Digitization of African Verbal Arts

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ABSTRACT

The twenty-first century is characterized by steady advancement in technology, ever increasing need for migration and evolution from the rural and archaic mode of operation to a more digitalized and urban modes. These evolutions in technology, migration and jettisoning of the old ways to embrace the modern ways have led to cultural displacement, loss of the authentic rustic flavours, and alteration of identity. In as much as technological advancement and, perhaps migrations, have led to the loss of the above stated, technology, specially, has aided the recovering, preservation and dissemination of the said African oral traditions to a wider audience and those who, ordinarily, might not have had access to them. Consequently, scholars of African oral traditions have embraced this development in technology and produced works where the cultural and linguistic interactions of the indigenous people are exhibited, thereby promoting intercultural relationships and preserving cultures. This study aims to examine the impact of digitization on African oral traditions, investigation how technological advancements simultaneously displace and preserve cultural heritage. The hybridity approach in use in this study finds out that digital platforms blend traditional and modern forms, creating new elements and challenging essentialized notions of African culture. The study concludes that digitization, while preserving the cultural heritage also threatens it. It was recommended that there should be a critical evaluation of technological impacts on cultural identity and authenticity as well as a community-driven digitization initiatives to ensure cultural ownership and authenticity.

Keywords: African verbal ar**ts,** digitization, oral traditions, verbal arts, technology, technauriture, orality, performance, cultural identity, hybridity, cultural heritage.

INTRODUCTION

Early one morning, I bumped into a little boy of about seven or eight years of age. He was singing a melodious song in Nsukka dialect. I had to call him to listen to the song. It happened to be a song attached to a folktale, I recorded the song, with the folktale as he excitedly retold them to me. He is from Nsukka. I had to make it a duty to interact with another boy of his age who resides in Enugu metropolis with his parents to decipher if he might know the song or not. It happened that his young parents do not know it, likewise the little boy. He listened to the recording I have and loved it. He learnt the song and the folktale. However, the first kid told me he learnt the folktale and song from his grandmother who lives in Nsukka with them.

According to Peace Muchiri (2017), "African heritage comes to life through the art of storytelling…this powerful art form has deep roots in Africa and is a carrier of language and by extension, culture as it has long been used to imbibe morals. In this digital age however, the beauty of this tradition continues to be disregarded and it is fast becoming a forgotten art" (n.p). And this is hugely due to technological innovations. She further states that "storytelling in Africa has always been a communal event. According to Finnegan (1977), "Oral poetry and, by extension, oral tradition is, as observes, intrinsic to the human cultural mosaic". People would gather to recount past happenings, taboos, beliefs, and myths. From the Azmari in Ethiopia, to the Iggawin in Mauritania, the Halaiqui in Morocco, the Imbongi in South Africa, and the Akewi in Nigeria, Africans have always been an oral people" (n.p). The oral form of storytelling and songs has been present from time immemorial. It preceded every other form of artistic tradition. Written literature was not always easy to come by or barely even in existence in the past. The traditional Storytellers combined the use of artistic and flowery or captivating diction

and rhythm repetitively to make stories easy to remember, interesting and alluring to the ears. Plants, nature, humans and animals featured heavily in folktales, myths, epics, songs and legends. These stories and songs told of concepts that were particularly unique to an ethnic group, village, or region. They aid the understanding of the universe, natural phenomena, modes of survival, religion, medicine, ancestry, social values. History and entertainment.

The written form of literature can be said to be the first known technological evolution of the oral form and has seem to have considerably displaced the oral form's initial prevalence; "yet the advent of arguably the most influential technology—the written word—altered the course of creative ability…As the written word evolved, the oral word became devalued and pushed to the fringes—particularly in Africa, where attitudinal problems regarding the use of indigenous languages persist to this day, and where there is a dire need to foster a sense of pride and belonging for these speech forms" (Alexander, 151).

Statement of the Problem

One perspective is that the abundance of written literature has made oral narration less important. The industrial revolution has also meant that more and more storytellers have abandoned the art form in pursuit of opportunities that offer better pay, sometimes, through migration. This revolution has further brought about urbanization and broken down the family structure, which is a cornerstone of traditional storytelling.

It is evident that knowledge or any speech act or performance transmitted orally barely remains the same in its subsequent repetitions, they often undergo various changes, either intentionally or unintentionally. Some of these changes maybe to adapt to contemporary and changing times. The need for digitization then arises, for the capturing and preservation and capturing of any form of these changes.

