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AN OVERVIEW OF YORUBA ORAL LITERATURE, ITS VIABILITY AS A HISTORICAL DATA SOURCE AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO MODERN YORUBA HISTORIOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT: *Like most oral literary corpora, Yoruba oral literature has mostly been viewed through skeptical lenses when it comes to being a viable source for the providence of sound historical information. The reason for this skepticism is tied to its capricious aural medium of transmission and its collocation with non-literacy and pre-literate epochs. This study aims to problematise this prevalent perception by underscoring the historicalness of Yoruba oral literature and exploring the different ways its genres have been employed by scholars of modern orientations in the discovery or validation of historical information in and around the Yoruba nation. Ample focus is given to reviewing the tentacular outlooks of scholars on the historical functions of Yoruba oral literature. Within the loci of the divergent stances examined, the hypothesis that Yoruba oral literature has an enduring historical dimension that has contributed to modern Yoruba historiography is presented and tested using various examples.*

KEYWORDS: Oral literature, Yoruba, Nigeria, Modern history, Orality

INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time, history was transmitted by means of spoken words crafted into stories, poems, songs and made alive by every wit of grit the person(s) who bears the burden of telling possesses. Or so it was believed till written scholarship came and eroded this assumption with the claim that no form of history conveyed by word of mouth should be believed as truth because it is utterly subject to being inaccurate. Franz Kafka made an implicit inference to this through his often-quoted statement that "the history of the world, as it is written and handed down by [word of mouth], often fails us completely". In truth, Kafka's statement somewhat extended to include written and 'transmitted' literature passed down from ancient scholars but his words elaborately explicated by an English translator is an indicator of the ambivalent sentiment towards oral literariness and its historical significance (The Kafka Project | Octave Booklet D (I, 21), n.d.). By way of support, an American historian also maintained assertively that "folklore… passed by word of mouth… [is] opposed… [to] history which is written down and stored in an archive" (Jill Lepore Quotes, n.d.). The purpose of this essay is to challenge this pervading viewpoint by defending the historical essence of oral literature. What this means is that this essay purports to not merely test the validity or invalidity of the premises which support the claim that literary orality amounts little to historicity, but to also legitimise the slant that oral literature does contain viable historical qualities that have, over time, contributed immensely to the development of modern historiography. The fulcrum that forms the base of this essay stems from the oral literariness of a particular group in Western Nigeria: The Yoruba people. With their oral literature having a dynamic, vast repertoire of oral literary conventions

as well as a rather entangled relationship with modern history especially in the Nigerian context, it presents itself as a fitting exemplar for engaging in a study such as this.

Although the role Yoruba oral literature plays for acquiring historical knowledge has been acknowledged by some scholars, most of whom are anthropologists, not many have made the effort to support the claim. For one, a leading researcher in African oral literature highlighted the import of oral literature to historical knowledge, weighing on how "poetry in non-literate as in literate societies can be illuminating for the historian - of direct relevance for the intellectual history of the time and indirectly useful for other aspects of society" (Finnegan, 1970, p. 196). However, she expressed a well-founded scepticism with regards to the viability of the prosaic form of oral literature like historical narratives to provide historical resources for scholars (Finnegan, 1970, p. 197). Considering the constant flux of academic research, the skeptically coloured valuation of oral literature in relation to prevalent historical traditions ought to be re-evaluated and this is what this article intends to venture into. Ilemobayo Omogunwa and Marcel Onyibor (n.d.) argue from a philosophical perspective that the disinterest in defending the viability of oral testimonial words has created a vacuum in African epistemological philosophy as many in this circle do not consider oral tradition as veritable sources of reference. The same can be said for African and postcolonial history; Robin Law (1976) stresses just how sceptical many educated Yoruba historians are about the "value of traditional evidence", in so much that Yoruba local historians like J.O George, Euler Ajayi and even Samuel Johnson who put them to use were apologetic about their reliance on orature.

For others like Chris Johnson, oral traditions should only be used if they can be corroborated with written evidence; but interestingly, there are more oral sources than written materials especially with regards to the prehistory of the Yoruba people, hence it seems quite offhanded to insist on the corroboration of oral references with written documentations (Law, 1976, p. 78). More so, it should be noted that oral literature is only a smaller fragment of the broader spectrum of oral tradition, which denotes the generality of how "knowledge about reality [is] transmitted orally from one generation to another" (Omogunwa & Onyibor, n.d.). Aribidesi Usman and Toyin Falola (2019), in their seminal book, sufficiently explored Yoruba oral tradition with emphasis on its religious trademarks, oral history, concrete and visual arts to bodily aestheticization and music. But most of these form part of oral tradition, not oral literature.

Interestingly, oral tradition is of a broader configuration than oral history as the former "consists of accounts of past events or activities rendered by persons who were direct actors, participants, or eyewitnesses" (Faseke, 1990, p. 78). As it is, oral tradition whose forms of existence include cultural practices, religious conventions, songs, rituals performed using several props and instruments have been given more historical credence than its literary aspects believed to be mostly fabrications. These complex relationships among oralities makes it all the more important to engage in a study that exclusively outlines the historical properties of Yoruba oral literature as a very specific area and delineates the several ways in which it has been used in Nigerian modern historiography. To do this, however, there is the need to review past literary endeavours in this regard and touch on what has essentially been the loci of discussion in this field of study. This is to be followed by a typological delineation of the genres of Yoruba oral literature, which will be done in order to give readers a basic understanding of this area of Yoruba oral tradition so that the subsequent evaluation of the historical qualities of Yoruba oral literature and its role in modern Yoruba historical studies by contemporary scholars can easily be comprehensible to the mind.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

The general meaning, functions and aspects of oral literature have always been subject to the scrutiny of both western and non-western scholars. An important area of contestation has been the literary quality of oral literature. Given the fact that literature is basically taken to denote a written form of art, the aural nature of oral literature is considered as an oxymoronic collocation that reflects the tenuous conceptualisations of artistic representations. Antonia Carcelen-Estrada (2018, p. 131) captures this paradox in the description of oral literature as "ontologically oppos[ing] any written encoding" yet "projecting and conserving people's cultural values and norms" just as the written form would (Carcelen-Estrada, 2018, p. 131). It does not help that the Latin etymological 'literatura' is derived from 'litera' which essentially means 'written words' (Literature | Origin and Meaning of Literature by Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). What this has done is cause historians to be more only interested in the anthropological, ritualistic, socio-religious attributes of oral performances, treating them exclusively whilst disregarding the aesthetic qualities of the oral representations (Binyou-Bi-Homb, 2009).

Despite the apathy towards recognising the literary and historical essence of oral literature, some academics have managed to exhaustively defend its appreciative artistically-inclined attributes with a number of them studying oral artistic forms in several parts of the world to justify their claims. Ruth Finnegan (2012) gave the example of N.K Chadwick who defended the literariness of oral literature based on the fact that oral literary forms have been around in non-literate societies long before the invention of writing. Also, the notion of individual authorship which is a distinguishing feature of written literature is also evident in oral literature as performers also bring in their personalities into the art, even adding or improvising the cultural contents. For one, the aural creative heritage of specific western ancient periods and societies like Anglo-Saxon, Slavic and Iberian communities have particularly received attention, with Sino-platonic oral literature also receiving academic, filmic or literary translational treatments by fantasy writers and anime screenwriters like Hayao Miyazaki, the popular screenwriter and director behind *Spirited Away* and *Princess Monooke*, two movies that gained popularity due to their cinematographic reconfiguration of several indistinguishable Japanese oral literary elements (Carcelen-Estrada, 2018).

However, more interest has been directed to African oral literature in so much that it has been studied in all its vagaries. On the home front, prolific literary writer and scholar Ngugi wa' thiongo has, in several publications, appraised the distinctive qualities of African oral literature and its role in preserving the historical heritage of newly independent African nation-states (Vaidya et al., 2018). He is averse to the caging of creative oratures in the prison house of the English language, hence his choice to write his dramas which borrowed a lot from Kenyan oral literature in his native language Gikuyu. There have, however, been several intensive studies that do not hold quite as strong an opinion as wa Thiong'o but simply explore the facets of African oral literature. In this regard, Ruth Finnegan's *Oral Literature in Africa* (2012) with its inquiry into the oral literary practices of about 150 cultural groups in Africa, including the Yoruba tribe, is considered one of such seminal efforts. Its strong arguments in defence of the literariness of African oral literature and illumination on its characteristic features and forms have been considered a breakthrough achievement.

