of scholars to these sections of relevance as well as highlight how literary evidence can support, enhance as well as broaden the very base of historical evidence and therefore contribute to other areas of profitable academic enquiry.

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Introduction:

The Relationship between Literature and History

There seems to be three main areas in which the study of literature becomes enormously invaluable to the full understanding as well as accurate interpretation of historical evidence. These are oral literature, folktales, and indeed, the written form itself. Linguistic evidence is indispensable to the historian where he is confronted with oral traditions and language change in a region where he is doing a field work. Although it is not the concern of this paper, however, it helps to illustrate the fact that no discipline can be adequately pursued independently of other related disciplines. With

respect to oral literature we are referring to literary compositions of pre-literate societies. Indeed such compositions reverberate the evidence of an imaginative mind creatively engaged in the interpretation of political as well as social phenomena. On the contrary, it is different from oral traditions in a historical sense in that oral literature does not pretend to record a historical truth. A case in point is the Homeric poems. The Iliad and the Odyssey are the prominent ones, primarily as literary compositions, and through the ages, they have remained valuable infact. Indeed, Homer's world is actually imaginary, although, the imaginary world of the literary artist does not grow out of oblivion. In other words, imagination is fed on observable phenomena. At the basis of every form of imaginary world, thus, there is, the essential realism of the author's universe. It is an over-simplification to say that Homer in his two poems, presents the Greek view of life. However viewed, what finally emerges from the character of Achilleus, for example, is the portrait of a Greek gentleman, a great fighter with a respectable place "in the gallery of Homeric Virtues", (Richmond Lattimore 1962:48).

Furthermore, it is significant to note that beyond the literary achievement of the Iliad lies an intrinsic historical source. Accordingly, it is exactly at this point that oral literature suggests areas of historical inquiry. For example, in the case of Troy, there is every evidence that the historical fact at a certain point of its development merged with the legendary imagination of the Greeks. Thus, the heroes are therefore, a cross between the divine as well as the human heroes in this non-literary sense, suggesting something close to the idea of the immortal. Despite the fabulous element in the details of the Trojan War, there is the basic historical component out of which grew the legend. Archaeological evidence have infact thrown some light on some aspects of the legend of Troy to the extent that the editors of the Oxford Classical Dictionary contended that:

The situation of Hissarlik ("in north-western Asia Minor, 4 miles from the Aegean Sea") fits reasonably well with the account of Troy in Homer, Greek tradition and folk memory. Searching exploration has discovered no rival capital site in North-West Troad. The destruction of Troy Vila in the mid-thirteenth century (BC) coincides with flourishing period of the Great Royal Palaces in Mycenacean Greek. Leadership, man power, and wealth were there abundantly sufficient to organize a coalition... Archaeological and linguistic discoveries during the past twenty years have convinced many

scholars that there is a residue of historical truth in many Greek traditions and legends, and Schliemann's identification of Troy has surely been confirmed (p. 1098).

It has long been accepted that imaginative literature, may be a valuable secondary source for historians trying to recapture the significant characteristics of the past. The philosopher of history, R.G. Collingwood argued that there are many similarities between the methods as well as objectives of the historian and the novelist. Writing on the idea of History, R.G. Collingwood asserted that:

Each of them makes it his business to construct a picture which is partly a narrative of events partly a description of situations, exhibition of motives, analysis of characters...Both the novel and the history are...the product of the autonomous or self-authorizing activity...the a priori imagination, (R.G. Collingwood, 1948:245).

According to R.G Collingwood, the basic difference between the two is that while the novelist's concern is to construct a coherent illustration that makes sense "the historian has a double task: he has both to do this and to construct a picture of things as they really were and of events as they really happened." (R.G. Collingwood, 1948:246). In this respect, towards this objective imaginative literature may have its challenges, because the writer may not know or project the real facts. However, what imaginative literature can provide the historian is an understanding into the mores of the period being studied, the social attitudes of the people, as well as their basic world view. Besides, it can also bring the period as well as the people to life in a palpable and compelling way which few histories can accomplish.

Basically not only imaginative literature in all its forms like fiction, drama as well as poetry but also art and music in all their forms are products of a particular age and a particular society. Where the historians fail to pay attention to these, he will fail to understand that age in all its aspects, particularly its intellectual climatic opinion of the times. Also significant and necessary for the literary scholar to pay attention to the historical conditions in which the literature or work of art was made.

