

Commercialization of African Storytelling: A Literary Perspective

© 2012

Paul Kipchumba

Abstract

African storytelling is a complex performance art embedded in everyday African life. It is the total expression of Africa's oral traditions in a narrative form by interlinking other genres such as proverbs, songs, tongue twisters and puns, and riddles. However, such other genres qualify as a form of storytelling if they enable a narrative expression. This study is a conceptual explanation of sources entailing the utilization of African storytelling for commercial purposes. These include theatre arts performances, stand-up comedies, publications, TV and radio commercials, general media works such as news stories, and politics in Kenya. The paper does not answer the pertinent question "why do communities tell stories?" but "how storytelling has reached commercial viability and how best it can be scaled up further". It observes that there is need to seek new avenues (legal and policy) for maximizing returns for oral artists.

Key words: *performance, oral artist, storytelling*

Commercialization of African Storytelling

Storytelling in this paper is understood within the entertainment industry, where people are mobilized and entertained accordingly. Who makes more use of storytelling? What is the commercial benefit to oral artists? How can it be enhanced further? Is it possible to form a commercial association of oral artists? These are some important issues in the Kenya's storytelling industry. The oral artist is usually a minor economic beneficiary of the performances because they are, usually, categorized as lower income and quite often satisfied by whatever little is offered to them. However, oral art is a viable business that has not been taken seriously by the oral artists. It is possible to begin the discussion by looking grossly at the role and place of the educated oral artist of both genders.

The first category of oral artists would be educated oral artists who are teachers of music, film, or literature (in whatever language). Celebrity musicians and other orally-disposed artists form the second category of oral artists. The final category of oral artists would be those artists that have formed local entertainment groups, not successful, but often invited to public functions; some of their members help researchers and research assistants to answer certain pertinent questions relating to the subject under investigation. To delve into the issue further, it is pertinent to ask, who owns the storytelling industry?

In the case of Kenya, storytelling is monopolized by political and for-profit moguls who use the media as a platform for propagating it. It is usually confusing if the media proprietors make some huge profit through African storytelling. They are the second in the hierarchy of sharing storytelling returns. The for-profit enterprises and politicians are the first-tier, followed by the media industry, then the (oral) artists themselves in the various categories,

with the second category of the artists getting more direct income than the first category who benefit indirectly by taking up supervisory and consultancy opportunities.

This scenario is a glaring example of what is happening in Kenya. How can it be reversed, to ensure that the oral artist makes more money than any other stakeholder in the industry? It would be much better to look at the possible sources of income from storytelling and devise appropriate solutions. Let's begin with the easiest – publishing stories. The first category of oral artists (teachers) exploits the third category (villagers) to write books to be produced by publishers who exploit them (the first category). In the Kenya's publishing industry an author gets between 0-10% royalty, depending on sales. To remedy this situation, there is need for the first category of oral artists to share the copyright with the third category then publish jointly through a digital media and sell it jointly through the Internet and bookshops by appointing a sales agent on commission basis.

The other channel is theatre performances including watching films. This is the purview of the second category of oral artists (the celebrities, both successful and failed ones). They are the most disadvantaged group of oral artists because they do not own their own platforms. They only own their names and some media publicity. The stories they perform belong to the first category of artists and the medium for their performance belongs to Government or for-profit. To ensure that this category of oral artists do not live extravagant lives which they cannot afford, there is need for a policy regulation to organize them properly into associations and possibly introduce a storytelling curriculum complete with "The Entrepreneurship of Storytelling". Part of their returns should be to enhance some savings to enable them to invest in their own companies, performance theatres, and scripts.

In addition, there are the paid and unpaid public performances common to the third category of oral artists and school-going children who perform for free in music festivals competitions. In Kenya, they are given pocket money and presidential recognition through the Permanent Presidential Music Commission. This is the most unfortunate group of oral artists, but the most resourceful. They are the source of all stories, data, rhythm and insights. In recent times, they have been enabled to form groups or entertainment firms in order to tap the prevailing market. However, they lack the necessary organizational skills and commercial acumen to run an entertainment industry in modern times. Their attempts only serve to give them false hopes. To remedy this situation, this category of oral artists should work together with the first category as joint partners. Their work should be to perform, while the role of the first category should be to direct them and explore more commercially scalable ways of managing them.

Finally, it is worth considering storytelling in media commercials and relevant political appropriations. The private sector, political parties and politicians, including the state, employ oral artists to sell their products and agenda through the media. While this seems like a good deal, it is self-evident that the oral artists are only paid for their time, but not for their skill and script. Therefore, there is need to develop expert evaluators for commensurate earnings to be realized by the oral artists in this kind of arrangement. There should be

separate accounting for oral art and a separate taxation regime that follows keenly that the oral artists be compensated commensurately.

Summary

To ensure effective commercialization of African storytelling, there is need to critically assess the avenues – both policy and practical commerce – for maximizing returns. The oral artists should form their own associations and lobby groups, then employ commercial and legal experts who can scrutinize the economic potentials of storytelling then lobby the Government for a policy proposal that can ensure that they are properly taken care of. The educated oral artists should lead in this endeavour, with their interests secured both directly (by monetary rewards) and indirectly (by building a legacy on the potentialities of an industry that is hitherto trampled upon by all others).

References

Kabira, M. W. (1992). The Oral Artist and the Gender Dimension. In Okombo, O., and Jane Nandwa, eds. *Reflections on Theories and Methods in Oral Literature*. Nairobi: Kenya Oral Literature Association.

---. (1983). *The Oral Artist*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers.

Madison, D. S. and Judith Hamera, eds. (2006). *The Sage Handbook for Performance Studies*. California, USA: Sage.

Okpewho, I. (1990). Introduction: The Study of Performance. *The Oral Performance in Africa*. Ibadan, Nigeria: Spectrum Books Limited. pp. 1-20.