Toyin Fálolá, Abimbola Wándé, Isidore Okpewho, Adeboye Babalolá, Abiola Irele and Russell H. Kaschula are other prominent scholars whose works have led to milestone discoveries about

African oral literature (Akinsola & Omolola, 2020, p. 314). Although their works might not be as extensive as Finnegan's, they boast more depth and exhaustive exploration of specific areas of interest which might only have been given cursory mentions in Finnegan's book. Their entry into an academic environment that gives more credence to written, printed texts have caused them to publish several materials in which they have vehemently championed theories and postulations related to oral literature and explicated its complex relationships with written narratives and several fields of study. They have managed to do this in different ways. Having spent most of his career studying Yoruba Ijala poetry (hunter's songs), Babalolá is considered as a renowned authority who has put Yoruba Ijala poetry on the world map of oral literature.

While both Wándé and Fálolá are renowned Yoruba historians, Wándé exercises a flair for pre-colonial Yoruba history using Ifa divination poetry as his mantra, while Fálolá dwells more on academic colonial and postcolonial Nigerian history, making only deductive references from Yoruba oral literature. Okpewho and Irele, in their lifetimes, were writers and literary scholars, hence, they were adept at discussing the aesthetic dynamics of oral and written literature in and beyond Nigeria. Interestingly, while scholars like Kaschula and Finnegan have tried to establish the contemporariness of oral literature in Africa, the preliterate, prehistoric nature of Yoruba oral literature is what is particularly emphasised by these intellectuals, with one of them referring to it as "the heritage of imaginative verbal creations, stories, folk-beliefs and songs of preliterate societies which have evolved and passed on through the spoken word from one generation to another" (Finnegan, 2012, p. 22). Obversely, another scholar, Ifeoluwa Akinsola, perceives Yoruba oral literature as inclusive of, though not limited to, the written text; this is an echo of a trend of thought that every written or unwritten discourse about Yoruba's cultural heritage is its oral literature (Akinsola & Omolola, 2020).

Despite the worldwide attention Yoruba oral literature has garnered, as established earlier, its historical content has always been subject to scrutiny; one of the vehement critics of oral Yoruba sources in this regard is Rev. E.T Johnson, who expressed stark scepticism about the validity of the information provided within its realm (Law, 1976, p. 78-79). Relatively, many view the relevance of oral literature to history in an obverse way. For someone like Abdul-Rasheed Na'Allah (2020), one cannot attain a full understanding of oral literature without first having knowledge about the socio-economic and cultural history of the people involved. However, the role of oral literature in providing understanding about a people's history is somewhat glossed over. One prominent Nigerian scholar that has, however, rooted for the possibility of oral tradition (including its creative, literary aspects) in being used as historical data is Bólánlé Awé. She has strongly criticised the overt dismissal of oral literature as 'quasi-historical' and the failure of scholars to recognise it as the 'third category' of oral tradition useful for historical construction (Awe, 1974). For her, literary narratives transmitted by word-of-mouth encapsulate the experiential socio-cultural trends of a community and can provide a historian with "knowledge of personalities, attitudes and social issues considered critical in times past" (Adeleke Adeeko, 2001, p. 181). On her part, she practically pursued a historical knowledge of Oyo and Ibadan people in Yoruba land relying mainly on literary oratures as her research materials. But, even then, in her research, she restricts the utilisation of oral literary corpora to non-literate societies without the archival advantage that written materials provide, just as Finnegan does. Hence, she does not present it as a default mode of historicisation; instead, she sees it as a conditional form of evidence contingent on the ready availability of written sources.

Another Nigerian scholar who subjectively subscribes to Awé's view about the contribution of Yoruba oral literature to historical knowledge is Adélékê Adéêkó. He, however, finds fault in the hegemonic structure of several forms especially the panegyrics (oríkî) which engages in a privileged telling of prominent parts of the Yoruba kingdom while relegating less important communities to the narrative margin. Adéêkó is even more perplexed by the omission of the Yoruba's experiences of slavery and colonialism from these literary representations. By looking into the 16 different variants of the lineage oriki of Olufe and Onikoyi as told by four individual oral performers recorded by Babalola, Adéêkó examines all the dynamics of the hegemonic historical presentation of two Yoruba principalities (Adéêkó, 2001). While Olufe's oriki celebrates Ife as the peaceful polity from which Yoruba land originates, Onikoyi's praise poem extols the war exploits (which includes dealings with slaves) of Ikoyi, the leader of the warrior clan of the Oyo kingdom (Adéêkó, 2001). To any historian who engages in a comparative study of the two panegyrics, it becomes immediately clear that both kingdoms are steering the wheels of cosmology in their feud for the "control of Yoruba cultural history and politics" (Adéêkó, 2001, p. 184-186).

Paradoxically, within these hegemonic constructs, historians get the chance to validate the agelong tension and rivalry between both charters. Adéêkó is not the only one who has expressed reservation about what acquired oral literary evidence can mean for historical research due to the above concern. In an 1886 annual report published by the Abeokuta Patriotic Association, it was acknowledged that "folklores, legends... valuable as they are, [have] conflicting opinions [with] each man magnifying himself above the other, each tribe or country wishing to be accounted superior" (Law, 1976, p. 78). This, alongside the variegated versions of individual folklores that are fostered by different Yoruba communities, pose real problems. But that literary performances are held to account with regards to providing historical information is a testament to the abiding confidence in the ability of oratures to provide historical information. This is not to talk about how the shared nature of oral literary performances and written historical sources in concretising partisan ideologies reveals their fraternised convergence.

This article chooses to ride on this confidence and focus on the strengths of Yoruba oral literature with regards to historical representations. More so, it is worthy of note, that from Western and Chinese viewpoints, history and oral literary forms like poetry are fundamentally distinct. On the other hand, the African conception of oral literature obviously does not distinguish between its historical and poetic attributes. Hence, arguing for the "historicalness" and "literariness" of African oral literature in Western terms is contradictory as the two aspects, to some extent, exclude each other. Thus, this explains the exigency to analyse Yoruba oral literature, the subject of this study, according to its own poetics which, in fact, is historically-inclined.

Genres of Yoruba Oral Literature

Some scholars have been known to simply substitute oral literature for folklore, storytelling, folktale etc. when in fact, within many communities (the Yoruba people included), oral literature is so much more than that. In fact, folklore is just one of the aspects of the different genres of Yoruba oral literature that there are (Binyou-Bi-Homb, 2009, 1). For Finnegan, the genres of oral literature in Africa include "poetry (panegyric, elegiac, and religious poetries); songs (lyric, topical, political, children's songs and rhymes); prose narratives, proverbs, riddles, oratory, drum language, and drama", all of which are functional forms that are of

historical significance to the Yoruba people (Ruth Finnegan, 2012, p. 52-80). Although, as Finnegan stresses, this classification can be problematic and has given rise to other counter-categorisations, it is generally agreed that some oral forms are more prosaic, poetic, lyrical or dramatic than others; so, the categories used in written literature just as well works mostly for Yoruba oral literature. Because the dramatic aspects of Yoruba oral literature are intricately tied with religion, theatrics and a combination of performance and presence, its historical properties cannot be sufficiently delineated in this essay so it will be excluded from the discussion below as well as in other subsections. Also, for the other two genres, emphasis will be placed on aspects and forms that are of more historical significance.