So far the discussion has centred on imaginative literature written during the period under study by the historian. In addition, there is literature written at a later time yet set in a particular past period. Nonetheless, this kind of historical fiction may in fact be of a great value to the historian as a source material for both the time in which it was written as well as for the time in which it is set. In all despite the intrinsic problems of historical literature it is fair to argue that:

Yet undoubtedly the penetrative insights, the deep sense of social awareness of the gifted novelists can enable him firmly to grasp at least one segment of the age about which he is writing. The historians and laymen, who ignores the imaginative literature of the period he is studying is as foolish and incomplete in comprehension as the historian or layman who relies exclusively on such materials. (R.G. Collingwood, 1948:49)

Aside from the foregoing, Schliemann's archaeological work was influenced by the Homeric poems and his finds lend weight to the historical probability of Homer's literary world. Even where there are other claims, like Samuel Butler's female authorship theory of the *Odyssey*, (Samuel Butler, 1987). there is a consensus agreement on the basic historical probability of the Homeric Saga. Against this backdrop, if we take the Homeric poems as purely imaginative production of an unknown artist whom tradition had christened Homer, the fact remains that the historian of classical antiquity can hardly ignore the wealth of information contained in these poems. In these volumes, information about the state of military development and military practice is readily available. Invariably, we have an idea of the type of weapons known to the Greeks of the thirteenth century B.C. Also, the state of economic development and the very pattern of social organization may be reasonably deduced from the society that emerges from these poems. If these deductions are corroborated by evidence from archaeology as well as folk tradition, the historian will have a reasonable basis for a guarded reliance on the authenticity of Homer's poems and their usefulness as probable historical sources.

The Homeric poems, as example may be extended to include oral literature in Africa or more appropriately, the oral literature of pre-literate societies. In almost all cases of this character, the evidence tends to support the validity, even if somewhat limited, of oral literature as repositories of probable historical sources. Although Ruth Finnegan will draw a line between the Homeric

tradition and African oral literature, she nevertheless admits that “praise poems are a fruitful source currently authorized interpretations of certain historical events and genealogies, (Ruth Finnegan, 1970:83). However praise songs, for instance, the Oriki of the Yoruba people, do more than merely confer authenticity on oral evidence. Preferably, the function as well as are set within a clear-cut world view. In his *Myth, literature and the African World View*, Deity, Wole Soyinka in plain man’s language, is historically created and therefore shows man’s understanding of and relation to his universe at a particular point in time. Alluding to Sango, the Yoruba God of lightning and thunder, Soyinka stated inter-alia:

I have stressed that Sango’s history is not the history of primal becoming, but of racial origin, which is historically dated. Yet, he leaps straight after his suicide for non-suicide, to be liturgically correct, into an identification (by implication) with the source of lightning. This seeming cosmic anachronism is in fact a very handy clue to temporal concepts in the Yoruba world-view. Traditional thought operates, not a linear conception of time but a cyclic reality, (Wole Soyinka, 1976: 9-10).

Soyinka later suggested that the God, Sango, was created out of historical necessity and said: “Economics and power have always played a large part in the championing of new duties throughout human history, (Wole Soyinka, 1976:12). In an earlier work, Soyinka had already developed this idea, and also interpreted the rise of the Dionysiac cults in Greece in respect of poetical, economic and social developments.

Also, in his introduction to *Bacchae* of Euripides (1973), he argued:

The definitive attachment to a suitable deity –in this case Dionysos–was nothing more than the natural, historic process by which populist movements (religious or political) identify themselves with mythical heroes at critical movement of social upheavals, (Wole Soyinka, 1976:vii-viii)

Against this backdrop, we may therefore safely adopt that there is, in the origins of religious institutions, an element of historical as well as social reality. And that in non-literate societies the study of the rise, development and growth of these religions will in turn throw some light on the

history of the society. In the circumstance, the form of ritual, the songs as well as traditions of the religion will, indeed, form the main source of useful information to the historian.

A large proportion of the total corpus of African oral literature quite often is made of the praise poems and which infact reflect the social and economic setting of a given society. Certainly, an economically developed state will have a thoroughly developed bardic tradition. An affluent and a more powerful, chief is more probable to control a large proportion of high quality professional praise-singers than the wretched chief.

The basic function of the praise-singer is that of the historian as well as the chronicler, even it history here tend to be too close to sheer, propaganda. In fact the problem which oral literature particularly the praise-poem, therefore, poses for the historian lies specifically in the very content of the poem. The first line of action of the historian confronted with the praise poem is to relate the poem to folk traditions as well as-sift the obvious propaganda from what actually happened. Infact, the historian need not be interested in the elaborate hyperbole of the praise singer although he must be interested in relating the historical event around which the hyperbole was developed to the historical context of the given community.

