

The Interface of Oral Traditions and the Poetry of Nol Alembong

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ABSTRACT

This research sets out to examine the relevance of oral traditions in literary imagination and the ways in which oral tradition has influenced Nol Alembong in his espousal of themes like peace, war, denunciation, resignation, nostalgia, revolt, hope, praise, kleptomania, imperialism, etc. in selected poems in *Forest Echoes* (2012), *The Passing Wind* (2013), and *Green Call* (2017). Selected poems were read, exploring the linguistic and aesthetic features in oral traditions and written poetry, and discussing the views raised by sociologists through stylistic analysis of a work of art. To this effect, post-colonial and eco-criticism were employed. The study reveals that Nol Alembong avails himself of the forms of oral tradition like legends, folktales proverbs, riddles, incantations, etc. as his poetic license, thus establishing cross-fertilization between oral traditions and written poetry. This emphasizes that the blending of traditional lore and written poetry is primordial in the remodeling of people and societies. The study reveals that there is a synthesis of written poetry and oral tradition, in which the magical aura of the oral is present in the written tradition. It further reveals that oral tradition and written poetry have enjoyed and still enjoy a healthy symbiotic relationship in human understanding. Oral tradition facilitates the elimination of anti-social and moral behaviour, as well as helps with social identity construction. The study concludes that despite the preponderance of modern forms of entertainment and education, there exists oral tradition; which is not only enjoyed for its form, but also for its dialectic appeal, which Alembong beautifully weaves into his poetry, thus indicting us to go back to it where morality resides for humanity to thrive.

Key words: Interface, Oral Traditions, Green Studies, Environmental Literary Criticism

INTRODUCTION

The most successful early African writers were aware of what to do with oral tradition and they understood how its structures or images could be transposed to a literary mode. Oral tradition dominates 21st Century writers because of the role it plays in societies from which it is drawn. Amos Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard* (1952), Daniel O. Fagunwa's *The Forest of a Thousand Demons* (1968), and the famous Polish Anthem "While Still We Live", were all crafted from the oral traditions of Ibo, Yoruba, and Poland respectively. *Beowulf*, an epic poem had been in circulation for many years through storytelling before the poet put the words to paper around 700AD. Works of early African writers were merely imitation of oral tradition and as such were not influential in encouraging creativity.

This is because some antiquarians did little more than retell, translate, or transliterate materials from oral traditions. Writers like Nol Alembong have had a dynamic effect on the developing literary tradition such that their works could not be regarded as mere imitation, but as sharpened creative skills within the context of living oral traditions. This study's purpose is to examine and understand the ways in which oral tradition has influenced the works of Nol Alembong. The aim is to explore the presence of dialogic exchange between his works and oral tradition, thus, interconnectedness. To be able to come up with plausible conclusions, the following research questions are modeled to tackle the research problem:

1. What is the relationship between, oral tradition and written poetry?
2. How has oral tradition acted as a repository for Alembong's poetry?
3. How ingenious is Alembong with the use of oral tradition?

Hypothetically, this study is built on the argument that oral traditions have been transposed to the written word, thereby, affecting the development of literary creativity and the impact oral tradition has on poets.

Oral tradition is defined as “cultural material and tradition transmitted orally from one generation to another. These messages or testimony are verbally transmitted in speech or song and may take the form, for example, of folktales, sayings, ballads, songs, or chants.” (<https://www.definitions.net/definition/oral+tradition>). Thus, oratorical forms like proverbs, myths, legends, folktales etc. theorizing from various cultural spaces, have been employed by the poet and blended into his poetry for societal edification. In this way, Alembong is able to transmit oral history, oral literature, oral law and other knowledge of the Nweh such that the mode of communication interacts with literacy and literature successfully. The study employs a textual analysis of Alembong's poems from three published poetry collections. His language strategy to articulate his vision is unraveled, indicating that a lot of inspiration was drawn from the principles of the post-colonial and eco-criticism theories. An eclectic approach to literary criticism with multiple interpretations is employed for a better understanding of the poetic vision of the poet. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in *Homecoming* (1972) intimates that literature does not exist, grow, nor develop in a vacuum. Literature is given impetus, shape and direction, an area of concern by social, political, and economic forces in a particular society (7). In essence, society creates literature and literature mirrors the society that creates it. However, the quality and nature of the reflection of the society, coupled with the writer's craftsmanship depends on the attitude and mind of the author. This is why the poems “Abiku” by both Wole Soyinka of Yoruba descent and John Pepper Clark of Ijaw received a wider audience. The two poems appeal to the consciousness of both the Yoruba and the Ijaw myths of a child that dies and comes back, yet to be born again.