Yoruba Oral Prose Narratives

There are several forms of Yoruba oral prose narratives like the Alo (story songs) which contain elements of riddles and singalong songs and are usually told to children (and adults) mostly at night. Alo usually starts off with a storied invocation - *Alo o* - and a riddle which the audience are supposed to answer before the storyteller continues telling the story. During the course of the story, a call-and-response song is started by the narrator involving the audience who normally clap as they sing along. An Alo can be related by anyone as little professionalism is required and the stories are usually fables spiced with trickster motifs so they are rarely of historical relevance (Kubik, 1968). Although on the lowest rung of narrative importance, the Alo is intricately connected to Yoruba's nomenclature for historicalness called Itan (the literal meaning of Itan is history; its intended meaning is historical narrativity) in a complex thread of narrative evolution as is revealed in a storyteller's explanation of its origins quoted by Deirdre La Pin (1980):

> Throughout the whole of Yorubaland, Ifa gave birth to Itan, itan gave birth to alo, alo gave birth to song. When some part of Ifa leaves its parent, it enters into Itan; when a part within itan leaves, it enters into alo; when a portion of Alo leaves, it then becomes a song (p. 333).

Itan, in its most glorified, popular form, is folklore which comprises biographical narrations, myths and legends that are of religious, literary and historical connotations. The popularity of this form contributes to the over-generalised name-calling of oral literature as mere folklore or folktales (this is also almost the case for the western counterpart whose repertoire of fairytales are classified as folklore). Its prevalence has stemmed from the explorations of anthropologists like James Frazer who found so much ethnographic merit in folklore that they downplay its literary qualities in search for its historical revelations about the "customs, beliefs, and culture of both early man and... contemporary 'primitive' peoples" which supposedly reveal "the surviving remnant of a once barbaric past", what, in Friedrich Schiller's euphemistic term, are the remnants of Western childhood (Ziemann, 2019; Finnegan, 2012, p. 309).

Given the anthropological interest in folklore, scholars like Carcelen-Estrada (2018, p. 133) have generalised the entire corpus of oral literature as an "in between the liminal spaces of anthropological and literary fictions". True enough, oral prose narratives are mostly centred on folkloric conventions; as it is, this supposed distinction between "literature" and "folklore" is largely based on sociological characteristics such as popularity and anonymous transmission rather than on themes and textual quality. Hence, the different types of forms that there are within this space of oral literary representation has been overshadowed by popular conceptions. Apart from the animal folktales that seem to be in a class of its own with the Ijapa (tortoise) as

the most invoked character within this trope, there is also *Itan* which connotes historical narratives and can pass for the historical repository of the Yoruba people. *Itan*, as emphasised by Finnegan (2012), can be classified into creation stories/myths and legends about conquests, ancestry and contemporary events. It is based on the repertoire of these myths and legends that the histories of certain Yoruba communities are constructed, written and published (As will be seen shortly, Samuel Johnson''s *History of the Yorubas* is clearly an example). Apart from these folkloric forms of vibrant historical traditions, proverbs and riddles can be said to be part of the prosaic genre because they are usually spoken in prose-like ways, even narrativised, depending on the skill of the speaker.

Yoruba Oral Poetry

Isaac Olugboyega Alaba (2002) in his elucidation of the qualities of Yoruba oral poetry dwells on its most historically inclined form - the Odu Ifá (Ifá literary corpus). The Odu Ifa is a set of literary primordial divination stories that serves as the knowledge base from which initiated priests who serve at the behest of the Ifa deity expend "information… about the present, past and future events" to Ifa worshippers (Omogunwa & Onyibor, n.d., p. 41). Believed to be founded by the Grand Priest Orunmila who is said to be the Supreme Oracle and first-hand witness of the creation process, the Ifa priest or priestess (babalawo) spends more than three years of apprenticeship learning and memorising the entire corpus of the Odu Ifa which has sixteen books and about two hundred and fifty six lengthy verses, recitations and stories as it is only by this means that the priest will be able to dispense both historical and epistemic knowledge to people during consultations (Akinsola & Omolola, 2020, p. 320; Finnegan, 2012, p. 93). The Ifa priests and priestesses are also supposed to learn about other things like traditional herbology, animism, spiritual incantations and the healing sciences, the most important that comes with the 'profession'. During these consultations, the poeticness of the words spoken – the sheer use of rhymes, metaphors, personifications and lyrical, trancelike voice – acts as a carriage on which a historical message about a person, animal or thing is often passed across and used to interpret a current predicament.

According to J.D Clarke (1939, p. 235), the historical significance of the Odu Ifa is contained in the fact that "buried in [its] stories and greetings, there is undoubtedly a vast amount of Yoruba philosophy, mythology and history." Although he stresses that most of the historical references are usually lost on the old babalawo who was not a witness to that period and are utterly incomprehensible to the new ones due to their proverbial depth, it is safe to say that they can provide annotated references for histories that are still familiar to the current generation. An example below shows how:

To Eji Ogbe

O da Ifa fun Kukundunkun -ni ojo ti o lo si oko Aloro-odun	He cast Ifa for the Sweet Potato on the day he went to the farm of Aloro-odun
Nigbana ni o korin pe "Ogbo di ye o, -omo yoyo lehin mi ".	Then he sang, "An old hen has plenty of chickens; there are many children behind me."

To Ogbe-sa

> The Olokun who was king of the sea brought two hundred and one crowns to the Ooni of Ife, who was the paramount chief of all the world at that time, so that he might give them to his friends. The Ooni was their chief and the Olokun became the suzerain of the Ooni. Therefore, the Ooni of Ife sacrifices a goat, a rat, a hen and a fish to Olokun every year. Olokun is the sea orisha (god) (J. D. Clarke, 1939, p. 247).

Given the fact that several divination tools are used in consultations and recitations like the Opele (divination chain), Opon Ifa (divination tray) and Odu of Obi (Kola-nut divination), there is a whole dynamic behind the interpretation of any verse of the Odu Ifa so it is impossible to interpret these lines referenced by the scholar Clarke out of context. What is, however, obvious is that the first couplet refers to an event that did happen in the ancient past but has been shrouded in mysteries due to the use of proverbs and impenetrable anecdotes. However, the second story that runs like a folklore refers to an event that is much more familiar. The Olokun deity is venerated by many Yorubas all over the world till date and the Ooni of Ife is a well-respected, prominent traditional ruler, hence, it is possible for anyone familiar (especially a historian) with antecedent information about this story to infer certain facts from this Ese Ifa (verse of Ifa).

Beyond the Odu Ifa which is historically oriented, there are several forms of Yoruba oral poetry that perform historical functions and provide factual information especially within the context of contemporary historicalness. They range from Iremoje, Esa, Ofo, Ege, Ogede, Arofo, Ewi, Rara, Ekun-Iyawo (tearful song of a bride) to the popular Ijala poetry which is imbued with the history of Yoruba hunters and, in its own ways, can be considered as an example of epic poetry. Oriki (panegyric or praise poetry) is another form of oral poetry that especially offers insight into historical events and personalities. Adéêkó conceives it as a "poetic elaboration of individual names" which, over time, are inflected to include unique information revealing the social and cultural background of the subject etc. (Adeeko, 2001, p. 182). As pointed out by Bolanle Awe (1974), an oriki can be about anything, anybody from animals, to humans and personalities, to places, genealogies or lineages. The panegyrics based on humans are mostly the ones that narrativize the historical origins or cultural details about a community. Awe (1974), in her defence of the historical characteristic of praise poems, classified human-related praise poems based on their subjects of engagement: Oriki Ilu focuses on places like towns and villages; Oriki Orile centres on lineage and Oriki Inagije is dedicated to individual personalities (Awe, 1974, p. 332). The panegyric, at its least historical slant, is the praise poetry meant to flatter a person, group or a deity in the hope for reward. However, when it is rendered to important personalities in privileged positions and lineages, it becomes historically potent. Regardless of what type, the transmission and recitation of praise poems are carried out with emphasis placed on staying true to authentically verifiable facts that have been gathered over time about the person, lineage or town because an incorrect presentation of facts by the performer can attract grave consequences and ridicule from the audience.

