

A Melting Pot of Literature and Orature: An Intertextual Analysis of Bosede Afolayan's *Once Upon an Elephant*

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Abstract

African writers are products of double heritages, of both the Western education they are exposed to and the immediate cultural environments from where they have appropriated materials for their literary enterprises. There is however the tendency to down play the influence of African oral tradition on African Literature by concentrating on the influence of foreign writings on African literary texts. Recent scholarly works have examined the relationship between works of African writers to establish intertextual relationships among their written texts but paid little attention to the African oral resources as a distinct text on its own right. The study aimed to fill the observed gap by examining the influence of orature on literary texts, specifically, on Bosede Afolayan's play, *Once Upon an Elephant*. The study employed both primary and secondary sources of data collection, which involved a close reading and in-depth analysis of the selected primary text and some secondary texts, adopting Intertextual theory as a tool of analysis. Intertextual theory is basically about similarities and differences between presumably related texts. The study made strong case for more intertextual practices among African writers with the recommendation that both creative writers and critics can enrich their works by looking inward, especially their immediate African cultural environment as veritable fount to source materials for their creative enterprises.

Keywords: Intertextuality, Orature, Oral Tradition, Orality, Close-reading, African Literature, De-emphasise

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Introduction

Literature, like other cultural products, owes its existence and development to the contributions from its immediate past. Literary writers and their products can therefore be aptly described as the products and heirs of their pasts. African writers are however, products of double heritages, of both the Western education they are exposed to and the immediate cultural environments from where they have appropriated materials for their literary enterprises. Intertextuality is a literary practice among writers all over the world and it involves the presence and traces of a text in another text. It is not strange then that African writers engage in intertextuality. Ogede (2011) frowned at the age-old notion that African writers have often looked up to the West for inspiration. He advised that literary critics should look inward to direct attention to intertextual practices among African writers. Scholars and literary theorists have paid little attention to orature by de-emphasising the fact that orature is a text on its own. Goody (2006) described what anthropologists called great divide between literature and orature as "a divide that is sometimes called a 'relic of academic colonialism'" (Goody, quoted in Finnegan, 2006:270). This binary division between these two concepts tends to subjugate orality to literacy and promote the erroneous idea that oral tradition is only suitable for children. This wrong perception of orature stems from the ignorance of the fact that oral traditions actually teach important social and cultural education, such as the importance of hospitality and of respect for those who are perceived to be weaker than oneself.

The major difference between the two terms has to do with the fact that orature refers to the oral tradition of storytelling, poetry, and other forms of verbal expression that have been passed down through generations by words of mouth. But Literature refers to written works of art, including novels, plays, poems, and essays. The pre-colonial Africa solely relied on the use of orature before the evolution the writing tradition.

Orature has influenced literature throughout history. In many traditional societies, storytelling and oral performances were the primary means of preserving cultural heritage, history, and knowledge. These oral traditions often involved the use of poetic language, rhythmic structures, and mnemonic devices to aid memorization and enhance the impact of the narrative. When societies developed writing systems, oral traditions began to be recorded in written form, leading to the emergence of written literature. This transition allowed for the preservation and dissemination of stories, poems, and other forms of artistic expression beyond the limitations of oral transmission.

Many academics, especially in Africa, have however moved beyond the binary between orality and literacy by involving multiple levels of engagement with cultural expression, rather than focusing only on literature. Gingell and Roy, (2012) posit that scholars have to adopt the term orature as a form of compromise, and to remedy the bias against orality. It is used to refer to speeches, oral tales, and other narratives as an analogous word for literature. Others

however prefer to call it *oral literature* or *verbal art* (Gingell and Roy 6–7). Many storytellers do call their oral narratives *stories*.

African literary works often draw inspiration from orature and incorporate elements of oral storytelling into their plot. Bosede Afolayan, a Nigerian writer is one of the African artists whose literary works draw inspiration from their immediate cultural environment. She generously incorporates elements of oral storytelling into her play, *Once Upon an Elephant*. Orature can be described as oral literature or folk literature. It is a genre of literature that is spoken as opposed to the written form of literature. This genre includes myths and legends which are traditional stories that explain natural phenomena, origins of the world, and the actions of gods, heroes, and supernatural beings. They are oral performances that often serve as a foundation for religious or cultural beliefs. Closely related to them is oral history that involves the transmission of historical accounts, personal narratives, and collective memories through spoken words. History preserves the experiences, traditions, and cultural heritage of a community or a particular event. Oral history is a very crucial tool for studying the past in societies without a written tradition.