Schapera (I. Schapera, 1965) and Babalola, (S.A. Babalola, 1966), have argued that praise poem contains much of local and national history. Consistently, Schapera found that the praise poem proceeded from historical reality, yet much of the history appears embedded in metaphorical and elaborately high-flown language. There his annotation of each poem in the praise poems of Tswana Chiefs is historical rather than literary, (Schapera, 1966: 176-177; 200-201). a fact already foreseen in his introductory analysis of the poems. He concluded on the basis that “the poems deal mainly with events in which the chief was personally involved” (Schapera, 1966:10) and went ahead to emphasis the historical context of these poems, however, was of the view at the same place that the poem may be about what is expected of the chief, a kind of wishful fulfillment. More importantly, Schapera said:

In modern times...the events commemorated include troubles with unruly tribesmen or subject communities, inter-tribal boundary disputes, dealing with the British Administration and an occasional hunting expedition, (Schapera, 1966).

Similar pattern in the Oriki chants were found by Babalola and therefore he concluded that “Although no two minstrels would give the Oriki of a particular progenitor in exactly the same words, yet there is a hard core of constantly recurring information in such Oriki, no matter by what expert minstrel they are performed.” (Babalola, 1966: 25). The consistency in the instant case points to a historical base that should reinforce the historian’s reliance on such recurring details.

Folktales, unlike praise poems, are indeed stories that have no pretence to historical evidence and include proverbs as well as riddles. Generally they are concerned with man, and environment; or more appropriately, with man’s attempt at understanding the world around him. In other words, most creative stories belong to the category. It is significant to state that the world of folktale is constructed on a system of metaphors and characters and situations are frequently conceived of as performing dual function. Little wonder how, on a close analysis, tales which obviously deal with the animal as well as plant world have a serious moral context, and become an indirect way of instilling a group morality. Perhaps more important from the point of view of our present subject is the recognition of the social responsibility, (Rose N. Gecan, (1970:6). In folktale, most characters, be they animal or human, represent desirable or undesirable social types as well as we can infer from their fate the moral and social ideals of these societies. It was against this backdrop that Richard M. Dorson, summarizing Ebiegberi Alagoa’s paper, contended that “proverbs are compact and cryptic and require considerable exegesis, but when this is available they yield fruit for the historian.” (R.M. Dorson 1972:58, Alagoa’s paper, 1968:235-42). As can be gleaned from the above, much of folk tradition that may be of historical interest is equally present in the Orikis. However, we do not suggest that these traditions are necessarily true. What is more, the point, of course, is that they do contain likely germs of historical truth. The historian, it is left for to sift the evidence and test them against other evidence.

Thus, this is especially valuable in the issue of migrations. Traditions of origin is common with almost every group. In most cases some of them quite often may appear legendary as well as apocryphal or spurious. But even so, a historian may investigate with some profit, (Babalola, 1966:118), the evidence presented by these Orikis, particularly those of particular individual historical figures and lineages.

There is also the issue of mood apart from the issue of facts. Thus, poetry is indeed partisan as well as subjective, and quite often betrays the emotional as well as psychological and in some cases, the intellectual state of a given society at a point in time and therefore, adds important dimensions to bare historical truth. Infact, at periods of excruciating debate, or social and political upheaval, poetry assumes a political and thus historical relevance. The situation in England during the Restoration through the end of the 17th Century is infact an enlightening instance. It should be noted that the intensely passionate heat generated by the great political debates of the period, particularly the succession, was reflected in the poetry of the period which indeed became partisan as well as often poignant. Some of the best known poems of John Dryden contain not only the royalist view of the political situation, but present a gallery of historical events. Significantly, we read not only the history of Restoration in the poems of Dryden as well as the Whig poet Thomas Sahdwell, yet feel the heat as well as enter into the very temper of the great political controversies and historical events of the Restoration. It is this kind of evidence that Jan Vansina has in mind when he observes that “poetry can be used as a historical source, mainly because it gives indications of the psychological attitude adopted by certain people towards certain historical events.” (Jan Vansina, 1973:148).²⁰

Background to Inter-Disciplinary Approach

The question that readily comes to mind of an African historian exploring the relevance of inter disciplinary approach as a source of recapturing the history of segmentary societies is a hard one. This is against the backdrop that until recently, the most widely accepted methodological approach was through written evidence. The historian’s hardware, it was maintained had to be written records. From the foregoing it is obvious that the most pervasive perspective on African history until recently was Eurocentric. And this development, led to the Europeanization of African history and the subsequent claim by European historians that “Africa had no history”. Though Africans had developed systematic ways of preserving their history, the vast majority of them did not write down this history.