A short verse from a translated version of a veneration of Ogun (an oriki of Ogun sung by an Ijala poet) shows how hyperbolic and loosely informative a praise poem can be (Finnegan, 2012). Apart from providing a basic description of Ogun, the poem does not really do much in terms of providing historical information about the Yoruba god of war:

… Ogun, let me not see the red of your eyes,
Ogun sacrifices an elephant to his head
Master of iron, head of warriors,
Ogun, great chief of robbers.
Ogun wears a bloody cap.
Ogun has four hundred wives and one thousand four hundred children (p. 113).

In comparison, Awe (1974) presents the praise poem dedicated to an individual personality named Balogun Ibikunle, a soldier from a Yoruba community called Ogbomoso who migrated to Ibadan and became the commander-in-chief of its forces. There is a deliberate attention to the historical details of Ibikunle's life in the praise poem in so much that it can be help in the reconstruction of the man's biography:

Ibikunle Oloke	Ibikunle, the Lord of his Quarters, (Hill)
Agbangba Ase!	The proverbial magnificent doer,
Balogun a teno bi Aje	The Captain that disgraces men as would the dearth of money
Jagun! a to bi aila	The Warrior! As regular as the Muslim afternoon prayers...
O loko lo'gbere	Owner of farmland at Ogbere
Ibikunle loko lodo-Ona	lbikunle also has a farm at Odo-Ona
A boju oko gberengede	A wide expanse of farmland
To fi dodi Adesegun	Extensive as far as the city (fortification) wall at Adesegun
Alagb'ala jayajayaaba-	Father of Kueje
Kueje	Owner of a deadly fearsome backyard...
O lara Ara lo Ohan	He drove the sojourners of Ara to Ohan,
O le Ohan lu Ikogusi	Drove 0han people against Ikogusi,
Darani ja baba Ogunmola	Admirable at expeditions, father of Ogunmola,
Gbagun loju baba Asipa	Fierce striker at war, father of Asipa;
Lota lete baba Osi Ibadan	A stockist of bullet and gunpowder, father of Osi of Ibadan.
Apewa polori ija nla	Usually commissioned to subdue the head of any rebellion… (p.
340 -346).	

As can be seen, although the characteristic hyperbolic speech is used to extol Ibikunle given his important personage, a lot of implicit personal information are given which also crisscross with historical facts about the places he has been to. The degree of authenticity of a particular oriki is thus dependent on who and what it is for. It should be noted that, just like the interconnection proverbs and riddles which are standalone forms have with prose narratives, oral songs also can be intertwined with oral poetry as they exude rhythm, rhyme and other poetic qualities to varying degrees. Several of the other forms already indicated like orin agbe (farmer's song), Ijala (hunter's song), rara (dirges) have degrees of lyricism and they are just as imbued with historical qualities.

Custodians of Yoruba Oral Literature

Just like in most traditional communities, there are custodians of orality amongst Yoruba people; those who are considered experts in specific aspects like oral poetry, folklore or creative, epistemic dissemination of knowledge. It is due to the authoritative reverence

accorded to these people that their performances transcend mere literary forms and become of historical essence. Omogunwa and Onyibor identified two major custodians of Yoruba oral literature: the elders of the community and Ifa, the oracle, who is represented by an initiated priest that uses such mediums as the opon ifa (a divination tray), opele (a divination chain) and iroke ifa to speak to the oracle and transmit the messages to lay men (Omogunwa & Onyibor, n.d., p. 39). Likewise, an elderly person who has lived up to certain expectations in the society is revered to the point of being considered a source for verifying historical facts; their testimonies usually elicit believability despite the fact that they might not have been witnesses of the event in question. The assertive authority of the sages is mostly embodied by their cultivated habit of telling stories (especially Alo and folklores) which draw a lot of crowd as well by how they are referred to when proverbs are quoted:"Awon Agba lo n wipe" which means "As the elders say…" (Omogunwa & Onyibor, n.d., p. 39). Apart from these everyday custodians, every oral form has performers who have mastered the art and perform it during ritual and ceremonial functions. Because these oral forms are mostly tied to traditional events, they require the performers to dress in certain ways and adopt specific mannerisms; most of these external embellishments add to the significance of the performances.

As can be deduced, performativity, orality and social situational transmission are the distinctive characteristics of most forms of Yoruba oral literature and the degrees to which each form draws on all these features largely contributes to their distinct characters. However, while it is easy to differentiate one form from another, most of them usually go hand in hand and are interconnected by the performative prowess of the trouper. An elderly woman telling an Alo might bask beneath the benevolence of the moonshine and simply tell her riddle-shrouded story to kids while a sprightly entertainer performing to adults would tell that same story adding other elements like dance, poetry and stunning oratory. Even more, the oriki is better performed to the drum language. Social conditioning is especially important as any oral performance depends on the broader socio-cultural networks and historical codifications of the society in which it is performed. There is the popular saying by Albert Lord, author of The Singer of Tales (1960), that 'an oral poem is not composed for but in performance'. Karin Barber does not, however, agree with the "prevailing emphasis on oral art as defined exclusively by performance", arguing that Yoruba oral verbal art is a form of a more inclusive type of textuality which is culturally configured (Karin Barber, 1999). Awe's emphasis on how the historical information contained in praise poems is lost when it is moved from the space of situational performativity to the space of the written text corroborates Barber's argument about Yoruba oral literature being one of the varied modes of textuality with regards to historical presentation.

RESULTS

A Presentation of the Historical Qualities of Yoruba Oral Literature

The historical character of Yoruba oral literature stems from its ever-evolving verisimilar cultural annotations of the Yoruba people; as Alaba (2002, p. 3) rightly construes it, "literature [should be] conceived as [embodying] social actions by people rather than as a static entity in its own right". Hence, while it is true that literature as part of the arts serves the pleasure of those who indulge in it, its purposeful social and civic trademarks should not be dismissed. For one, Yoruba oral literature has always engendered and formed the historical consciousness

upon which pre-colonial realities are reconstructed by its people. Samuel Johnson (2010), in his *The History of the Yorubas*, takes the liberty to present mythological and legendary folklore as historical facts about the origin of the Yoruba. This is mostly evident in the chapter of the influential work titled 'The Founders of the Yoruba Nation' where he rehashes the prevailing ancestral myths about Oduduwa being the "reputed founder and ancestor of the race" (Johnson, 2010, p. 143). Although he admits that Oduduwa is a "mythical personage", he still coherently tells the agelong story which portrays Oduduwa as the 'son of Olodumare' (God) sent down from heaven alongside his wife Olokun (goddess of the ocean), his sons Oranmiyan and Isedale and grandson Ogun to establish Yoruba land in Ile-Ife, thus becoming the ancestral great-grandfathers of the first kings (Johnson, 2010, p. 143). Johnson (2010) also goes on to narrate how Oranmiyan came to be the father of the Oyo people with his symbolic staff translated as a 'concrete evidence' of this historical narrative; then, he talks about the Yoruba king with an unstable rulership Ajaun also known as Ajaka and his brother Sango or Olufiran who went on from being the only king of the Yoruba people who spewed fire from his mouth when angry to being the god of thunder and lightning after he died (or rather hung himself).

Due to Samuel Johnson's unease about the presentation of Yoruba oral prose narratives as historical facts, in the very first chapter of his book, he attempts to give a genealogical, 'scientific' hypothesis of the origin of the Yorubas. He alludes to the national historians of the king of Oyo as his primary sources and then attempts to map the different migratory courses from which the Yoruba nation was supposedly eventually birthed. Johnson (2010) starts from their nativity in Upper Egypt or Nubia to their migration to Mecca where Lamurudu (Nimrod/Namurudu) of Phoenician origin was king, then their misadventures in Arabia. Amidst these back-and-forth explorations, he delves back to Ile-Ife and the Oyo kingdom ruled by Oduduwa and Oranmiyan. All of these hypothetical movements aided by his penmanship created a confusing friction between historical fiction and mythological facts, a confusion which has left many contemporary historians conflicted (Johnson, 2010, pp. 3–14). It should be noted that this procedure of interpreting mythological narratives as derivatives of historical events has been conceptualised and termed "euhemerism" by ancient Greek think tanks who thoroughly perceived mythology as history. Despite his oscillating treatment of the origin of the Yoruba people and appeal to mythological legends and folklores, Samuel Johnson's work is considered a seminal, authoritative historical material which even influences contemporary oral performers who resort to his written text to dig up oral references that have been eroded in the process of slavery, colonialism and western civilisation (Law, 1976, p. 75). This practice opens one up to the realisation that there is, in truth, a historicity underlining the social conventions of oral transmission, especially given the fact that the process has been affected by westernisation and modernisation, generally, the increasing use of writing. The ethnographic impetus is to take it to heart that the oral tales are only dwindling remainders of a vast field of memory, hence, the proclivity to salvage the messages of the narrative traditions that are already dying off.