On one hand the post-colonial theory that developed in the early 90's with proponents like Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Franz Fanon, Bill Ashcroft, etc., deflates the Eurocentric view about Africans and their culture. The theory analyses the various forms of cultural practices and their suppression, paying attention to the relationship that exists between domination and resistance to domination which is one of the crucial concerns expressed by Alembong. To Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, the theory came into being with the writing of post-colonial literatures which are as a result of the interaction between imperial culture and indigenous cultural practices. As a consequence, the colonized people had reasons to reflect on and express the tensions which ensued from this problematic and contested, yet vibrant and powerful mixture of imperial language and local experience, (The Post-Colonial Reader: p. 2) which Alembong has brilliantly and captivantly articulated. On the other hand, eco-criticism, being the study of literature and the environment from an interdisciplinary perspective takes advantage of the aspects of the green culture espoused in especially *Green Call*. The theory guides us to examine the world around us and critiquing the mannerisms of the society in the treatment of nature. It is traceable from the late 18th Century to early 19th Century, but only developed in the late 20th Century with proponents like Peter Barry, Pippa Marland etc., who referred to it as “green studies or where literature and environment cross paths”. This theory gives value and importance to the relationship between human beings and nature and expounds how human beings affect nature and vice-versa. This is done exponentially in all the poems in *Green Call* that if read from a post-colonial perspective, the interdisciplinary and interconnectedness of everything to environmental criticism cannot be overemphasized.

THE USE OF THE STORY TELLING AND MYTH AS A WAREHOUSE

Alembong puts into greater use folktales and the myth. The folktale, which Stith Thompson refers to as “all forms of prose narrative, written or oral, which have come to be handed down through years” (The Folktale:

p.4) is very instrumental in Alembong's poetry. He draws heavily from the folktale tradition of Nweh from where he hails. He includes many supernatural elements as found in the Nweh folktales which contain hunters, animals, birds which interact with kings, queens, and the gods. In "The Christmas Chicken", Alembong employs the famous "The Tortoise and Birds' Party in Heaven" tale in which the tortoise, because of greed, falls down from the sky because the borrowed feathers from the birds were all plucked off by the owners and so could not fly back home. When he sends a message to his wife to place mattresses, blankets, and everything soft on which he would land, the birds lie to his wife to put cutlasses, hoes, knives, spears, and stones. When he finally lands at his compound, he crashes, reason why its back is cracked:

The message had been swallowed

With greed by tortoise in the sky,

Unknown to him he was in a foreign land

With the birds' feathers all stuck on him

And so we folded our arms and closed and closed our eyes

And swallowed this strange communion

Forgetting we could be stripped of our borrowed feathers

And abandoned in mid-air (The Passing Wind: 21).

The allusion of the tortoise is reminiscent of the myth often told to explain how the tortoise has a cracked back and how he acquired the name "For You all" that deprived all birds that went to heaven for a party of food and drinks. Through this, Alembong retells childhood tales and memories as he appropriates Bangwa orature that encompasses his people's communal experiences. He uses this story to discourage greed, at the same time, parodying the borrowed Christian religion and how the Africans "swallowed" or accepted it greedily not knowing that it's a foreign/borrowed religion that preaches individualism. The tortoise crashes because he wants to disrupt the African harmonious life that existed during the pre-colonial period. The "Christmas Chicken" uses African cultural aesthetics to contrast two ways of life. However, the intention of the poet is to recommend the building of a healthy national culture in which desire, interest, and renewal are fundamental features in the bid to build a healthy tradition. In the poem, the cultural ambiance of togetherness in Africa before the arrival of the colonialists cannot be underemphasized. Thus, the killing of a chicken (an African cultural aesthetic) at Christmas by Africans and the death of Christ are synonymous to sacrifice, which man must make for others:

For the man whose birth we celebrate

Washed down our sins with his blood

So too must we offer innocent blood

To welcome this great washer man (The Passing Wind: p.21)