Research Questions

1. How do the digital platforms reinforce or challenge colonial narratives?

2. What are the implications of cultural hybridity in digital contexts?

3. What role do African scholars and artists play in shaping digital cultural representation?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Andrew Bula in his *The African Verbal Art Artist* (2019) states that "Verbal art is not the same as the normal or ordinary speech of human beings. Verbal art is deliberately and skillfully undertaken…even without the intention to be artful in speech, a human being can sometimes achieve oral artistry. But the 'verbal art' of the verbal artist is always intentionally and artistically executed, not in the act of speaking per se but in that of oral performance" (109).

Richard Bauman in his *Verbal Art as Performance* however argues that is no clear distinction between performance and speech, he posits that "performance is a mode of language use, a way of speaking" (293).

Finnegan, borrowing from W.R Bascom's article, writes that the name verbal art was first used by W.R Bascom as fit and proper for folktales, myths, legends, proverbs, riddles, and other literary types (9), which is of course one of the gains of it, and that it is a less disputatious appellation though its deficiency is that at first sight verbal art means a restriction to words only.   Richard Nordquist explains that "verbal art is the same as verbal play, speech play, and other synonymous terms" (n.p). He goes further to describe Verbal play as "the playful and often humorous manipulation of the elements of language. Also known as logology, word play, speech play, and verbal art" (n.p).

This paper however defines African verbal art as the most advanced artistic form of storytelling, singing and performance, which can also be identified as drama. It engages a lot of artistry and skill on the part of the artist. It is a composition of deliberate couplings in order to convey thoughts, feelings and emotions. It is a composition of an art form, an outcome of human ingenuity.

Forms of African Verbal Art

There are various forms of verbal art, some which have been mentioned above, just as there are various forms of written literary traditions. These various forms will be outlined and explained below. It is however, imperative to note that in Oral Literature, Akporobaro F.B.O, divided them into the three basic literary genre: prose, poetry and drama. But the prose and poetic forms are our fundamental concern as they encompass the core branches of verbal arts, while the dramatic form, (which includes: Masquerades, Dances, Hand Drums, Flutes, Signal gongs, in a nutshell, festivals and ritual ceremonies) is mostly associated with oral literature (this was earlier stated above).

Prose Forms

According to Akporobaro (2001), "a large number of oral literary forms are created in the language of ordinary prose…to say this does not mean that these prose forms cannot be said contain stylistic features which we associate with poetry." He goes further to expatiate on the prose forms thus:

The Folktale: this refers to an imaginative story in prose form. The story might however be on the basis of a real life event or an "imaginative recreation of a memorable experience that is intended essentially to entertain rather than to record history or social experience." Generally, they are seen as fictional stories and must not necessarily be believed.

Formal (ceremonial) speech: Akporobaro, explains the that it is considered formal because it is usually delivered by an elder or delegated good speakers in a gathering of the clan, tribe, family town or any formal setting. He considers it as an "imaginative self-expression in many African societies." Usually, the main purpose of such a speech of this nature is to deliberate on issues of utmost importance amongst the audience and in a formal tone. According to him, formal speech differs from ordinary speech in terms of form and style, measured tone, rhythm and effective use of rhetorical figures as proverbs and vivid images and witticism.

Epic: this is a long narrative poem that celebrates great deeds of legendary heroes in grand ceremonial styles. Some epic poems include, Milton's *Paradise Lost* which is on human race, Virgil's *Aeneid,* which is based on performance of superhuman exploits in battle or in marvelous voyages, often saving or founding a nation. Then, there is Homer's *Illiad* and *Odyssey* which are derived from an oral tradition of recitation. Homer is a prototype, in the sense that most of his conventions were adopted, such as the invocation of a muse, the use of epithets, the listing of heroes and combatants and beginning in *media res,* according to Akporobaro.

Legend: legend refers to a story or stories handed down through popular oral tradition, usually consisting of an exaggerated or unreliable account of some actually possibly historical person or event. Legends are different from myths because they are majorly concerned with human stories and not the gods, also because, sometimes, they have historical basis unlike myths.

Myth: A mythology is a body of related myths shared by members of a given people or religion, or sometimes a system of myths evolved by an individual writer or group of writers. Why the tortoise has shells, why women have no beard are examples of aetiological myths, Akporobaro (2012). Malinowski states that "myth is a vital ingredient in human civilization- it is not an idle tale but a hard-worked active force. It is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery but a pragmatic carter of primitive faith and moral wisdom."

Proverbs: this is a short popular saying of unknown authorship, expressing some general truth or superstition.