Talking about the academic traction Johnson's work has gained over the years, Toyin Falola stresses that "it is an article of faith to many of its readers [to believe] that Johnson is always right" (Agai, 2017, p. 427). Although it is not out of place to fault Johnson's historical delineations as ahistorical and scholastically misleading, it cannot be dismissed because it is what the people have always believed about themselves, and what is truth if not what is believed to be true? Indeed, this is a crucial question for the distinctiveness of orature: is there any place for individual dissidence if and when truth is determined by collective consensus

(and oral transmission seems to need such a consensus)? Can orally transmitted narratives which have received the people's consensus transmit the thoughts of single individuals, scientists, political thinkers, historians and philosophers who claim to be right against all others? This concerns historiography in particular, since most historians since Greek antiquity write in order to correct what is believed to be true on the basis of objective sources (whether written, oral, visual, material). In fact, with respect to West African oral literature, it has been remarked that the griots who serve the kings have the right to express criticism and even mock narrative accounts consensually presented as historical facts.

Philosophically speaking, anytime scholars strive for knowledge, they mostly have to resort to finding truth by justifying beliefs formed on evidential remnants or "on the basis of the content of a speaker's testimony" (Omogunwa & Onyibor, n.d., p. 35). Also, just like Isidore Okpewho (1992) pointed out, "any community with some pride in itself would naturally see itself as the first and best in creation", hence, if this ontological self-worth is reflected in the constructed historical beliefs and testimonies of a community, thus, is it in the place of historians to disbelieve and prove just how wrong these 'native' people are? True enough, most members of academia would answer affirmatively to this rhetorical question, pointing to the discordance between history and memory, which gives historians the essential task to disbelieve and disprove collectively-held commonplaces. Although this same ethos is upheld in this essay, the canonical narratives of people bound by the same beliefs and cultures consequently abides in the face of historical queries.

Also, while history might be embossed with archival sources about events that have happened since the *beginning* of existence, it lacks the least reference when it comes to cosmology and the *origin* of existence (and sometimes, origin of people) so truths about the origin of people have, over time, been created in different ways within different fields of operation. With Darwinism, the Big Bang theory and several religious narratives in the queue for establishing 'the facts about creation', oral literary narratives might as well join the queue. The point being made is that oral literature might not have the answer to ontological questions like how things came to be, but neither does history nor science. Hence, the tolerance of belief(s) is the best form of historical knowledge that can be aspired to in a situation such as this.

Away from this sensational defence of Johnson's folkloric historical representation of Yoruba's origin, there have been breakthroughs in establishing the veritability of elements that make up these Yoruba cosmological myths. Usman and Falola (2019, p. 52), in this strictly data-based treatment of the prehistory of Yoruba, mentions that archaeological excavations done at Obalara and Woye Asiri regions in Ile-Ife have led to the unearthing of "wrought iron produced during Oduduwa's time [and] led to the recovery of iron nails, iron slag, and tuyeres"; interestingly, the shrine of Ogunladin, the blacksmith of Oduduwa who is now deified, is also located around this area of iron discoveries. Also, reference is made to the marriage between Oduduwa's son Oranmiyan and the daughter of a Benin chief, a union that produced a son called Eweka "who became the first Oba and the true founder of the Benin's dynasty" (Usman & Falola, 2019, p. 58). The story is basically the same for the Benin people, except more details are provided about antecedent events and the reason for the arranged marriage which essentially revolved around an attempt to join alliance with the king of Ile-Ife to bring peace to the troubled Edo-Benin kingdom. This event which is considered a legend in Yoruba oral literature is upheld as the historically validated origin of the Benin empire. This Benin-Oranmiyan story, the extensive political consolidation and latter territoritorial squabbles between the former two neighbouring empires have been historicised by Amaury Talbot and

his contemporary J.U Egharevba who based his account on the stories "recited by several old people… knowledgeable about Benin's past" (Akinola, 1976, p. 21). Although historical writings about the Ife-Benin folklore have been questioned by scholars like G.A Akinola and A.F.C Ryder (1965), it goes a long way to show that beneath the heavy cloaks of poeticism and metaphoric aesthetics contained in Yoruba oral literature, they are still a kernel of historical truth.

Furthermore, according to Irele, his earliest encounter with Yoruba history was in the form of a historical textbook called Itan Eko (History of Lagos) which served as an instructional material for Yoruba history classes during his elementary school years (Irele, 1993). He reflects on the unnerving depiction of "the early rulers of Lagos... as proper figures of legend endowed with supernatural powers [who] lived to a very advanced age" (Irele, 1993, p. 157). He also reminisces about the narrative structure of the Yoruba history classes in which the "history teacher [was] fully disposed to enter into the role of the traditional storyteller... using the book merely as a prompt for what was in effect a narrative performance... a storytelling session." Dwelling upon these early memories, he argues, in a paper, that historical and oral literary representations are both modes of expressions that stem from the "same fundamental impulse: to recollect the past as a function of one's existence in the present"; although "they achieve this central aim through different methods", they have individual values which can complement each other well enough (Irele, 1993, p. 160-161).

Moreover, for the Yorubas, collectively asserted information about a community or individual which historians mostly concede to are more or less established or reinforced through their oral literature. As earlier established, apart from entertaining the audience or providing didactic inferences, oral poetic forms like orin agbè or panegyric (oríkí) or Odu Ifa provide information about the lineage and historical origin of the persons or groups. True enough, the lyrics of the poetry are mostly adulating as the panegyrist always hopes for rewards, but they are based on veritable evocations of the historical chronicles of the individual or group being praised. In mapping out the geography and culture of the Ilorin people, Nigerian historian Abdulrasheed Na'Allah (2020) draws from one of their lineage orikis which not only dwells on the cultural idiosyncrasies of the people but also highlights their migratory history:

Ilorin Afonja

Ilo irin, Ilorin
Iron sharpener, for the hunters,
That's what you're called.
You also answer
Ilu Afonja, Afonja's town
From the Oyos.
To Fulanis,
You're Garin Alimi,
Alimi's town?
Oh yes!
The Scholars.
A town that is big (and Yoruba speaking)
But detests masquerades.
Horses, own favourites,
Swords (dazzling) are their own custom.
Saa Maza gudu, Ilorin Afonja (p. 3).

As plainly stated in the lines of the panegyric, it is believed that the Ilorin community was founded by a man called Afonja whose complicated biography has been traced within the different versions of folklores that exist about him. Given the fact that Ilorin stems from an influx of migration of people from Mali, Nupe, Gobir, Hausa and Fulani communities, the Yoruba town is mentioned in several oral literary productions of places other than in the Yoruba land of Western Nigeria. One of the famous references is made in the Hausa song *Karamin Sani.*

Yet another popular Oriki Ilu focuses on the ancient big capital of Oyo called Ibadan; it moves from stating historical information about the urban town and their origin to rehashing strongly believed stereotypes about the people in the community which are rather unflattering. Regardless, it is considered as very emblematic of the behavioural problems of the Ibadan society. Given the fact that Ibadan dwellers answer to this oriki (they accept it as part of their heritage), it can be said that it mirrors their own perception about their origin and way of life. This shows that although oriki is about praise, it is more focused on the dissemination of information, historical or socio-cultural, about its subject:

Oriki Ibadan

Ibadan kure!	Hail Ibadan! Home of warriors
Ibadan bere	Ibadan the town about which you must make investigations
ki o to wo o	before you enter,
Ibadan mesiogo	Ibadan, the child of Esi-the bush pig
N'ile Oluyole,	The home of Oluyole,
Nibi ole 'gbe-	The town where thieves get the better
jare olohun,	of the rightful owners,
lbadan kii gbe-	lbadan which gives more succour
onile bi ajeji,	to the strangers than to the indigenes,
A kii waye	It is impossible for any being in this world
ka ma'larun kan lara	not to have a defect,
Ijagboro	Ibadan's blemish
larun Ibadan	Is its constant civil war (Awe, 1974, pp. 336–337).