Alembong parodies the manner in which Africans accepted the Christian religion, not knowing it was a dangerous thing to have done. Like the borrowed feathers in the allegory, the Christmas tradition is a borrowed tradition that can let us down anytime. "The Christmas Chicken", therefore, is the depiction of the conflict between the African past and the urbanized, westernized and Christianized contemporary world

with the emphasis on the need for Africans to establish roots within the reality of the world as it is. The poem is a clarion call for Africans to go back to traditional ways of worship which are neither borrowed nor deceptive. The conflict, as a subject, is biting and thus becomes a moralizing agent on ways to treat the conflict that exist between the Nweh and Christian tradition in terms of worship. “The Christmas Chicken” is a critique of how alien Christianity is to Africans. He cautions Africans on their acceptance of the alien culture which is very dangerous because it would abandon them in mid-air. The ephemeral nature and deceptiveness of the new order is reiterated, thus warning that western values are deceptive and detrimental to the Africans. His advice is that our national culture should be built on indigenous African cultural values of communion and sharing. The poet appropriates this myth to show the un-aging African culture of camaraderie which the forefathers used to impact on their children. The acceptance of Christian values which compromises African cultural values is some sort of cultural exile, “our borrowed feathers” by the poet who perceives Christianity as a demolition system of Africans whose belief systems are undervalued as explained in “Changing Planes in Mid-Air”:

The mother

Who they say is the younger sister

Is now the White God’s child-

The White God who lives in a country in the sky.

And he says

I am the child of the Black God-

The Black God who lives in the rocks

And in the streams,

And in the baobab trees.

She says

Her God is the true God

For He is the true God of Abraham

She says

My God is the God of my fathers

And of my fathers’ fathers-

A thing of the imagination! (The Passing Wind: p.45)

The use of hyperbole and metaphors represent the carriers of oral history through which the poet is able to present the story of the colonized repressions and generational conflict owed to culture contact and conflict. The new religion and its converts (the personae’s aunt) undervalue African traditional beliefs and call it “A thing of the imagination”. The beginning of some of his poems is indicative of the formulaic opening as used in storytelling. In “Mores”, he uses “Some time ago”, which is usually used at the beginning of every story-telling exercise. This promotes the view that the vitality of African Oral literature has been promoted

by African novelists, poets, and playwrights: (Teke: 86) The story telling narrative is so strong in writing because narrative plunges us into a sociality, we must instead draw on the narrative resources available to us (Steph Lawler: 37).

The Nweh oral tradition is a central concern in Alembong's poetry in which he dexterously juxtaposes with the written. He combines traditional poetic structures and contemporary events, as well as religious influences but points out his concerns on the preservation of the Nweh traditions. In the poem, Alembong reinforces Christian values although he satirizes the conflict that exists between African tradition and that of the west as he explores the divide between Christian beliefs and Africa's traditional beliefs. The myth of how death came into being is interwoven in "Some Day for Sure", a 12 line-poem, in which Alembong attempts to explain the plight of Anglophones in Cameroon. Although the dog runs faster than the chameleon, the chameleon arrived first to "drum the long awaited message of death", making humanity not to live forever. The tortoise in the tale represents the marginalized, yet resilient Anglophone Cameroonians, while the elephant stands for the oppressors. His use of symbolism and metaphor is biting. Metaphorically, Alembong refers to the Anglophone struggle for liberation as a very long journey but that which will come to fruition someday. There is a glimmer of hope that one day the marginalization and oppression of the minority by the majority will end thus calling for patience and resilience on the part of the marginalised:

The feeble cords of that voice

Spell the agonies of the tortoise

Down trodden by the elephant.

But for how long will this last.

When the tortoise's shell is hard to crack?

The journey may be too long and hard,

But was the Chameleon not the first

To drum the long-awaited message of death?

Where was the dog

Who thought the race was his? (The Passing Wind: 2013, 29)

The tale in the above poem suggests that in life, it is not how fast you can go but how far and that we need to endure to achieve success. The tortoise's shell symbolizes resilience and endurance. Commenting on why myths are used in written poetry, the poet had stressed that using myths especially during the initiation of young men and women of the tribe, coupled with the accompanying initiation rites, not only clears the way for their admission into the corporate community but also guarantees their membership of that community (2003: p. 35). The folktale of how a beautiful girl, who rejected so many suitors brought to her by her family, only to accept an incomplete elf who had borrowed different parts of the body to come and ask for the girl's hand in marriage is captured in Alembong's poem, "To Kevin". After their wedding, the couple sets off and on their way to the elf's kingdom, the elf starts returning all the borrowed parts of the body. By the time they reached their destination, the elf is left only with a head. There was nothing the folk girl could do but cry:

For in ancient ages, our sages hold,

Lived a folk's daughter, fair to
behold, Wedded to an elf, scorning her
kind,

But just a head was he, dismayed to find. (The Passing Wind: p.40)

In his moralizing mission of the society through folklore, Alembong explores the moral lesson (disadvantages of parental disobedience) that resides in the folktale. It teaches us that before marriage, a background check (an African practice) of both the girl's and the boy's families is necessary to ensure that both the boy and the girl are not of questionable character. "The Beginning" utilizes the biblical Christian myth of creation in John 1:1, (In the beginning was the Word/ And the Word was with God/ And the Word was God. (KJV: p. 1074) which reveals Alembong's several forms and manner of inter-textuality, a concept where a text dialogues with other texts without distorting the ideas of the initial text.