There are many forms of orature, and one of them is epic poetry that involves long narrative poems. It normally centres on heroic figures and their adventures. Another is folktale which is a traditional story passed down orally across generations, to reflect the beliefs, values, and cultural practices of a particular community. Folktales often feature supernatural elements, moral lessons, and animal characters. Examples include, “*Ijapa* the Tortoise”, among the Yoruba in Nigeria and “*Anansi* the Spider.” among Akans of Ghana.

Proverbs are short, concise sayings that convey wisdom, moral lessons, or cultural values. They are often used to teach, admonish, or illustrate a point. Proverbs vary across cultures and languages. Examples include “A stitch in time saves nine” and “Actions speak louder than words.” Riddles are enigmatic or puzzling questions or statements that require creative thinking to solve. They can be entertaining and serve as a form of mental exercise. Riddles are found in many cultures worldwide and often reflect local customs, objects, or natural phenomena. Oral poetry encompasses various forms such as ballads, chants, rhymes, and songs that are performed or recited aloud. It often combines rhythmic patterns, repetition, and musicality to convey emotions, stories, or cultural expressions. Examples are *Ijala*, *Ewi*, *Ofo* in Yoruba land.

Orature plays many important roles in the African societies, especially in preserving a community’s cultural heritage. It transmits knowledge, history, mythology, customs, and values from one generation to another. It also serves as a means of educating and instilling moral instruction. Aside from providing entertainment and serving as a form of recreation within communities, it also serves as a medium for interpersonal and intergenerational communication, through which individuals are afforded the opportunity to connect, share experiences, and express emotions.

One can rightly argue that the didactic nature of Afolayan's play derives its inspiration from the African oral tradition which states that no crime against humanity will go unpunished. The view is shared by Anthonia E. Ezeugo and Nkechi Ezenwamadu (2023). They describe the play, *Once Upon an Elephant* as a portrait of the nation's political trajectory, which to any discerning mind, easily recognized as a farce; the reality of which is the espousal of the Nigerian society where leaders toy with the nation's destiny at will. The play however draws consolation in the fact that the perpetrators of the perversion of justice and autocracy hardly go unpunished.

In the same vein, Lekan Balogun and Sesan Fasanu (2019) note that Afolayan takes a different ideological stance against Western feminism that views women as grossly marginalised lots by adopting the Yoruba culture that defines the individuals' roles within the context of a stable and virile society, in which men and women play their collaborative and active parts.

Most importantly, orature plays a central role in religious, ceremonial, and ritual practices like chants, incantations, prayers, and recitations are integral parts of various rituals, initiations, and rites of passage. These oral performances invoke spiritual forces, create a sacred atmosphere, and connect individuals with their religious or spiritual beliefs.

The aim of this study is to establish an intertextual relationship between Afolayan's play and the African orature. Its specific objectives are to identify elements of African oral resources in the play, critically examine the effect and relevance of the oral materials to the overall understanding of the play. The study employs *intertextual theory* as a tool of analysis. Intertextual theory is basically about similarities and differences between presumably related texts.

The Notion of Intertextuality

In the late 1960, Julia Kristeva introduced the concept of intertextuality as a theory that defines the relationship between texts. The theory is one of the many attempts at giving literary scholarship a distinctive character. Like other literary theories that are influenced by formalism, it also interrogates some fundamental principles of formalism especially, the rejection of the non-literary criticism, the obsession with the nature of the literary text and how literature should be defined and conceptualized in the midst of closely related disciplines like philosophy, history, religion and psychology. Kristeva introduced this term in her discussion of the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin (Julia Kristeva 1981) and a radical notion of the non-referentiality of literature." The concept gains rigorous attention of theorists like Riffaterre (1984) who insists that "reality" is only admissible into account as it is textualized within an intertext, made available for displaying or affirming the "mimetic activity of the literary text." John Frow, (198) in a radical critique of some of the implications of the term, intertextuality comes into an interesting conclusion that a text "has not only an intertextual relationship to previous texts...but also an intertextual relationship to itself as a canonized text." As earlier mentioned, intertextuality is conceived as conditions of textuality which affect and describe the relation between texts.