More than revealing genealogical information about an individual or a community, Yoruba oral poetry also historicise the present conditions, popular beliefs or prevalent trends in a society. Alaba (2002) gives an example of a Yoruba dirge (which can be called rara sisun in some cases) sung by an oral poet who conceptualised the nature of death while describing a deathly national event:

A bá fun un lówó,	Had Death demanded money,
Inkú inbá gberen,	We would have willingly given him money.
À bá ràgbò fun un	Had Death demanded an animal,
	we would have willingly bought him a ram.
Inkú ò gbowó;	Death did not demand money;
Inkú ò gbobì.	Death did not demand kola nuts.
Inkú pa Múrítàlá omoo Mùeemedù!	Death killed Muritala, son of Mohammed (p. 13).

The allusion to 'Muritala, son of Mohammed' is clearly a historical reference to 1974 military head of state General Muritala Mohammed who had been assassinated in a bloody coup d'etat that saw the installment of General Olusegun as the new head of state in the year 1976. The murdered HOS who died at age 37 had been mourned throughout the country by most who saw him as a revolutionary. Alluding to the painful memory of his demise is a way to show just how merciless Death can be.

Ewi is another form of poetry by which the history of the Yoruba people, both in fragmented parts and a collected whole, is transmitted. This poetic form which is still well practised in contemporary times is held in popular regard as a viable way of historicising communities within the Yoruba nation. However, given its voguish, contemporaneous outlook, it evokes allusions to modern, western ideas and is largely influenced by colonial imports, one of which is Christianisation and its effects. A clear example is an Ewi rendition by David Olayemi (2020) delivered on YouTube on the history of the Yorubas. Amidst reciting the Ewi in the usual singsong manner accompanied by the talking drum, he makes reference to Abrahamic notions upheld by those of Christian belief:

Kokoro lo ru ko ta ba so ni	The name given to a person is a key
Eni to ba so ni loruko	Whoever names a person
ole dari eni sibi kibi to ba fe	can control the person in whichever direction he/she wants
Te ba fe, ke gba be	If you like, accept it (his words) as it is
Pataki ti n be ninu oruko	The importance of a name
Lo mu mi se tan pipe	is what has made me tell the story
lori oro oruko Yoruba	of Yoruba name-bearing
Olorun orun gan to da wa	Even God himself who created us
Wo mo pe a se kan	knows that there is an authority (literal: command)
be ninu oruko ta ba so ni	in the name that is given to a person
Won ni Abramu	He said 'Abram,
maje Abramu mo	do not bear Abram anymore'
Abrahamu ni ko ma je	'You should bear the name Abraham'
O ni ohun ti Oluwa ri	There is something the Lord saw
To fi ni Jakobu	That he said Jacob
ko yi pada si Israeli	should transform (his name) to Israel
La si ko hun	In his (God's) time.

Despite the overt Christian references, Olayemi rightly historicises Abeokuta (literal meaning: under the rock) as a major Yoruba town that was formed following an ancient event in which its people took refuge from war in the Olumo rock (which is currently a tourist site in Abeokuta). In a way, the fact that oral literary performances undergo development as the society in which they are located evolves can be a meritorious quality. An example is Ilorin's Dadakuada, an oral poetic form, that adapted rapidly to the Islamisation of Ilorin, blending thematic representation of past deific worship with historical events happening within the modern Islamic town (Na'Allah, 2020, p. 1). Given its adaptability, Dadakuada artists also known as 'shameless beggars' have been subject to ill reception from Muslims in Ilorin who still consider their brand of poetic songs as un-Islamic hence they have had to expand their performance landscape to places outside Ilorin making it inevitable for them to also integrate their diasporic experiences in their poetic songs (Usman & Falola, 2019, p. 317). This further

enriches the knowledge capacity of their productions, making them even more relevant to historical research.

More so, although the Odu Ifa, in its own right, is a repertoire of the primordial histories of Yoruba gods, kings, deities, animals and worshippers, it also reveals insight into past interreligious or interstate relationships Yorubas have had. One of the references that scholars always come across are those made about the penetration of Islam into Yoruba land. In this case, the dealings of ancient babalawos with the Muslim clerics, the activities of the Islamic people whether good or bad or allusions to the different religious practices of the Muslims are mentioned. In a certain verse of a particular Odu dedicated to the Muslims called Odu Otura Meji/Odu Imale, reference is made to a certain Muslim who murdered hundreds of people in a place called Maka. His atrocious acts were duly historicised in this particular verse as can be seen below:

… Alukaadi	"I, Alukadi."
Igba pere ni na o pa	It is only two hundred I will kill
Alukadi	"I, Alukadi."
Bee ni o nse ni ojojumo	He does so everyday
Laipe ilu ndi eyo	Till the town becomes thinly populated
Ni awon ti o ku ni ilu ba mu	The people remaining
eeji kun eeta	take two and three (cowries)
Nwon lo si oko alawo	and go to the diviner (Ifa)
Awon le según Alukadi.bayii?	Can we overcome Alukadi?
Nwon ni gbogbo ara ilu lo ru 'bo	All perform the sacrifices
Alukadi nikan ni ko ru	except Alukadi
Lojo keji Alukadi tun digbe	The following morning, Alukadi sang his usual song
Esu pade re	Esu (a Yoruba god of mischief) encountered him
Ni esu ba gba ori lowo re	and obtained the head from him
Ni ara ilu ba ba'le	The people of the town
Ni iku ko ba le pa won mo	felt relieved
Ilu ti Alukadi, baje naa ni nje Maka	The name of the town is Maka -
Eyi ni Ma-se-ka-won-mo.	Do not count again (Gbadamosi, 1977, p. 81-82)

Gbadebo Gbadamosi (1977), the scholar from whose source this translation was cited, stated that there is no Yoruba town called Maka (he also dismissed the possibility of it being a linguistic distortion of Mecca) so this verse might be referring to a bigger incident done in a global context and Alukadi might be the Yoruba way of saying "Al-Qaeda" (Gbadamosi, 1977, pp. 82–83).

There, however, can be negative effects of modernised adaptability especially when these literary oratures are used in written translational works. For one, Samuel Johnson's presentation of folklores in the *History of the Yoruba*s was largely influenced by the colonial experiences and Christian beliefs of him and his brother Obadiah in so much that, within the locus of their oral translations, they expressed belief about "the hand of the Christian god punishing moral iniquity" and imposed interpretation based on the "effects of the Atlantic slave" trade (Law, 1976, p. 81). A clear example is when Johnson compared the story about

the sacrifice of an only son named Olurogbo by his powerful mother Moremi to "the story of Jephtha and that of the Blessed Virgin and her Son perverted" (Johnson, 2010, p. 148). As an aside, Moremi is a Yoruba woman of great beauty and prominence who sacrificed her only son in order to appease the god at river Esinmirin to grant Ife victory during a fierce war they had with the Igbo people. Before then, she deliberately exposed herself to the Igbo military troops and married one of their powerful men in order to obtain secrets on how to defeat the Igbos. She has, since then, been revered in Yoruba land with a great statue of her erected in Ile-Ife. Johnson even subscribed to the "out of Egypt" myth, claiming that the "ancestors of the Yorubas were Coptic Christians who had lost touch with Christianity following the recodification of the Bible into the Koran and the deceptive propagation of Mohammed Bello who "influenced the Yorubas to begin to think that their ancestors were Muslims" (Agai, 2017, p. 431; Johnson, 2010, pp. 5–6). He further justified this claim with the premise that "the reign of the mythological heroes abound in garbled forms of scriptural stories" (Johnson, 2010, pp. 7, 154). His dilution of Christian and Yoruba mythological beliefs is what has, more than anything else, led to the questioning of the historical authenticity of his work, and, this, just as well, proves that the historical qualities of Yoruba oral literature shine brightest in their untainted form.