The African continent, like other continents in the world, has been a stage upon which the drama of human development and cultural differentiation has been acted since the beginning of history. However, until very recently this history of the continent, its cultural patterns, as well as the

potential of its people, have been the subject of monumental distortions, ridicule and amusement among the intellectual community. The quotations of the renowned Scottish Philosopher, David Hume, (Okon E. Uya, 1984:1) the great German philosopher, George Hegel Okon (E. Uya, 1984), and the renowned Regius Professor of History at Oxford University England Professor Hugh Trevor-Roper (E. Uya, 1984), from three different historical periods might serve to dramatize the above observation.

Thus, the image of Africa as the “Dark Continent” waiting to be “discovered” by Europeans was thus consistent with the power relations between Africa and Europe. The over-dependence upon European written records could also lead to an approximation of the above statement by the European historians. Indeed, a renowned English writer, A.P. Newton, had earlier declared that “History begins when men begins to write”, (E. Uya, 1984:3) this assertion was equally Eurocentric based on power relation between Africans and Europeans.

This European derogatory image on Africans, its history and its continent was expected to change. The struggle for independence was soon accompanied by the fact of independence and this development however, a new atmosphere was created. Thus, the African university colleges, hitherto attached to European universities, would soon become independent as well as fully-fledged universities with young and vigorous departments in the humanities and the social sciences dedicated to reclaiming the past of their countries. As earlier noted, the power relation between Africa and Europe, that of the colonized and the colonizers respectively also played a significant role in the conceptualization of this historical image of Africa. Accordingly, the new Africa nations now independent demanded new historical images consistent with the power relations between Africa and Europe. Invariably, there was now greater insistence upon indigenous African sources for the reconstruction of African history.

The emphasis on oral tradition as valid historical documents gained respectability and validation from the works of Professor Jan Vansina as well as the young Africans he trained at the University of Wisconsin. Also, new nations made tremendous investments in the reclaiming of their past by supporting the opening of national archives, research institutes, national museums and the like. In other words, the insistence on African nationalism and consequent search for the roots of that important phenomenon became major themes in African historical reconstructions. The major

concern of African historians both Africans and non-Africans, in these years was to create a historical tradition consistent with the dictates of African nationalism, Pan Africanism as well as African independence.

In the light of the above analysis, the study of African history and culture, have reached three stages in its development. African history in the colonial period was written as well as interpreted by interested European amateurs who infact made contributions consistent with the political realities, philosophical assumptions as well as methodical approaches of the times. African scholars, during the few years of the agitation for independence, got involved in the conceptualization of the image of their continent with consequent shifts in perspectives, if not in methodologies. Marked significant changes emerged in the years of independence both in methodological approaches as well as perspectives which have continued into the present period. In the last two periods, American writers and some European scholars, although most significantly, young African writers, have played a role. It can be safely said, if nothing else, “that it will no longer be possible for anyone, except the hopelessly uniformed, to say that “Africa has no history and culture”.

African History and Literature

From the foregoing, if nothing else, as earlier stated above, it can now be said without fear of contradiction that African history has developed tremendously. The relevance of literature as aid to African history, though, it has not been given the attention it deserves either by historians or literary scholars but this particular one was designed to break the lacuna or jinx. It is settled, and well known that oral traditions-Folklore, genealogies, praise songs as well as drama-constitute an oral literature on which African historians rely extensively for reconstruction of periods for which there are no written records especially in the segmentary societies. Also there is also a tradition of literature written in Arabic in the northern part of the country which is useful for historians examining the Moslem impact.

Colonial literature written by British authors, whether in the colonial service or independent, shows the classical colonial attitude of paternalism or racism. Colonial literature is either concerned with the heroic activities of the British in Nigeria, or with Nigerians concerned merely and providing a scenic backdrop or when it concentrates on Nigerian characters, presents them in a very negative

light. The most often quoted example here is *Mr. Johnson* by Joyce Cary, which Chinua Achebe described as an “appalling novel.” (Nina Mba, 1987:353). It was from reading such colonialist literature that Achebe decided “that the story we had to tell could not be told for us by anyone else no matter how gifted or well-intentioned.” (Nina Mba, 1987).

