

The Word as Event in Oral Discourse: The Meaning and Importance of Story Telling Performance Contexts in Bakor Society

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Abstract

Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia defines ethnopoetics as the “recording of text versions of oral poetry or narrative performances that use poetic lines, verses and stanzas to capture the formal, poetic performance elements which would otherwise be lost in the written texts”. With the preponderance of emphasis on writing as a major mode of communication in today’s world, verbal and extra verbal or non- verbal modes of communication are gradually suffering relegation and possible obliteration in favour of writing. Despite this relegation however, pre or semi- literate cultures like the Bakor in Nigeria still largely depend on orality as a formal means of encoding and decoding knowledge and experiences for educational purposes as well as the transfer of culture along generational lines. Storytelling, therefore, has a prominent place in the lives of the people as a means for the transfer of knowledge and for other educational objectives, yet, it is observed that the influx of modern multimedia forms like home videos, Mass television viewing centers and GSM phones have drastically impacted on storytelling as a formal traditional means of achieving these educational objectives. As a result, traditional communities have lost their reliance on storytelling with the consequent debasement of storytelling sessions which occupied the pride of place in the field of entertainment in Bakor society. This write up is therefore an attempt to call attention to the need for the revival and repositioning storytelling as a veritable past time in Bakor. It examines the importance of the performance context of storytelling as an event in oral discourse, which emphasizes not just the word but also other non verbal or extra verbal accompaniments for the effective transfer of cognitive experience. The findings are that the word and all its associations, in the context of storytelling performance, is very vital as a record of culture and identity, not only in Bakor community but also in most other African societies who depend on oral performances as a record of culture and folk life. The performance contexts become invaluable as records of the creative indulgences of traditional communities like the Bakor in Ogoja Local Government Area of Cross River State in Nigeria. Through them, one can better glimpse the narrator’s complex presentation of the Bakor Hero-protagonist in his many faces of portrayal of the communal experiences of the people.

Key words: Word, Event, Oral discourse, Performance context, Bakor, Storytelling, Cultural Identity.

1. Introduction

Storytelling is a universal phenomenon, though earlier associated with pre-literate cultures, but today has permeated all facets of human life from leisure through religion to business and politics. Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia asserts that even though

...stories have been carved, scratched, painted, printed or inked onto wood or bamboo..., clay tablets, stone and other textiles, recorded on film, and stored electronically in digital form; oral stories continue to be committed to memory and passed from generation to generation despite the increasing popularity of written and televised media in much of the world.

The question that arises naturally is why oral storytelling retains its appeal in the advent of electronic and other media that can record and preserve stories. This appeal can only be traced to the dynamism of the

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word as an event in oral discourse and its dialogic potential within the performance context. Secondly, the appeal of storytelling also derives from the fact that it enhances effective learning in a social environment that provides authentic cues about the way knowledge is to be applied. Audiences or listeners therefore get involved in the narrative event and imaginatively gain new perspectives on how to overcome obstacles in real life experiences. In their review of Doug Lipman's book titled *The Power of Storytelling*, Kristin M. Langellier and Eric E. Peterson (1999) assert that

Storytelling is perhaps the most common way people make sense of their experiences, claim identities and "get a life". So much of our daily life consists of writing [in literate societies] or telling our stories [in pre-literate societies] and listening to and reading the stories of others. But we rarely stop to ask: what are these stories? How do they shape our lives? And why do they matter?

These are very pertinent questions because as we know, the world of storytelling is a complex world within which comprehension of reality is moderated and mediated by one's knowledge of his culture, its values and its knowledge systems. This complexity arises from the fact that the world of storytelling operates at two levels, the fictional and the realistic, with the fictional only bearing verisimilitude to the realistic world within which we humans operate thus posing a problem of comprehension to un-initiates into the rubrics of storytelling performances.

Another reviewer, Barbara Garro (2000) says of Lipman's work and Lipman himself

...he found methods to engage both my right and my left brain as I voraciously chewed and swallowed each and every page. This book is rich with no extraneous wordiness or meaningless trivia. The author makes every word count within a logical whole cloth of thought about ways any teller of tales can enrich their audiences by becoming one with their stories and their audiences.

Garro proves, in this review, to be an artful storyteller herself in the powerful images painted about the relevance of Lipman's book which reveals his ability as a storyteller. But there is still a gap between these written texts and oral rendition which gap can only be breached by the effective use of the word and action given the appropriate context. This is what I have described elsewhere as "the efficacy of the word" (see Ganyi and Ogar: 2012). Storytelling offers the artist and his community or audience the opportunity through fantasy and psychological exposition and development, to gain self knowledge which serves as the fore grounding for knowledge of the universe.