PROVERBIAL LANGUAGE AND LOCAL COLOUR

Nol Alembong is not only passionate, but he is also very obsessed with oral tradition such that all his poetry collections begin with elements of oral tradition. He makes use of the raw materials through which his poetry is built. While Forest Echoes begins with a Zambian proverb of the Bemba: "One who enters the forest does not listen to the breaking of the twigs in the bush", The Passing Wind begins with an Igbo proverb from Nigeria, and "Unless the wind blows you do not see the fowl's rump". Green Call, on its part, begins with an Egyptian proverb: "Dress up a stick and it will be a beautiful bride". This is testimony of his obsession with oral tradition. Alembong is largely proverbial to give local colour to his poetry. In "The Way", Alembong utilizes yet a number of proverbs:

And the Lizard of the homestead

Passed for that of the farmland;

And the fowl passed for the partridge:

And blood passed for Palm-wine:

And frightened owls hooted at noon

At seeing the way, the world was going (The Passing Wind: p. 37)

The above poem depicts the confused state of things with the coming of the new order. Alembong's use of local colour is fused into his poetry logically and for a purpose. He explores generational conflict and the conflict between tradition and modernism where the older generation represents traditionalism and the younger incarnate modernism and the erosion of cultural values. In "Tekwombuo", Alembong presents traditional Nweh style on how male children are revered at birth. The birth of a male child among his people is synonymous to the birth of a liberator and protector of the family:

So stay with us, Alligator, fear of the kingfisher,

So that our fence shall no longer be eaten by termites;

So that giant rats shall no longer dig this compound;

So that hawks shall no longer prey on our chickens;

So that owls shall no longer cry on our roof tops. (Forest Echoes: p.66).

He combines techniques of Nweh oral traditions to create the new form of writing. Looking for a wife for a boy is another traditional practice of the older generation. His use of Lewoh traditional words like Ndindi, Ndem mbo, fve-afu, nda'a, nga'ah are all traditional elements used in welcoming the male child to fortify him for the great task he has as builder and protector of the family. As the elements protect him from danger so too does the boy bring joy to the family as "pots once more steam with joy" (Forest Echoes: p.65). His use of such traditional words is a call to return to Nweh traditional art and warns that Nweh values in the present dispensation are endangered. Alembong reiterates that to be able to fortify male children through traditional rites, it is as well important to preserve certain traditional artifacts and plants. The use of such traditional leaves and trees is evident of his search for a return to African traditional value, restore, and valorize them. His use of local colour debunks the cultural space created by the West and Teke does not fail to point out that Alembong uses "local colour to challenge Eurocentric and Universalist biases which regard Africa as a blank space needing primal cultural inscription" (p.86). His contempt for overzealous people is subtly put and handled with very mild and metaphoric language. In his "Zombie", Alembong re-echoes that the hunter will one day become the hunted for although the cat wails all night in the den, the hour will come when "the keeper will sing his own dirge" (The Passing Wind: p.22). He explores the marginalization and discrimination of the Anglophones by the Francophones, however, being hopeful that all these will come to an end someday. Alembong's "Married Widows" is an example of a poem that has utilized local colour to a greater extent. The poet frowns at the influence of cultural imperialism of African's lifestyles in which the alien culture has helped to disorientate the Africans thereby confusing them. The metaphorical representation of the confused African is seen in "Married Widows" but despite the misrepresentation, Alembong blends it with local colour so that the effect is less. The cock's crowing, echoing the break of day in the local African context is African:

Like a cock's crow

That reminds one always

Of the break of yet another day

Their daily alleluia

Tore the garments of the night

And the cornea of the morning sky

With retrospect exhibitions (The Passing Wind: p. 32)