Chinua Achebe as a master story teller, has a very sharp, witty as well as rich historical consciousness which is not only reflected in his novel but constitute a driving force for his writing. In the 1920’s, his novel *Arrow of God* was set in Igboland and indeed, was a penetrating study of the clash of ideology as well as morality between the Igbo traditional priest, Ezeulu, and the British D.O., Captain Winterboltom. Thus, *Many things you no understand* by Adaora Uluasi is set in Eastern Nigeria in 1935 as well as provides perceptive insight into the thinking of the British colonial servants and the traditional leaders of Igboland. These two novels were published in 1964 and 1970 respectively. Both of them are historically based, were-illustrated and reflected the feeling, thinking and climatic opinion of the time. The social and political conditions of Nigeria in the 1950’s and in the First Republic are well drawn by several novelists who highlight the pressures of parochialism, ethnic conflicts, the corroding force of bribery and corruption in all areas of life and the materialistic orientation of society. (Nina Mba, 1987). Note however, that substantial body of imaginative literature were generated in terms of the Nigeria-Biafra civil war period.

In another genre, modern African literature, like that of Chinua Achebe, demonstrates that imaginative literature can both derive from history and influence the representation and reinterpretation of historical evidence. Therefore there is a sense in which Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* can be seen as a reassessment of the nature as well as the pattern of the historical contact between Blacks and Whites. Furthermore, in the same way a sound historical account of Nigeria between 1960 and 1966 will benefit immensely from Achebe’s *A Man of the People*. In fact, similar claims can be made for Soyinka’s plays and poems. Put differently, however, the study of these literary works cannot replace the history of the period, it will definitely enhance the interpretation of the historical perspective. By and large, the emotional dimension which is too often lacking in historical narrative becomes accessible through literary rendition. In *Sunset at Dawn*, there are aspects of the Nigeria-Biafra war which Chukwuemeka Ike captured and preserved in his work which is relevant to the historian recapturing the Civil War.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o has consistently created his fictional world out of the historical realities of Kenya as well as has left for future generations very insightful observations on the political evolution of modern Kenya. In the present case, we may not have recourse to *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) or *Petal of Blood* (1977) as historical documents. Although, no historian who wants to enter into the mind of the Kenyan people as well as understand the process of their political and social development can afford to ignore these titles. Also, the ideas that lay behind the Uhuru struggle as well as the consequent betrayal of these ideas, and thus, of Uhuru itself are dealt with in the novels of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o.

Invariably, we may therefore say of Ngugi, as infact, we can say of Soyinka in certain contexts, that contemporary history is recorded on the pages of his fiction. Besides, for example, *Petals of Blood*, is not a historical novel, like the historical novels of Sir Walter Scott, but a fictional interpretation of contemporary history and in this sense is similar to Charles Dickens novels. In fact, that is why these novels cannot fail to enrich the historian's understanding of Kenya during the period they covered.

Whatever is the case, we can develop out subject further as well as include in our survey of memoirs of literary men. However the result will not be different. And because literary men tend to feel more intensely about many issues and they are unusually articulate, they tend to leave on record and in the most memorable phrases, their reaction to momentous historical events. There is no doubt that such reaction may greatly enlighten the historian confronted with the cryptic official records preserved in the archives. Actually, it is at times like this that the historian may find in literature, oral or written, a useful instrument in his attempt to present and represent truth within the limits of available data.

Conclusion

Along with these developments went the increasing recognition among history scholars that traditional African segmentary societies though different from so-called modern ones, were not static. Moreover, indices of change were identified to be wars of expansion and conquest, state formations as well as consequent bureaucratization of African life, religious wars, long distance trade as well as migrations of peoples.

Besides, as earlier stated above, there was also the recognition that given the functionality of the past in the African perception of reality, Africans had developed appropriate ways of preserving their past-oral traditions. Social anthropologists contributed to the changing atmosphere by their insistence on the fundamental harmony which characterized Africa life as well as its cosmological orientation. Also, according to the view, African life demonstrated a “Coherence or compatibility among all disciplines-philosophy, theology, medicine, politics, social theory, as well as land law.” All these, it was maintained by the Nigerian writer, Adebayo Adesanya, “find themselves logically concatenated in a system so tight that to subtract one item from the whole is to destroy the structure of the whole.” The probable consequence of this by African historians was the insistence that African history had to be approached from the inter-disciplinary perspective. Against this backdrop, works of social anthropologists, historical linguists archaeologists, ethno-botanists as well as zoologists had to be used in the reconstruction of African history.

In conclusion and from the foregoing analysis, it has long been acknowledged that literature is an aid to the historian and constitute a valuable secondary source for historians trying to recreate the significant features of the past. The focus here is on the historical value of the novel, the way in which it illuminates the lives of a given people and conveys their thoughts and feelings.

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