The term is closely related to textuality, because the latter foregrounds the importance of boundaries or border lines in production of a work, since texts are fragments with open-ended outlook resulting from presence of quotations, allusions, references and others. This idea of intertextuality is mainly based on the nature of language with its multifarious interpretations which makes it impossible for any writer to be in perfect control of meaning.

According to Judith Still and Michael Wonton, (1991) two basic types of intertextualities can be identified. They are ideational or ideological and systemic intertextuality. Systemic intertextuality can be subdivided into linguistic and paralinguistic intertextuality. Linguistic intertextuality has to do with the writer's use of grammatical devices while paralinguistic intertextuality is about semiotic devices and elements of cultural communication." In this comparative analysis, elements of cultural communications are explored to establish textual relations between *Once Upon an Elephant* and orature.

Thus, intertextuality is not just about the older text. It borders on the similarities and differences between texts that are seen to be closely related in forms and contents. This is a point of clear departure from adaptation or source theory. In adaptation theory, the emphasis is always on the adapted texts and its sources. Critics tend to look at the relationship between the new work and a specific text. It is not impossible that the writers of the inter-texts may have sourced their materials from their cultural environments or even from a foreign culture, it may also be that there may be cultural coincidence; the main concerns of intertextuality are textual relations

The above are noticeable strategies in African intertextual discourse. African writers have successfully adopted these strategies, as they often make use of the pulped-up versions of what they take from the adapted foreign texts and these versions are only chosen because of their relevance to the African culture. The large chunks that are discarded are replaced with materials sourced from the African oral traditions. The end result is always a new text of African origin. We can also relate these strategies to the views of theorists who de-emphasize the role of the author in the literary work. For instance, Derrida (1981) claims that writing is an orphan while Barthes (1975) says that there is no father author. This position will have serious implications because through this denying technique, history is undone as appropriation forces the reader to accept that originality is not the best way to appraise a work.

The force of language is identified as an impetus for each act of imitation, since it is influenced by the socio-linguistic and literary codes of a particular period. African writers have been observed not to take their language lightly even when they write in foreign language. The influence of their indigenous language is always so strong that one can notice that the writers are only using the foreign language to express African thoughts. Afolayan adopts this style in her play. Although she writes in the English language, the strong influence of the Yoruba language is noticeable in the text.

Barthes argues that the intertextuality is not necessarily a field of influences; rather, it is a field of figure, metaphors, thoughts and words. According to Still and Worton, (1991) Barthes admits that he relishes borrowing some “delicious” words and uses them dexterously to silence his critics claiming that works are “enriched by social heteroglossia, the historical and social determination of specific languages.

Barthes’ position is very relevant in explaining intertextual practice in Bosede’s play, *Once Upon an Elephant* to determine how she successfully draws from the common pool of African proverbs, metaphors and other rhetorical devices to enrich her literary productions.

Literature Review

Many literary critics and theorists of African Literatures have variously observed that African writers generally are also influenced by the principles of artistic production or style of oral arts and other forms of oral traditions. This influence, according to Joel Adedeji, (1985) is almost unavoidable because the attraction of the oral traditions is a by-product of a movement, the main motive of which proceeds from the consciousness of the contemporary artists to work out a tradition and heritage of the African people, recognizing the need to be relevant in forging the people’s unwritten ethos on the new horizons of the time.

Eldred Jones (1976) has earlier referred to the rich oral tradition which is part of the cultures of Africa that have provided both the thematic and stylistic inspiration for writers. It must be stated that all the genres of literature were deeply rooted in Africa before the advent of Western literary tradition. Poetry, narrative and performance have long been in practice in Africa. For instance, the Yoruba already had their folktales and other genres of poetry. Jones claims that drama also has its roots in Africa, though not like the sophistication of the proscenium stage plays, but practically being very African in material. One can from the positions of these scholars assert that Afolayan, a Nigerian playwright has drawn inspirations from her Yoruba culture which offers her the idioms to project her world views. This study, holds the view that by effectively utilizing her immediate Yoruba oral resource to produce an authentic African drama, she is able to assert her individual creativity and originality.

The notion of what constitutes African drama, however, poses a lot of problems as critics differ in their positions on this subject. Meki Nzewi, (1981) for instance, quotes Ulli Beier that for anything to be declared authentically African, it must be one “which has not been influenced by Europe or the West. “The position of this study is that it is not possible for a creative personality to totally avoid any trace of foreign influence. Nzewi doubts the possibility of avoidance of external influence. According to him, “the creative personality in any place and period of human history has always been enriched by experience external to his native creative cultural heritage.”