In the typical African society, the cock crow plays the role of a clock or a wrist watch as compared to the church songs "daily alleluia" sung during morning devotions but that disturb the exuberance of the cool morning and tearing the quiet and natural African night (the garments of the night). Through this contrast, Alembong satirizes the new order, calling it bad. His use of animals, birds, insects, in "The Celebration" as well as in other poems like "Come Brothers" in which he uses the dog metaphor recalling the barking of the dog goes a long way to prove his attachment to local environment. The poet himself is a dog that is calling on his kith and kin to gather because there is an issue that needs immediate redress and to bring about the much desired change, collective action is required: "The dog of the house calls. / Come, and stand on the anthill/ And let the mound give way, / Under your weight" (The Passing Wind: p.4). He, thus, uses this proverbial language and images to articulate the impossibilities of shifting Anglophone move towards

restoration of dignity. (Teke: p.14). His love for the natural green and local colour qualifies him as a Great Eco-patriot” Kenneth T. Nsah) as is seen in “Vision” where he makes use of the bat, the moon, the sun, the eagle, an antithesis of life, to show how different environments and things affect different people at different times:

The bat rises with the moon

And sleeps with the sun.

The eagle rises in the sun

And sleeps with the moon,

At midnight

The bat sees the ant’s trail;

At noon

The eagle does not. (Forest Echoes: p.....)

In the like manner, he cautions the reader of the impending doom in his “Song of Awambeh” when he says,” the disease that attacks cocoa today/ Is the same disease that will attack coffee beans tomorrow”. (Forest Echoes: p. 63), as a proverb that exudes what befalls human nature.

ORAL POETRY/SONG

Song, another aspect of oral tradition, is effectively put to use by Alembong. Occasions like palm-wine drinking, hunting, games, farming activities like planting, weeding and harvesting, marriages, births, deaths, etc. are usually accompanied by song in most African traditional societies. Reason why we find the following quotation relevant to this study:

We sing when we fight,

We sing when we work,

We sing when in love,

We sing when we hate,

We sing when a child is born,

We sing when death takes a toll. (Okumba 1994:p.87)

People come together to sing and listen to other forms of entertainment, often at night in the moonlit night and in the cold of the dark, free of other distractions and free of labour, as many of the people who participate during the night are free. Alembong educates us through his poetry that a tradition of singing thrives in the village setting, thus, propelling his native Nweh language and tradition through song to survive from the eroding African culture. His use of the song shows a man who has affiliation with his traditional setting. In “Stand up! Stand up for Green”, Alembong is inspired by the Christian Song “Stand up, stand up for Jesus”. The poem is a song that calls for all to stand and keep green everything. Stand up Green’. Stand up! Stand up for green! You soldiers of the cause; /Lift high its mighty Banner, /It must not

suffer loss. (Green Call: 24). Since green metaphorically represents peace, prosperity, and posterity, Alembong calls on all in song to protect the environment from various environmental hazards which is responsible for our present predicament and the destruction of the ecosystem. His title poem “Green Call” and its repetitive chorus that has green all over reminds us on the importance of keeping the environment green:

Green, green, green as green,

Melon is sweet when green

Green, green, green as green,

Traffic flows when lights are green (Green Call: 15)

This reiterates the usefulness of the colour green and which must be preserved because everything good happens only when there is green as suggested in the poem. The repetition is biting and like in song, the purpose is to drive the major preoccupation of the poem. He uses his poetry to put the history of Cameroon in the colonial and post-colonial eras to educate and conscientize the Cameroonian people on the importance of keeping our environment green. In “The Gospel Singer” Alembong uses the popular “One two, three, go!” a song aspect, as if to kick start a song, to present an anti-colonial agenda as part of his protest and rebellion on colonialism:

One two three, go!

And metallic voices

Picked up the celebrated jingles

In mid air

Apostrophizing

Eulogizing

Deifying

Earth:

The eye of the blind: Yé!

The feelers of the numb: Yé!

The mouth of the dumbfounded: Yé!

The easel of human live: Yé! (The Passing Wind. p. 24)

The use of song allows Alembong to comment on what was going on in the country under colonial resistance. His poetry is an engaging type that responds to the socio-political and economic climate of the Cameroonian society. The use of song makes the problems subtle and sways the reader away from the biting socio-political and economic petrification of his society. The poet combines traditional poetic structures and contemporary events of politics and religious influence. To show the extent to which colonialists have been

defeated, Alembong celebrates in song:

An offspring on the stool: Hurray;

An umbrella over our heads: Hurray!

An icon for children of ghost: Hurray!