To prevent highly misleading digressions or inaccuracies, performers are usually subjected to truth checking with the audience or an accompanist vigilantly watching out for errors in their words. Isidore Okpewho (1992) talks about Charles Simayi, a folklorist from Umuahia, Nigeria, who is has an accompanist called the "answerer" who performs many functions, one of which is often interjected him (sometimes annoyingly) in order to help get facts straight. Even more, Babalola, quoted by Finnegan (2012), elucidates on how an Ijala performer is often listened to by strict critics who interrupt him when he seems to be erring. See an example of this laid out by him:

> I beg to differ; that is not correct.
> You have deviated from the path of accuracy . . .
> Ire was not Ogun's hometown.
> Ogun only called there to drink palm-wine . . . (p. 13).

Although the historical attributions of Yoruba oral literature have been well proven up till this point, one of the problems that one might have perceptively noticed thus far is the inability for these oral literary forms to locate historical events in time. However, history goes beyond chronological configurations, there are asymmetrical ways of presenting histories. Besides, in traditions that do not use a linear year count, the relative location of historical events is fixed by reference to genealogies that run (as in the Bible) from the earliest ancestors to the present time and it is interesting how chronological references in Yoruba oral literature are also made using family lineage as is often the case with orikis. In addressing the issue of chronology in African literature and history, Irele successfully makes a distinction between history as res gestae – the re-organisation of events from the past or present based on available concrete data – and history as a narrativization of a recollected past, the events surrounding it and the facts that embody its cultural or collective memorialisation (Irele, 1993, p. 158). This idea of narrated memory before time might be a concept generally referred to as a myth but the historical underlining of such narrativised constructions called myths should not be so easily disregarded. To recollect the past, concretise it in the mind's eye as a narrative before datafying

it and presenting it as fact requires an imaginative effort which historians might not be able to exert without appealing to the repertoire of imaginative enterprises engaged by their subjects of investigation. Yoruba oral literature is a repository of the collective imaginations and memories of the Yorubas since time immemorial and it is because of this that it is invaluable to historical research.

DISCUSSION

Yoruba Oral Literature in Modern Yoruba Historiography

Modern Yoruba historiography is largely filled with academic and scholarly materials from historians aiming at countering colonially established stereotypes and prejudices from the position of homeland-ness. Do they consider Yoruba oral literature to be of any import to their cause in any way? The answer would be in the affirmative. As it is, any historical writing on arising post-colonial issues (the hyphenation of 'post-colonial' is to distinguish it from the critical theory and conception of postcolonialism. The post-colonial inferred here is 'after colonialism') by Nigerian scholars inevitably leads them to explore its precolonial and colonial heritage, and yes, attempts to map out early Yoruba history always brings academics face-to-face with oral literary forms. Historian Robin Law (1976, p. 69) keenly weighs in "the value of local histories as sources". He concedes to the great dependence of academic historians who are part of the modern wave of early Yoruba historiography that began in the 1950s on the oral traditional materials provided by 19th and early 20th century local historians. It is worth criticising his description of these predecessors as 'amateurs' and mere informants on oral tradition. The fact that they did not employ sophisticated historical theories boasted by post-colonial academics does not relegate them to the status of non-professional buffs who lack specialisation and are only useful as primary sources for experienced 'intellectuals'.

As Law (1976) himself would point out, these local historians were brilliant in their execution of historical writing using several languages from English, Yoruba, Roman to the Arabic scripts, with the likes of al-Hajj Umar, Ibn Kukûra, al-Hâjj al-Ilûri relying on the help of oral evidence to provide enviable sources on the history of Ilorin after it gained dominance in the Yoruba kingdom and became a notable emirate of the Sokoto Caliphate. More so, as earlier established, the untethered reliance on oral literature by such local historians as Samuel Johnson sparked debates about veracity amongst modern African historians who, in a second-hand fashion, were obliged to depend on the works of their forerunners. In taking a stand, Jan Vansina, a prominent oral historian, does not consider using oral traditions including its literature as sources a problem. However, given how these local historians omitted the contradictory strains of these oratures in order to condition them to their historical visions, he thinks it advisable to altogether go back and appraise the original sources (the oral performances) rather than rely on second-hand information. However, Law points out the impracticality of this opinion owing to the sheer fact that some of the oral forms alluded to by local historians no longer exist. However, given that modern Nigerian historiography is patterned with analytical postcolonial theorisations and decolonisation trends, one would instinctively think this renders precolonial oral literary history irrelevant. However, Terry Eagleton, as mentioned by Alaba (2002, p. 4) stresses that literature is a proclamation of ideologies; it tries to unravel "questions of social power".

Consequently, modern historical ideologies formulated around Yoruba history by postcolonial scholars have received authentication through both modern literary tropes and oral literature. For one, the "local tradition of historiography" which is built around folklores and other forms of oral literature serves as a baseline on which the ethics of cultural nationalism, an ideological stance popular amongst postcolonial Yoruba indigenous scholars in Nigeria, Brazil and other diasporic countries, have been constructed. Yoruba cultural nationalism, in this sense, has to do with the identification with and adoption of indigenous Yoruba practices by African-western scholars trying to resist being entangled in the process of assimilating to a European identity. Writing and reading the history of Yoruba lands have been considered essential components of preserving the nationalistic heritage of the Yoruba cultural nation part of which are the "folklores, legends, histories, parables, aphorisms, allegories" that must not be lost to "oblivion" (Law, 1976, p. 77). Cultural revivalism was especially sparked between 1920-1960 which led to the "publication of several pamphlets and monographs on Ifa, mainly in Yoruba language" (Olupọna, 1993, p. 246). One of the stauch cultural revivalist groups in existence is the African-American Oyotunji community (Oyotunji literally means 'Oyo' awakes again). In expression of their increasing disillusionment with the legacy of slavery, racism, western culture and civilisation, these Oyotunji revivalists that form part of the black cultural nationalist movement in the USA meet to celebrate and re-enact their indigenous Yoruba heritage by "educating themselves about Yoruba history and cultural practices… pursuing ritual apprenticeships, learning the [Ifa] divinatory corpus, attending workshops about Yoruba cultural practices and reading and studying texts about the history of African peoples" like Samuel Johnson's *The History of the Yorubas* (K. M. Clarke, 2002). They also engaged in the production of indigenous knowledge connected to their African roots, and for Kamari Clarke (1939, p. 275), "the shift from indigenous oral forms to accessible circulating literary writings… led to the privileging of Oyo-Yoruba ancestry as the popular literary icon of African American revivalism".

Closely related to this group are religious nationalists of scholarly acclaim like Abimbola Wande who, through academic writings, defend their advocacy for a sustained contemparary veneration of Ifa and other Yoruba deities amidst the encroachment occasioned by imported religions like Christianity and Islam. To make their defence, they thoroughly study, record, translate and collate the Ifa literary corpus so that it can be on par with other religious materials like the Bible or Quran. One major aim of this enterprise is to allow for the historicisation of these Yoruba deities. Also, due to the existence of the recorded and compiled Odu Ifa, many religious historians of both western and non-western backgrounds can easily access the Ifa corpus during their research. Even more, without a provision of an accessible, written version of the oral Ifa divination poetry like what Wande accomplished, the push for the incorporation of Nigerian traditional religion and history in the curriculums of Nigerian colleges and universities would have been futile (Olupọna, 1993, p. 246). This poses a pre-emptive perception that only the content of orature can be salvaged, not its form.