The influence of orature is not limited to African drama as pointed out by Olumide Olugbemi-Gabriel (2013), he argues that modern African poetry is embracing forms of African oral

traditions with poets like p'Bitek's using his *Song of Lawino* to project his people's oral tradition forms as manifested in songs, proverbs and oral poetry. In the same vein, Niyi Osundare uses his poem, *Villages Voices* to establish the ability of the modern African poets to locate the critical interface between African oral tradition and western education which undoubtedly influences modern African poetry.

For ages, literary works have remained a common wealth, accessible for borrowing, imitation, appropriation and adaptation. This is in spite of the ancient belief that artists are inspired, spurred and activated by a mystic force of divine origin. Lindey (1952) credits the Greek philosopher, Longinus, to have first propounded this theory when he evoked a picture of the artist receiving his celestial afflatus in shaft of radiance from above." This divine inspiration as a source of literary enterprise may result in a negative perception of writers that engage in intertextuality as being unoriginal and derivative.

The study is of the view that the fact that African writers are influenced by foreign culture should in no way be seen as transgression of a holy norm. Literary history is replete with acts of borrowing, imitation and adaptation. Ralph Emerson, (1883) claims several years ago that his work may not be the original, stressing that "there is imitation, model and suggestion to the very Arch Angels, if we knew their history, the first book, tyrannizes over the second. Read Tasso and you think of Virgil, read Virgil and you think of Homer, and Milton forces you to reflect how narrow the limit of human invention." In fact, Aristotle's (1975) *Poetics*, which is greatly influenced by Plato's thinking, reduces the whole literary field to an act of imitation (mimesis).

In the Introduction to Plato's book, *The Republic*, Aristotle says that "there is a form of each thing and that there are objects which are imitations of form. Thus, we can describe imitative art which imitates, as an imitation of imitation. An imitation must be like the original to be an imitation"? This implies certain likeness in a context of unlikeness". Aristotle further describes the poet as an imitator. "Since the poet is an imitator... he must imitate one of three things, either the sort of thing that was or is. Or the sort of thing that men say or think. Or the sort of thing that ought to be."

Jack Miles (1996) views the classical Greek tragedies as all versions of the same tragedy. "The same spectacle is cathartic in suggesting that human lives are variations of collision it presents." Borrowing was a familiar practice in ancient Greece, Aristotle lifted whole pages from Democritus, the laughing philosopher of Abdera. Aristophanes who borrowed from Cratinus and Eupolis treated this subject in the *Frogs*, in which Aeschylus and Euripides insulted each other in a rowdy scene.

Roman writers considered a Latin adaptation from the Greek a new work, and did not always trouble to acknowledge their sources. African literature is not alone in being influenced by other cultures. According to Lindey, Roman literature developed slowly, and much of it was derivative. The comedies of Plautus and Terrence were imitations of Hellenic models.

Virgil's *chief model was Homer. In Aeneid, he drew on Iliad and Odyssey. Lindey notes that Virgil's* conscious imitation of Homer has been vigorously defended by Audin who claims that Virgil's imitation of Homer is not due to lack of invention (Lindey, 1952 p.65)

Homer, himself wrought *The Iliad* and the *Odyssey* out of the "mass of myths and legends - chaotic, barbaric, and extravagant that flourished around the Aegean in his days". Just like one can claim that the play, *Once Upon an Elephant* is a product of popular African folktales.

Emmanuel Abe Olanipekun (2024) agrees with this position by claiming that the history of African oral literature is firmly built on oral tradition with its foundation communal living. Therefore, African oral literature is a conglomerate of communal traditions that reflect African culture, experiences, and societies. It is therefore not surprising if *Once Upon an Elephant* as an African combines traditional and modern theatrical techniques to sustain communal living and cultural practices. Eliot (1972) takes an elaborate look at the issue of originality and concludes that the best and, the most individual parts of a poet's work may be those in which the dead poet's ancestors assert their immortality most vigorously. " Eliot is not alone, Wole Soyinka (1997), shares the same sentiments when he acknowledges "the limited amount of originality in creative ideas admitting that "though innovations have a slightly larger scope, but what we all do mostly is renovation and development of existing ideas" The position of these two writers does not in any way suggest outright condemnation of originality in art. Eliot, for instance, admits that novelty is "better than repetition", far better than following the way of one's predecessors in a blind or timid adherence to (their) success.