Poetry

There numerous forms of African poetry and they are:

Lyrics and songs: Akporobaro (2001) states that lyric poems are short personal poems, which may convey different emotions, composed to be sung to the accompaniment of a musical instrument such as the lyre, lute, guitar, gong or rattle.

Praise Poetry: Finnegan (1977) asserts that this is a form of poetry designed to eulogize the virtues of a particular subject who may be a king, a chief, a war leader, an animal or a plant. Its most pronounced feature is the invocation of the noble and heroic qualities of the subject through the use of appropriate suggestive metaphors, symbols and allusion.

Ballad: tFinnegan (1977) is of the view that this is a folk song or orally transmitted poem which tells some popular story usually derived from a tragic incident in local history or legend in a direct and dramatic manner. The story is told simply and often, with vivid dialogue. They are normally sung in the form of chanted folktales, musical interludes or narratives expressing complaints in free verse unrhymed. These forms of oral poetry are occasionally artistic forms, being bound up and shaped by the matrix of social cultural occasions like birth, marriage, installation of chiefs, burials, festivals and rituals.

Akporobaro (2001) goes further to create "poetic sub-genres", which include, Music Poetry forms (love songs, ballads, work songs, religious songs, initiation songs, war songs, marriage songs, bridal songs, drinking songs) and Recitative Poetry (incantation, praise poems, divinational, poetry, heroic, recitation, riddles, myths, epic).

The Concept of Hybridity in the Digitization of African Verbal Art

The term hybridity has been associated with the work of Homi, K. Bhabha, whom according to Mambrol (2016) analyzes the colonizer versus the colonized relations as one that emphasizes on their mutual dependence and the construct of their subjectivities. Bhabha (1994) in Mambrol (2016), contends that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in a space that he refers to as the "Third Space of enunciation". It is a postcolonial term referring to the quality of cultures that have characteristics of both the colonizers and the colonized…they are continually changing and evolving (Dobie, 2011).

Over the centuries, hybridization can be detected in the shift from orality through writing and print to electronic processing of the word. This has profoundly affected and, indeed, basically determined the evolution of verbal art genres, and of course simultaneously the successive modes of characterization and of plot (Ong, 155). While modern technology has nearly killed the traditional format of storytelling, it can also be used to give it a new lease on life:

It is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or postcolonian provenance. For a willingness to descend into that alien territory…may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity. (Bhabha, 1994).

Oral tales are being recorded virtually and archived for future use and for purposes such as conserving memory and collective identity (Muchiri, n.p). This is evident in the various roles technological gadgets play in literature. Theatrical performances, television, and film are also keeping the art form alive. Social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter are providing a platform for personal narratives. Ultimately, storytelling needs that arise from changing times must be met with technological innovations that help foster communication.

The digitization of the verbal arts started with the "advent of arguably the most influential technology—the written word" (Russell H. Kaschula & Andre Mostert, 1). According to them, the written word is nothing but the oral in another form. In fact, the written word sans an oral context is not possible. The converse is obviously not the case, nor was it true for much of human history. For many people, the written word has come to dominate, with orally-based societies being viewed as quaint but unsophisticated. But for many orally-based cultures, the spoken word continues to carry much weight and is a pillar of this social mosaic. There is a growing belief that, despite the obvious technological benefits that have flowed from the written word, the undervaluing of the knowledge of orally-based societies has significantly contributed to the malaise that modern humanity, whether written or oral, is now facing (1).

For many scholars, technology is the defining aspect of the properness or otherwise of literature. In the contemporary context, technological advances have afforded phenomena such as 'twitterature' (Acimen & Rensin 2009). Russell Kaschula & Andre Mostert explains that "…such developments are simply orality in a

more sympathetic written form...Twitter and text messaging are more fluid in terms of their ability to reflect the immediacy of the spoken word, and are indicative of the ubiquitous influence that digital technology has had on the written word. It is not an unreasonable stretch of the imagination to foresee references to 'e-mailature' and 'virtualature', with the prefix being linked in each case to a new technological advance or paradigm" (2). Walter Ong posits a thought-provoking view of the written word thus: "Writing, commitment of the word to space, enlarges the potentiality of language almost beyond measure, restructures thought, and the process converts some dialects into "grapholects". He defines grapholect as a transdialectal language formed by deep commitment to writing. Writing gives a grapholect a power far exceeding that of the purely oral dialect' (8).

However, Ong saw the development from oral literature to literacy as "inevitable" (175), just like the East African scholar Pio Zirimu conceptualised the term 'orature' in an attempt to mediate between 'oral literature' and 'written literature'. Today, orality or 'orature', literacy and technology coexist…The term 'orature', and the resolution it brings to earlier dichotomies, may then be seen as a precursor to 'technauriture' (Russell H. Kaschula & Andre Mostert, 3).