Historical attempts at explaining origins are yet another scholarly endeavour that has inspired modern historians to delve into oral literary sources. For instance, Cheikh Anta Diop (1974, p. 45) attempts to validate his claim that Black Africa is the earliest and oldest ancestry of the world, the "initiator of western civilisation" by insisting on a strong argument that the Judaic Christ is an appropriation of Osiris, "the redeemer-god who sacrifices, dies, and is resurrected to save mankind". He even gives a strong 'historical' reference claiming that 'Osiris is… indeed the lord of revealed religions" as a visit to Thebes in the Valley of the Kings would

show that he existed "1700 years before the Koran" (Anta Diop, 1974, p. 45). With regards to the Yoruba case, just like Agai puts it, many scholars have also traced the 'truly, authentic, historical' origin of the Yoruba to "Egypt... or Israel… Mecca or even… Etruscan sources" (Agai, 2017, p. 427). Despite their attempts to stick to written materials, the names of characters from folktales like Oduduwa, Oranmiyan and Orunmila crop up repeatedly even as legends are freely quoted side by side with chronologically historical sources, anthropological reports and archaeological findings. In rethinking Yoruba culture and origins, Agai (2017) freely navigates oral and written sources; citing academic sources, referring to discoveries from the excavation of skeletal remains in Iwo Eleru in 1965 and then going on to mention the legend of Oduduwa. One thing that is generally agreed amongst most scholars interested in mapping out origins is that the "Oduduwa legend [might] not [be] aimed at tracing Yoruba origins but rather to show that, in Yoruba history, a monarch named Oduduwa existed and flourished in Ile-Ife" (Agai, 2017, p. 445).

That, like Diop, these scholars seek to legitimise their Afrocentric or Yoruba-centric quest for an idyllic, romanticised Egyptian origin through 'proper, historical objective research' is ironical given the speculative nature of their research. This scholastically difficult mission emboldens the position that history is "the exercise of an imaginative cultural or racial memory that is quite analogous to, and has the same powers [when] put to the same uses as personal memory fused with the pattern-making creativity of the individual historian" (Shubhangi Vaidya et al., 2018). Literal and literary translation are generally effective means by which the imaginative memory imbued in Yoruba oral literature synthesises with the creative singularities of a historian. As Carcelen-Estrada (2018, p. 131) puts it, "when writers translate into script any piece of oral literature (from poems, songs, ballads or odes to folktales), they carry across the haunting of a people's past". Even more, it is in their trans-migratory forms that the idiosyncratic historical streak of translated oral literary texts is affirmed because they embody a collective cultural, ancestral yet contemporary diasporic memory of a people useful not only for dealing with national trauma and "mobilising the past in the process of imagining the future" but also for revealing "complex migration routes and economic, political conditions" (Carcelen-Estrada, 2018, pp. 131–135). Hence, when in its written form, modern scholars are able to quote and rework these literary oralities into historical information useful for supporting their ideologies. But then, if literature transmitted through orality does not have historical weight except when restyled into written materials, does it not weaken the hold orality has to authenticity?

Extensively, due to the denigration of contemporary novels written by Africans as foreign imports stamped with a borrowed language – English – and western-based thematic preoccupations, it has become requisite for modern *literary* historians to emphasise the stylistic entrenchment of modern novels in an oral narrative framework in so much that the folklores, praise, epic poems, myths of pre-colonial Yoruba world are imbued with symbolic, historical significance and ignited with powerful, narrative surges. This is done by subjecting the English language to an operative reconfiguration in which a Nigerian dialect like Yoruba and the writer's idiolect take syntactic and semantic pre-eminence in what can be called a subversion of the tool of the colonialist. The written oral poems of Niyi Osundare, Wole Soyinka, Tunde Kelani's movies like *Saworoide* and contemporary novels like Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone*, Ayobami Adebayo's *Stay with Me* and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* are embodiments of this inventive endeavour. See below an excerpt from

Niyi Osundare's *Invocations of the Word (*2020) which is to be performed with full musical accompaniment:

In the Beginning was not the Word
In the Word was the Beginning
Unwind the wind
Give rapid legs to the crouching leaf;
The horse of words has galloped
Through clouds, through thunder, through roaring waters...
Throw open the door of your ears
Araba *ponmbe ponmbe ponmbe*
Araba *ponmbe ponmbe ponmbe**
...
I see the Word
in the dream of a dream
in the dream of a dream [no stanza break]
in the cloud which gathers the rain
in the rain which unchains the earth
Abuubutan Eja okun (Inexhaustible, Fish of the sea)
Abuubutan Eja osa (Inexhaustible, Fish of the lagoon)
Adunnni lenu (A joy to have in the mouth)
Ma dunni lorun (Dreadful to have around the neck)
Araba *ponmbe ponmbe ponmbe…*

However, what has gotten the attention of many, even the western community, is Yoruba *written* literature which pays intense attention to mythological re-representations; D.O Fagunwa's *Ògbóju Qde Ninû Igbó Irunmale* (the English title is *The Forest of a Thousand Demons*; literal meaning is *A Brave Hunter in the Forest of Demons*), Awe Debo's *Apoti Alakara* and Lawuyi Ogunniran's *Eegun Alare* are popular references in this regard. A derivative of this process of literary assertion through evocations of orality is the development of a historical consciousness from the phoenix ashes of the imaginative fictionalisation about the Yoruba's shared past and identity in so much that, within the Yoruba scholarly realm, "history is felt as [being] part of a [precolonial] primordial, organic order of experience" (Irele, 1993, p. 60). This leaves one wondering whether the aura of a particular oral literary corpus can unfold itself outside the life of its community? Amidst the constant grapple and aspiration for seemingly progressive forms of historical representations that are scientific, objective and geared towards postcolonial authenticity, Abiola Irele (1993) issues a reminder that "all history begins as a story": the narrative element is the point of departure for the interpretive endeavour involved in the discipline of history.

CONCLUSION

For the most part, this article has attempted to amplify the historical significance of Yoruba oral literature at the expense of western hegemonic constructions and clear-cut distinctions between literature, modern history, orality and the written text. Regardless of what might be a

scholastic opposition between belief systems and historical criticism, it has been established that Yoruba oral literature holds the belief system of its people and, if well-refined around the edges, can yield historical breakthroughs in modern historical endeavours. But these arguments have seemingly been defended with a conscious navigation in and out of the overarching master narratives imposed on Yoruba oral literature. Hence, the fault lines of these oratures have just as well been exposed albeit alongside the contention that written history is also subjected to similar fallibilities. Inadvertently, though, there seem to have developed along the lines of arguments, an unabashed undermining of the engendered age-long dissimilarities between the historical science and art based on analytic, argumentative and factual intricacies. Rather than express apologetic sentiments about the interdisciplinary slippery slope created within this paper, one cannot but be drawn to the consequential validation of the thin line between history and (fictional) literature, an observation which spurs in the mind several questions with regards to the positionality of history in the grand scheme of dialectical scholarship. The most persistent question, in this regard, might be just how far apart literature and history are on the spectrum of knowledge?

Hazel Ngoshi (2015, p. 12), without mincing words, posits that "the demarcation of history and fiction by traditional scholars has to be revised in the wake of the realisation that the historian also makes use of metaphor and point of view in writing what is supposedly an objective ordering of events". From all that is known, the underlying variance between history and literature has always been about truth and objectivity. Without meaning to weigh in heavily on this polemical issue, the position of Hayden White (1978) about how historical and literary representations have a shared centre of discursive convergence due to the textual fictionalities of history and historical factualities of literature is worth taking into consideration. His point is well seconded by 21st century New Historicist perspectives which locate historical texts within the space of their cultural contexts even perceiving cultural divergences as modes of textualities (Irele, 1993, p. 159). Following these, it is only fitting to acknowledge the blurriness of the gap between mythopoeic lores, epic poems, gyrational songs and written historical accounts legitimised by "archival material, provenance with accurate footnotes (and) similarly acknowledged, published sources" (Ngoshi, 2015, p. 14). It is for a fact that the crux of history lies in its necessary fear of ideological and mythological delusions, so much that it builds rigid ethics around what deserves to be true or not. However, as historical scholars, conceding to intersubjective arbitrations is sometimes necessary for processing historical information out of certain sources and data (such as those provided by oral literature), because just as the fictionally contrived Sherlock Holmes (who many believe to be real and alive and well!) often says, if and when the impossible is ever eliminated, "whatever remains, no matter how improbable, [might] be the truth" (*Sherlock Holmes*, n.d.).

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