An oasis in the desert: Hurray! (The Passing Wind: 25)

Historical themes are spotted almost everywhere in Alembong's poetry. He articulates issues of land alienation, which has successfully been taken over by one who can be protective of the African. He celebrates in song the departure of the "deity" and describes the stay as "how short-lived the canonizing sermon:" (The Passing Wind: 24). The song symbolically represents the ruinous nature of the post-independent state and the effects on indigenous cultures of alien cultures are measured in his poetry because of the colonial experience. Nol Alembong's poetry puts the history of Cameroon in the colonial and post-colonial eras to educate and conscientise the Cameroonian people through anti-colonial song as part of his protest and rebellion on certain things that were prohibited during the historical eras. In "The Beginning", the poet attacks materialism and explores historical events with evidence of poetic reaction in the presence of British colonial forces. This depicts the clash between the past and contemporary African reality:

In the beginning was the forest,

The forest was with the earth,

The Forest was the earth, The Forest was one.

It had one head.

It had one mouth.

It had one eye.

It had one ear.

But the fire came,

The fire came. (Forest Echoes: 1)

Although the reader is put in suspense, he is able to deduce that the coming of the colonialists was destructive to the essence of the continent. His frequent use of anaphora, which is also very common in song, is for emphatic purposes. Fire symbolizes destruction and the disruption of the old order of African communalism (that had one head, one mouth, one eye, one ear). The poet critiques western values and individualism as detrimental to Africans who were in one accord during the pre-colonial era. Colonialism, imperialism, neo-colonialism, and globalization are destructive and disruptive concepts blamed on colonies, thus in "The Beginning" and "The Passing Wind", the central motive is the "wind", connotatively used and the manner in which the wind came is reflective of the way a thief comes in to steal:

It came suddenly

And caught us, as if unaware,

It came limping,

Like a child learning to walk,

It came naively

Like the chameleon in the race of immortality. (The Passing Wing: p.12)

The characteristics of the wind (Colonialism) are deceptive and suggestive of how dangerous it has been in the destruction of Africa, such that when it came:

We saw our soft lips

Turn to scabs.

We saw our tough soil

Crack to let the microbes in.

We saw our trees

Shiver in their shoes.

We saw them

Drop their leaves in a falling sickness.

We saw our fowls

Lose their feathers to the chill.

We saw our animals

Abort their babies for lack of food.

We saw our rivers

Expose their stony ways

And our fishes preyed on by the hawks (The Passing Wind: p. 12)

The coming of the new order with its socio-political and economic problems reveals the contemporary urban life and its vicissitudes. The poem depicts a wandering African continent that must make a decision whether to preserve its customs or move to the direction of the wind while she loses her traditional values to the wind

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USE OF ALLEGORICAL NAMES

Nol Alembong is a largely didactic poet who writes poetry that is morally pregnant by his use of allegorical names and the characters he utilizes. One of the central themes he creates using such characters is the relationships between man, animals and insect kingdom and between man and God or gods. The use of “mosquitoes” and “hawks”, and their relationship with man, both blood sucking symbols suggest what Alembong as a poet is critiquing. Like in “The Passing Wind”, “Forest Echoes”, reiterates the dangers colonialism had caused the Africans. He insists on retaining a connection with the African past by producing

poetry that is interwoven with black consciousness, a theme that became a dominant one in Africa. He uses a lot of rhetorical questions to seek this connectedness and yearns for a return to normalcy of African societies. This is also done in “The Mosquito with us”. The mosquito is proud to see the African, the masses, the simple man, and the electorate destroyed. The mosquito stands for the politicians, who are the blood suckers (man’s inhumanity to man) as seen in “Hawks”. Here again, Alembong is seen critiquing man’s quest for power which has made man to be his own enemy. He uses dialogue in “The Mosquito” to immortalize oral poetry and like in “The Game”, he captures post-colonial history that is characterized by manipulation, deception, intrigue, falsification, rigging of elections as he gives the impression that elections in the post-colonial Africa are far from being free and fair. Angwa, on the other hand, is a character who is envied by his people by his deed and achievements. Angwa in “Angwa” is said to have blossomed more than even a rose flower as he is the light of his community. The image of the rose shines against all odds, thus describing Angwa as a redemptive character who has come to redeem mankind:

Angwa,

The robin claims it is bright

But you give colour to the butterfly;

You give colour to the peacock;

You give colour to the rainbow.

Fresh foliage of the savannah,

Juicy pumpkin of the farm land,

Mother hen of the homestead,

With the sun you rise

As with it you set.