The position of these scholars will help this paper to critically analyse how Afolayan has utilised the borrowed oral resources. The study also agrees with Eliot (1972, p. 22) that the original writer is the one endowed with historical sense ... a perception, not only of the pastness, but of its presence" (Eliot 1972, p. 22). This means that the writer must be conscious of the living heritage of his culture, at the same time, be aware of his own place in it and relationship to it. This relationship can be established when the writer contributes something to the whole system. Soyinka, in the same vein, however warns writers against slavish repetition of their primary sources. This, he claims, will help them maintain their artistic integrity. John Winterich observes that whatever the sources of Homer's *Iliad*, it was his own imagination and organising skill that produced the beautiful work that many generations continue to hail as a masterpiece. (Winterich's, 1942, p.34)

Ahmed Yerima tacitly supports this position by claiming that the strength of adaptation lies in the originality that the new playwright has brought to bear on the old text and the relevance of the new text to the new socio-cultural milieu (Ahmed Yerima 2003, p.119).

This study is of the view that *Once Upon an Elephant* is authentic and original since the playwright is able to exploit the existing materials to express her world view. This is a feat that will establish the African writer an original and creative writer, not a slavishly derivative one. This position is supported by Lindfors (1994) who claims that it will also prove the adapter is

an African artist who has mastered European tools. The writer will not be reduced to a European artist who happens to be an African: Any other African writer who succeeded in Africanising a foreign source of inspiration . . . as well as a foreign literary language by completely assimilating them and using them to express his own vision of the human condition could lay claim to the same impressive creative accomplishment, the same artistic originality” (Lindfors, 1994:3).

Overview of the Play

Once Upon an Elephant is a story of a deviously greedy ruler called Ajanaku and whose reign brings suffering to his community, making the land to cry for justice. His subjects are oppressed and deprived of their basic human rights. Anyone who speaks against Ajanaku stands a risk of being destroyed. The playwright uses characters such as Olaniyonu (Ajanaku) and Serubawon, his accomplice to depict the wiles of dictators, how they come to power and the means they deploy to perpetrate their activities on the throne. Ajanaku the protagonist of the play lacks all heroic qualities exhibited by his major antagonists like Iya Agba, Desola, Odekunle and Delani. These people, tired of being hurt, come together to resist the tyrant on the throne. They represent the few courageous people in society who speak truth to power at the risk of facing personal loss. The play is a tragic comedy because after the heinous atrocities of the villains, everyone is rewarded according to their deeds: the tyrant Ajanaku is brought down and the community will possibly be governed under a better leadership dispensation. Anthonia Ezeugo and Nkechi Ezenwamadu (2023) describe *Once Upon an Elephant* as a portrait of the nation’s political scene which any discerning mind may easily understand to be a farce. It is however a tragic play as it bears scathing resemblances of the reality of a political system where leaders toy with the nation’s destiny and mortgage the children’s future. The playwright however takes solace in the conviction that the perpetrators of crimes against humanities will not go unpunished.

The plot of the play begins when contenders begin to eye the throne of the sick and dying king Akinjobi. Among the aspirants are Ajanaku and Serubawon who are plotting to install themselves as the powerful forces in the community. Ajanaku aspires to be king while Serubawon aims to play triple roles as the king maker, medicine man and priest. Gifts are used to bribe select members of the Hunters’ Guild, with all the processes wrapped up in secrecy and darkness. Ajanaku is not fit to be king because he is not the first son of the late king. Further investigation reveals that Ajanaku is not even the true son of the late king, his father is actually the evil medicine man, Serubawon. This explains the reason Serubawon is prepared to go to any lengths to enthrone the illegitimate one king.

Ajanaku is also prepared to do anything possible to capture and hold on to power. He, for instance, undergoes all forms of rituals, no matter how difficult and injurious they might be to him or to other members of the society. Fate soon catches up with Ajanaku when he rapes

Desola who is preparing to get married to Odekunle. Desola turns out to be Serubawon's daughter and also Ajanaku's sister or step sister. Serubawon commits suicide, as he cannot endure the shame of ruining his own family through his wickedness. Ajanaku's death brings freedom to the land. A new king will be announced soon, hopefully through a more democratic process that will bring to the throne someone who will make the people happy.