Technauriture as a Digital Paradigm

It is useful to recollect that the inquiry on multi-mediated orality started in the latter half of the 20th century with the debate on the continuities and differences between literate and oral cultures (Morell, 80). Daniela Merolla in her *Introduction: Orality and Technauriture of African Literatures* posits that Kaschula has investigated the digitalizing and commercial technologizing of Xhosa oral poems and has proposed the new term "technauriture" "which integrates technology, auriture (the aural aspects of producing and receiving oral literature), and literature. Technauriture is proposed as a paradigm for engaging with the interplay of orality, the written word, and technology, and its contextualization "within a post-modern milieu that has […] historically undervalued the spoken word," as well as for maintaining the central role of orality in discourses on technological media" (84).

Kaschula (2004a, 2004b, 2009, 2012c) and Kaschula and Mostert (2011) define technauriture as an attempt to capture the modalities associated with the three-way dialectic between primary orality, literacy and technology, thus moving the debate into a more sophisticated realm that expands what has essentially been a tension between orality, writing and the use of technology in re-inventing the oral word. This discussion now includes the implications of technology as a general and alternative category. The term includes all technologies that can be brought to bear on the issues of orality, oral history, community meetings with headmen and oral traditions more generally. It also encompasses the implications of the application of technology to contexts that should be characterized by a sympathetic perspective towards orally based cultures. This is an attempt to recognize that human culture has evolved to be more aware of the implications of technological advances (47).

Impact of Hybridity on African Verbal Arts

This takes into cognizance, the technological inventions that have overtime bedecked and taken over the oral form of artistic performance. Here, the term technology is used in its widest sense to include all technologies that are relevant to orality and oral traditions, and implicates the consequences of the application of technology to contexts that need to be characterised by a sympathetic perspective towards orally-based cultures. These technologies could include all forms of digital recording, from the unobtrusive hidden recording device to elaborate holographic technologies that could transport the poet into another physical context. Such technologies have the potential to fundamentally alter the nuances of a performance and will have an impact on the immediacy of audience feedback. Such examples point to the multiple considerations that must come into play as digital technologies are developed, a point that is fundamental to the very idea of technauriture (Russell H. Kaschula & Andre Mostert, 4). According to Alant (2006), "for many people, the written word has come to dominate, with orally-based societies being viewed as quaint but unsophisticated. But for many orally-based cultures, the spoken word continues to carry much weight and is a pillar of this social mosaic." However, Kaschula & Mostert are of the view that there is a growing belief that, notwithstanding the clear technological benefits that have flowed from the written word, the undervaluing of the knowledge of orally-based societies has significantly contributed to the malaise that modern humanity, whether written or oral, is now facing. They go further to state that one of the unfortunate consequences of the transition to writing has been a focus on the systems and conventions of

orality and oral tradition. Although of importance, a more appropriate focus would be on ways of supporting and maintaining the oral word, and its innate value to human society, in the face of what has become rampant technological development. Kaschula (2004), posits that it is ironic that technology is creating a fecund environment for the rebirth of orality. Through the use of web networks and web platforms, oral performers are now more globally visible and able to market their literary talents. Furthermore, intellectual and academic sites that discuss, analyse and preserve material electronically are emerging. Recent examples are the World Oral Literature Project, based in the United Kingdom, and the poetry website. Such websites contribute to a new critical discourse, which, in our opinion, falls within the domain of what we have termed technauriture.

Technauriture allows researchers to assess the potential of harnessing technology to reverse the demise of oral traditions and the knowledge systems embodied in such spoken contexts. Hence, supporting cultural identity and cultural maintenance thereby revaluing the human knowledge that remains embedded in traditional cultures through orality, because oral tradition, as Alant has noted, is 'a vehicle of social cohesion' (201).

The challenge that researchers now face is the infiltration of some of the originality of the oral arts in transcription which undervalue the spoken word. Technauriture offers a vehicle by which orality is able to bypass the written phase and directly harness the potential of new technological structures and solutions to capture and disseminate oral performances.

It is through technauriture (which includes the use of technology to record, archive and disseminate audio or audio-visual content) that a performance can keep aspects of its primary character and yet be allowed to develop within a nurturing and coherent paradigm that sees the written as only part of a dynamic process that is sympathetic to audience, artist and future contexts.

In summary, new technological developments are presenting practitioners with opportunities to reverse the alienation that the written word has visited on oral cultures.