You rise to soothe;

You set to rest. (Forest Echoes: pp.68-69).

The hyperbolic presentation of Angwa lends him credence as a legendary character in his society. The fact that Angwa is said to give colour to an already colourful rainbow elevates him to an extra ordinary character which, “teach [es] the moon how to shine” and “teach [es] the stars how to twinkle”. (...) The poet’s use of such legendary characters in search for their true identity is revealed in “To an Ambazonian Warrior” in which he glorifies heroes and the cause of the Anglophone nationalism when he refers to the warrior as the “offspring of the elephant”. The elephant, an epitome of power, represents the Ambazonian warrior fighting for the liberation of Anglophone Cameroonians from brutality, dehumanization, and enslavement and for all those who are voiceless “echoing the musings of the silent world” and against those damaging the Anglophone regions and beseeching them in turmoil.

INCANTATIONS, LEGENDS, RITUALS, RIDDLES AND OTHER ORATORY DEVICES

Alembong incorporates all aspects of African life styles into his poetry such that we are able to perceive traditional healing, incantations, dance festivals (Teke: p.55) to propel that poetic vision. Through

incantatory recitations drawn from the oral repertoire of his native Nweh, Alembong has underscored the place Oral literature has in written texts. Abiola Irele (2001), Tapping (1990) Miruka Okumba (1999) had noted that incantatory recitations and other oral pieces all fall under local colour which Alembong has employed in his poetry. In “Come Brothers” the dog metaphor recalls the barking of the dog. A dog cannot back without an incident. The poet himself is the dog that is calling on his kith and kin to gather because there is an issue that needs immediate redress and to bring about the much needed desired change, collective action is required since communality is a virtue:

The dog of the house calls.

Come, stand on the anthill

And let the mound give way,

Under your weight (The Passing Wind: p. 14).

He is the testimony of Cameroon Anglophone writers who are enriched by orature which gives vigour and life to their writing. The interface of orality and writing produces enriching hybrid texts. This shows how the past shapes or reshapes the present. In “Song of Awambeng”, the poet exhibits the blacksmith’s vocation and expertise in the fabrication of freedom fighter’s weapons which were mostly traditional historical articles. The interconnectedness of oral and written text is an art by present poets as they intertwine or interlace epics, legends, myths, folktales, proverbs, etc. within the written text. This undoubtedly gives African Post-Colonial literature its international uniqueness (87: Teke). Alembong’s orality that has been incorporated in his writing testifies that orality permeates poetic writing. In “Tekwombuo” the poet uses an incantation to welcome a boy child into their family as done by the tribe:

Male child, you are welcome.

Welcome to this family.

Welcome to the world.

We welcome you in good faith.

You will bring this family together.

We place fve’afu on your forehead,

It will protect you.

We put Ndindi’ in your mouth,

It will calm you.

Let the man with the owl’s eyes

Receive wood ash on the face.

Let the man with the chameleon’s mouth

Be served with hot water to drink

Let the man with fox's mind

Find thorns on his path,

We place you in the hands of Ndem-mbo' (Forest Echoes. p. 66-67)

The purpose of this incantation is to protect the child from evil especially as he is a male child who can protect the tribe. "In Steve Biko and His Fist", the poet uses Steve Biko, a legendary character and a South African selfless Apartheid activist, who was at the forefront of a grass-root anti-Apartheid campaign to reiterate the importance of some characters:

And this man, Steve Biko,

Gave up father and mother,

Gave up brothers and sisters, gave up wife and children,

To throw down and to root out

The walls and divide this house,

The walls and made this house

As divided as the fingers are. (The Passing Wind. p. 51)

The above depicts how much Steve Biko sacrificed to save Black South Africans during the Apartheid period in their country. It takes only a brave man to have done so.

In the "Earth Spider" dedicated to the late Bernard Fonlon, Alembong immortalizes and admires the great intellectual's humility, simplicity, and his down to earth nature, and who was ready to bring sanity to already corrupt parishes in the Catholic Church:

What in man is loftier

Than the littleness you always sought to be?

What manner of man is he

that, when cathedral heights

are the longings for fire-hot throats, would seek to conquer the depth

of sequestered parishes? (The Passing Wind: p.42)

The "Earth's Spider" can thus be read as a dirge, yet another form of oral poetry. The fact that Bernard Fonlon died in semi-obscurity is appropriately symbolic of the fact that despite his accomplishments in life as a government minister, he labored patiently and effectively but others gained fame and notoriety for not working hard. The poet thus immortalizes these great men of historical significance to conscientise his audience of the importance of certain people in our society.