The Melting Point of Literature and Orature

A critical examination of the play reveals that it is a modern African play written in a simple English that is highly influenced by Yoruba cultures and expressions. The cultural and religious practices of the Yoruba people are richly displayed in the play. There are many Yoruba words and expressions that are directly rendered in the indigenous forms, the use of proverbs, adages and other epigrammatic expressions in the play establish an intertextual relation between the play and the Yoruba orature. The title of the play owes its inspiration to a Yoruba trickster folktale, *Itan Ijapa ati Erin*, in which the smaller tortoise lures the bigger elephant to an untimely death because of the elephant's inordinate ambition to rule over a human community. Incidentally, both the title and the name of the protagonist have symbolic meanings in Yoruba culture. Elephant is either called Ajanaku or Erin. The protagonist of the play whose real name Olaniyonu is interpreted to mean wealth comes with troubles. He further decides to nickname himself Ajanaku, the Elephant in order to intimidate his subjects.

Lekan Balogun and Sesan Fasanu (2019), while examining the connection between naming and oral tradition in *Once Upon the Elephant* observe that the playwright is aware that the Yoruba do not trifle with names and naming, rather they view them as the material nodes of the social network, this is the reason the rites of naming underscore the people's belief in birth, life, and living, as well as the totality of existence. The naming and adopted titles of the major characters really aid our understanding of the strong connection between naming, politics, and the thematic preoccupation of the play.

In Yoruba land, the circumstance(s) surrounding the birth of a new born child is / are a major factor in the type of name that the child is given. Balogun and Fasanu draw our attention to the fact that Yoruba do not always believe in chance occurrence, they rather accept causation and also aware of the influence of (nick) names on attitude and behaviour the name bearer as well as their ultimate social reality. Thus, the genesis of the phrase, "Orúkonironi, àpèjá a máaròyàn" (Names do influence; so, does an alias). That is why names like Serubawon which means intimidate them, Ajanaku, the elephant reveal the tyrannical natures of the bearers, while Adunni (good treasure) whose appellation is Iya Agba, (the old mother or grandmother) ends up becoming the mother who saves the whole community.

The play, *Once Upon an Elephant*, set in an unnamed traditional Yoruba agrarian community, is highly influenced by many Yoruba cultural practices and beliefs. The villagers are mainly farmers and game hunters. The hunters also serve as soldiers protecting the

community. They also perform both official and ceremonial services for the king. During Ajanaku's coronation, the hunters are drafted to hunt for meat to be used for entertainment. In their *Ijala* ceremonial outing, the hunters chant to entertain themselves and their audience. *Ijala* is a form of traditional poem that is dedicated to praise of Ogun, the god of iron. In Yoruba land, the installation of a king is not complete without some rites. Ajanaku, the tyrant however chooses to engage in the Jobele rite, a peculiar traditional ritual expected to complete his transformation from an ordinary man to an immortal being.

The character delineation in the place is highly influenced by the Yoruba culture, this is easily noticeable in the roles to the female characters. Lekan Balogun (2015) observes that while most of Afolayan's Nigerian contemporary female authors are influenced by Western ideology with the notion of challenging female oppression in a patriarchal society, Afolayan takes an antithetical position by presenting a very clear alternative perception that projects women as daughters, wives and mothers with well-defined roles for the survival of their society. This role is exemplified by Iya Agba whose bravery and wisdom serve as the community saving grace.

The Yoruba people have a very strong belief in the concept of *Esan* (law of Karma) which dictates that whatever we do to others, either good or bad, will come back to us. This law applies to Ajanaku, an illegitimate child and a pretender to the throne. As a king whose mother is unfaithful to her husband, Ajanaku also marries a woman that is not faithful to him.

Like all other superstitious society, the Yoruba people attach a lot of importance to dreams. It is believed that a dream is a sign of either a good or bad omen. In the play, Desola dreams that she forgets her *Ekun Iyawo*, the bride's song, on her wedding day. This dream foreshadows a tragedy that will take place before the wedding day. Desola is eventually raped by the tyrant king, Ajanaku, very close to the time of her wedding to Odekunle, her betrothed fiancé.

The strength of the play is the ability to borrow many cultural materials to adapt effectively. For instance, Afolayan uses traditional Yoruba method to measure time seasons. The characters speak of next market day, next moon and next planting season and harvest season to show the agrarian nature of the community. Desola, while lamenting the loss of her virginity, bemoans the fact that her groom will not present a blood-stained white handkerchief on her bridal night as a sign that he meets the bride as an unblemished maiden.