Forms of Digitization

"It is useful to recollect that the inquiry on multi-mediated orality started in the latter half of the 20th century with the debate on the continuities and differences between literate and oral cultures" (Merolla, 80).

In order to highlight some of the technological gadgets that have been making arts available, it is accessibility to these imperative to first make mention of the world wide web, the internet, without which accessibility via the gadgets and platform to these various forms of verbal arts will be completely impossible.

YouTube: this an American video-sharing website and social media platform owned by Google. It was launched in February 2005 by Steve Chen, Chad Hurley and Jawed Karim. It is the second most visited website, with more than one billion monthly users who collectively watch more than one billion hours of videos each day (Wikipedia). Brahima Camara, Graeme Counsel and Jan Jansen recount "the documentation of a video recording of the song "Nanyuman" by Mali's legendary female bard Siramori [Sira Mory] Diabaté (ca. 1925–1989). This unique recording was recently collected in the archives of Radio Télévision Guinéenne (RTG), and was then made available on YouTube. This enhancing of the YouTube video is an attempt to produce a teaching tool" (1).

Kindle: it is a series of e-readers designed and marketed by Amazon. This device enables users to browse, buy, download and read e-books, newspapers, magazines and other digital media via wireless networking to the Kindle Store. Kindles contain a lot of books, both novels and poem collections which can be read or downloaded or listened to with the help of the internet.

Spotify: this is a Swedish audio streaming and media service provider founded on 23rd April, 2006 by Daniel Ek and Martin Lorentzon. It is world's largest music streaming service providers, with over three hundred sixty-five million monthly active users, including one hundred and sixty-five million paying subscribers as of June 2021 (Wikipedia). On this platform, a lot of spoken poets have their works uploaded for easy access, for instance, Ama Diaka Asatewa, the notable Ghanaian poet have a lot of her works there. This is an application that can be accessed with a mobile phone or a computer.

Podcast: According to Oxford English Dictionary (2022), this is a digital audio file made available on the internet for downloading to a computer or mobile device, typically available as a series, new instalments of which can be received by subscribers automatically. Here, you see collections of recorded folktales, songs, and so on.

Radio and Television: As commonly known by urban users, these devices are audio and audio-visual respectively. Based on the research carried out for the purpose of this study, the research discovers that when you listen to the radio in recent times, you will find out that there are times designated specifically for storytelling and folkloric songs, this is often recorded in the studio and played at the allotted time for it, for the benefit of the listener. On the other hand, some of these folklores and songs are enacted into drama and staged plays, recorded and played on televisions for the viewers.

Compact Disc: this is a digital optical data storage format that was co-developed by Philips and Sony to store and play digital audio recordings (Wikipedia, 2024). This can be used to record and keep stories and other forms of verbal arts for the future generation. The recordings will be undiluted and continue to stay in its original form for time immemorial.

Casettes: this is known as compact cassette or tape cassette, it can either be audio cassette or video cassette. It is an analog magnetic recording format for audio or video recording and playback. (Wikipedia, 2024). It was developed by Dutch company in Belgium. A woman in Mali, named Macalou, in a bid to keep alive the practice of storytelling once the older generation of storytellers like her grandmother passes away, recorded a couple of stories on cassette for her nephews living in France after they had been introduced to traditional storytelling during a visit to relatives in Bamako. For Macalou, cassette recording proved a difficult long-term strategy for preserving traditional folktales, and she eventually turned to writing to preserve these tales. As of 2009 Macalou had "transcribed" and translated four stories into French.

CONCLUSION

This goes to show the role technology has played in the world of today in recording, preservation, and the dissemination of the African verbal arts. Hybridity in the digitization of African Verbal Art births the blending of traditional and modern art forms, cultures and technology. This blending challenges essentialized notions of African culture and creates new and dynamic expressions. Technology has immensely contributed to the growth, evolution and utilization of African vebal arts and these innovations that revived old almost extinct arts can never be undermined or overemphasized. In the concluding words of Kaschula & Mostert (2011), as technology becomes a defining aspect of all disciplinary investigation, technauriture offers a suitable paradigmatic framework upon which to build a cross-disciplinary approach to orality and oral traditions in the digital age. In a very real sense, the journey from orality through the written word to the virtual utterances of avatars encapsulates the cyclical nature of human culture. Perhaps digital oral poets and shamans will lead the next generation as they build their own performative worlds online that transcend the narrowing of contemporary and traditional cultures (8). African scholars and artists alike should, as much as, they strive to imbibe modern technology, should strongly uphold, teach and portray the traditional methods and modes of relaying the African arts.

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