Rituals and other poetic devices like foregrounding, rhetorical questions, direct address, dialogue, and the most biting irony are also common in oral tradition poetry. In "Asumptia", the poet questions the efficacy of the educated woman who knows nothing about the cultures of her people:

She learnt how to cook books

Six harvests following her birth;

Since then she has been cooking books

For twenty more corn harvest.

How would she pick the jiggers in his father's feet?

How would she pick the lice in his mother's hair?

How would she mop his brother's floor?

How would she court his sister, since

She learnt how to cook books (Forest Echoes: 40)

Alembong suggests that a traditionally oriented woman is better placed to handle house chores than an urbanized one. In the above poem, the poet investigates the disparity between urbanized and traditional life and the conclusion he draws from this is that the urbanized life is undesired, thus unstable. As the poet explores both the generation conflict and tradition versus modernity conflict, he underscores that the younger generation incarnates eroded cultural virtues. The use of dialogue and direct address in "Asumptia" shows the sense of intimacy with the persona thus sounding natural and lifelike to the reader. Again, in "Science of Life" the poet uses the science logic of X and Y, in actual fact a riddle, in finding an answer to a situation posed while he narrates the relationship between science and life:

If X is the sufficient cause of Y

Whenever evidence X occurs

This will be an occurrence of Y

But when millions of mouths

Are said to feast on meatballs

In morphean paradise (as founded by Moses)

While one sees Kwashiorkor children

Com earthen streets for juicy termites

The eye loses the glimmer of the half-bling

Upon examining the evidence of X. (The Passing Wind: p.20)

Most of his poems show the influence of African oral tradition in his style and themes. In finding the answer to the riddle of life, one is misled by the numerous problems plaguing the contemporary society.

Alembong's poetry is ritualistic, an aspect of oral tradition which helps him to investigate the perennial conflict between Christianity and African Traditional religion as seen in "Changing Planes in Mid-Air". The conflict begins with the speaker and his aunt who calls him a pagan and labels him uncircumcised. This

accusation angers the speaker who narrates the circumcision ritual done on him in the presence of his aunt, reminding her how her memory has failed her so fast of their ritualistic life because of the new order.

The mother

Who they say is my aunt,

The sister of my mother,

Calls me a pagan.

She calls me uncircumcised

As if she did not eat palm oil

At the ritual where my manhood

Was exposed to elders and age mates alike

And if foreskin cut off

To let blood wet the earth

The blood

That quenches the thirst of our ancestors. (The Passing Wind. p. 44)

Circumcision rituals are done in Africa because it satisfies the desires of the ancestors by quenching their thirst with the blood that drops during the ritual.

CONCLUSION

Alembong in his craftsmanship demonstrates that oral tradition can act as a vehicle for ideology, culture, and history. He uses African mythology, songs and his oratorical prowess that lends him these credits suggests that Nol Alembong does not only borrow heavily from African orature and blends it with written literature, but is also, influenced by his Nweh traditional cultural space, all in the bid of giving authenticity to his experience. His exposure to other cultural spaces and cultural belief systems of other tribes in Cameroon and abroad cannot be underemphasized. He deploys flashback and biting metaphor to characterize the complexities of life, coupled with his style that shows uniqueness. As a testimony of African traditional systems' heavy influence on writers, the study instigates researchers to explore other art platforms like comics and autobiographical works because it provokes questions on the conventions of poetry. The literate societies, though relying on the written word, tap into folkloric traits and other informal social gatherings to produce written poetry. Alembong, therefore, proves that there is a connection between history, culture, politics, ethics, and environment. The particular relationship of oral tradition and written literature warrants the need to reconsider and revise our understanding of the dichotomy. Alembong fashions his poetry using the looms of oral tradition as he fuses folk philosophy into his poetry and shows that there is a distinctive place oral tradition holds in creative writing. His poems have survived as songs as tradition survives on the basis of oral transmission. His poetry is a summation of his social and collective experience. Alembong's poetic vision shows that orature does not only permeate every aspect of our daily lives, but also provides a rich commentary on the happenings in our cultural spaces. His use of a constellation of dreams and hallucinations to maintain the African hesitation blends into his poetry but tells that his experience as an oral artist as well as other roles he plays within and outside his domestic sphere are

crucial in his creative ability and the transmission of traditional lore.

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