Afolayan also uses a traditional story to adapt socio-political contemporary issues. The creativity of the play begins with the title, Ajanaku which means Elephant. It is borrowed from the tale of the tortoise and elephant. The size of the elephant and its strength are representative of the oppressive tools over the helpless masses. This is symbolised by a human leg wearing a pair of brutal shoes that tower over the populace who are depicted as dwarf compared to an elephant. The legs are seen to be trampling on the malnourished populace, which is what bad leaders do. They trample on the people and their rights. The tiny sizes of the people are based

on how the dictator sees them insignificant, while the enlarged image of the legs is how dictators see themselves or how large their ego is.

Literary Devices and Imagery

The play is also full of innuendoes which are very common among the Yoruba, for instance, Iya Agba speaks mostly through innuendoes in the play. An instance is when Ajanaku calls her mad and she replies that ‘the lizard may resemble a crocodile, but they are certainly different’p37. This innuendo refers to Ajanaku and it means that he is not the biological son of Akinjobi, the former king and, therefore, is not fit to be king.

The title of the play, *Once Upon an Elephant* is direct allusion to the fall of the elephant in the Yoruba folklore. Olanipekun identifies songs and dance, proverbs, role-play technique, and audience participation as signposts of Nigerian oral literature (Olanipekun, 2024).

Iya Agba directly quotes the tortoise song of deception to lure elephant to his downfall “*A o merinjoba, erekun ewele.*” (We shall make the elephant the king). The use of songs and music in the play is typical of the Yoruba cultural practices. Olaolu Adekola (2024) contends that music and language are inseparable and that their relationship manifests in various contexts. Yoruba language is especially expressed and preserved by musicians who usually deploy certain linguistic elements and communication devices in navigating their artistic creativity. The real value of an African music is the ability of the musician to use the right and appropriate linguistic elements like proverbs and figures of speech such as hyperbole, metaphors, simile, fable, parables, repetition and to drive home their points.

There are idioms and wise saying. An instance of a wise saying is seen in Ogundele’s statement that, “anger, our fathers say, is the brother of hopelessness’ (p.19). Dele chides Odekunle for keeping his relationship with Desola a secret, which partly contributes to the success of Ajanaku in raping the poor maiden. Dele says that, “the snake that travels alone gets killed by the farmer”(52). This traditional adage warns of the dangers of being unnecessarily secretive.

When Iya Agba sees that Ajanaku is dying a disgraceful death, she drops another wise saying “Whoever wishes to die a decent death should live a decent life”p.80.

Afolayan makes numerous statements that are direct translations of Yoruba proverbs and idioms. There are many examples King Olaniyonu in his inaugural speech describes himself as Ajanaku, the elephant, saying that:

“Ajanaku, more than I have caught a glimpse of something’, for when you see an elephant, you surely have seen something huge, awesome, imposing...even impregnable like a rock” p.25.

This is a Yoruba proverb, (Ajanaku koja mo ri nkan firi, tio ba ri erin kio so pe o ri eri.)
He also boasts:

“What does an elephant do to creepers
and thorns and bushes and thickets
and a whole forest? He tramples them”.
(Itakun to ni ki erin ma lo ti ohun ti erin lo jo maa lo)

Ajanaku with this boastful comment, sees himself as invincible and should not be challenged by mere mortals that can be trampled upon at will,

“If a cock crows on earth, its peers in heaven respond” p.25. (Ti akuko adiye bako laye, awon egbe re a gbalorun.). This statement is a Yoruba invocation when a speaker seeks the intervention of the supernatural to make his statement come to pass. But in this instance Ajanaku challenges the council of the chiefs to give his tyranny unconditional support.

“Unrestrained daring makes the acrobatic masquerade expose his private part to the public” (p. 55) (Ijo a jo ju lo mmu ki eegun yo epon sode). This Yoruba proverb is often deployed to warn impetuous person to thread the part of caution. Lere employs this proverb to his friends to be strategic in confronting Ajanaku when they have not got the wherewithal to fight him.

Dele supports this position with another Yoruba proverb, “If a dog’s mouth is infested by leech, is it a fox that will be called to unfasten it?” p.55 (Se bi enu aja ba ni eegbon, se akata laa wa be ko bani yo?) This a warning not to underestimate the wickedness of a cruel despot like Ajanaku.

Iya Agba also employs series of Yoruba proverbs to drive home her points:

“They deceive themselves greatly. Whoever collects rain water with a sieve.” p.34 (Afasegbojo ojo ntan ara re je). This is an expression of incongruity and impossibility. Iya Agba expresses the futility of concealing the question of Ajanaku’s paternity and eligibility to be king.

“The leper said two things of which one is a lie. He said, after he struck his child with his palm, he also severely pinched him with his fingernails.” p.34. (Adete so oro meji o fi okan re paro. O so wipe leyin ti ohun fi abara na omo ohun, o hun tun ja leekana). Iya Agba goes on to tell Ajanaku that he can only fool himself, when he claims to have done the impossible.

“To the rafter belongs the load; the shelf only pretends” (p.38), (Aja lo ni eru, iro ni pepe npa). Iya Agba uses this proverb to insist that Ajanaku is a pretender to the throne, sooner or later the legitimate king will soon be enthroned.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis done on the plot, setting and style, among others, it can be stated that *Once Upon an Elephant* is imbued with both internal and external aesthetics which can

please any lover of drama who reads it. Its story is timeless and universal and likely to appeal to readers from all climes. The title of the play is imaginative, and signals the depiction of the tyrant king Ajanaku, who can hardly be called the hero of the play. He is at best, an anti-hero and certainly a villain like Serubawon, his god father.

Ato Quayson's (1997) observation is instructive at this stage. According to him, the relationship between orality and African literature cannot be fully explored without the notion of intertextuality, since "arguably, oral forms of discourse are ultimately texts in their own right."

Walter J. Ong (1982) is of the view that, "Oral cultures indeed produce powerful and beautiful oral performances of high artistic and human worth, which are *no longer even possible* once writing has taken possession of the psyche" (*Orality and Literacy*, 1982 p. 14).

A detailed intertextual analysis of *Once Upon an Elephant* and Orature shows that the play is a Yoruba play written in English language. The idioms, wise saying and the use of cultural symbolism in the play, draw the attention of readers to African traditional cultural performances and festivals. The play succeeded in broadening our understanding of the use of indigenous African oral resources by African authors that however use foreign languages to communicate to the global community.

The play has a strong intertextual relation with orature because of its reliance on African oral tradition as a source of its materials. The paper while noting that orature can be seen as a text in its own right from where African writers can borrow, that has not reduced their originality. It can therefore be emphasised that the influence of the African orature in *Once Upon an Elephant* has not in any way reduced the creativity and originality of the playwright. The position of this study is that if the contributions of both the original author and input of the copying writer are not acknowledged, the tendency is that the copying writer will not see any need to add to the existing work, and, therefore, end up vomiting the raw material he has appropriated without digesting it.

The fact that African writers appropriate the oral tradition of their indigenous culture does not in any way reduce their originality.

The seeming lack of originality in oral literature stems from the wrong assumption that African stories and poems are handed down from generation to generation in word perfect order. One fact that is often overlooked is the verbal flexibility of African oral performance. In many instances, the main plot of a story may date back to thousands of years, yet the plot will only be a minor element in the finished work of art produced in the actual telling by a particular individual narrator. A close study of the performance of old chanters will demonstrate the flexibility of African oral performance.

Ijala as a sub-genre of African traditional poetry among the Yoruba hunters, often dwells on common subject matters but during delivery, an individual chanter brings new life to his

Ijala as the chanter lives and performs his narration rather than just recites an old *Ijala* poem. He can, during his performance, create vivid effects through variations and exaggeration or speed and volume of his tone. He can also create suspense with abrupt breaks, and pregnant pauses. He may enthrall and hold his audience's captive with his dexterity in performance and as well as create room for their participation with adroitly delivered rhetorical questions. The chanter keenly watches the audience's reactions and exploits his freedom to choose his words as well as manage his mode of delivery. It will, therefore be totally out of place to claim that all these effects are not the products of the narrator's creativity.

Recommendations

This paper recommends that Bosede Afolayan's *Once Upon an Elephant* can serve as a good example of an authentic African play that communicates to the reading populace all around the world. The play is capable of meeting the needs of lovers of drama and those in powerful political positions who are concerned about the quality of leadership in their spaces.

Other aspiring authors or playwrights are advised to come back to their roots to take advantage of many cultural materials that are abound therein to enrich their works. The study also encourages more literary artists to engage in act of intertextuality with both African indigenous and foreign texts to make their works relevant to their society while projecting African culture.

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