For oral cultures like traditional African communities, storytelling, as a major means of communication and education, provides a foundation for the understanding of African knowledge systems and African cosmology because it serves as the synergy or unity of nature and humanity within which reality is perceived as a unified entity. Storytelling, therefore, becomes or has remained as a universal human activity that authenticates lives and represents a people's articulation of their world view and a practical representation of their linguistic complexity and diversity. Universally, storytelling arouses a people's instinct for evaluation and interpretation of their culture and environment so that they can more fully appreciate or comprehend nature in relation to their existence.

In Africa generally, and Bakor in particular, the storyteller is a valuable citizen in his immediate community who, through his tales, evokes emotions as he appeals to his audiences emotional as opposed to their rational instincts. The storyteller transports his audience out of this world of reality and into the world of fantasy within which man and nature coexist as one and within which he arouses emotional responses to events and situations which help to concretize reality. This is achieved through appropriate manipulation of the word within the performance context which creates graphic pictures of events and situations that register ideas in the consciousness of the audience members. Reynolds Price (1978), attesting to the usefulness of storytelling as an event in the cultural lives of a community opines that

A need to tell and hear stories is essential to the species Homo-sapiens – second in necessity apparently after nourishment and before love and shelter. Millions survive without love or home, almost none in silence; the opposite of silence leads quickly to narrative, and the sound story is the dominant sound of our lives, from the small accounts of our day's events to the vast incommunicable constructs of psychopaths.

The efficacy of the word as an event within the performance context becomes the means by which audience responses are solicited and achieved through graphic representation of ideas. The storyteller utilizes his linguistic proficiency to appropriately and effectively arouse and hold his audience attention for the transfer of cognitive experience. The word, which encapsulates the story within the performance context, becomes a kind of lens through which the audience views and interprets society and the world around them. Within the Bakor traditional environment, stories that portray the Hare as the hero-protagonist come alive as positive and negative societal experiences, are projected and achieved through skillful manipulation of linguistic resources available to both the artist and the audience. The performance context, therefore, serves as an interactive session of oral discourse between the artist as creator and the audience as recipients of the ideals and cherished norms of the Bakor people. The word, within the performance context, is also more than a mere utterance. When effectively employed, it becomes pregnant with meaning and evokes ideas and associations to build up the story events and enliven the performance through creation of appropriate images. The performance context also comes alive with dramatization that aids embellishment and enhances meaning. The artistic manipulation of linguistic resources along with the histrionics of performance direct the audiences' consciousness towards observances and modes of perception of ideas and events or occurrences as well as the audiences' judgment of same. The story can thus be geared towards societal change or maintenance of the status quo ante depending on the perception of the storyteller. This is so because even when each story has a central theme or message to be imparted to a target audience, stories are usually susceptible to several interpretations consequent upon their contexts of performance and the linguistic proficiency of the storyteller which aids the evocation of scenes for the representation of ideas and events he wishes to comment on or transmit to his audience. In this context, the performance i.e. the story, the audience and the performer all become a major traditional institution for education and transmission of African knowledge systems to younger generations. They equally serve as an inspiration for better lives and models for emulation because of the array of character portraits presented by the artist in the performance and for the audiences' judgment, appreciation or criticism. Storytelling must therefore be viewed, not just as an entertainment pastime, but as a performance approach to narrative, in which performance is a complex realization of the ability of the storyteller to sway the consciousness of his audience and to take on responsibility for the knowledge and interpretation of culture and identity according to the dictates of the aesthetic principles of the community where the stories are created. Langellier and Peterson (1999) therefore further assert that storytelling contexts embody or represent

...the material constraints on narrative performances, and the myriad ways storytelling orders information and tasks, constitute meanings and positions speaking subjects. Readers will also learn that narrative performance is consequential as well as pervasive, as storytelling opens up experience and identities to legitimization and critique.

2. The Dynamic Context of the Word in Oral Discourse

The word as an event in the storytelling performance context is dynamic especially as we acknowledge the concept of communication dynamics in the transfer of cognitive experience or information from one individual to another. Oral communication offers the storyteller the opportunity for this dynamic transfer of information which he exploits extensively in performance contexts. In oral discourse, the speaker has more liberty and more ability to manipulate and engage the audience psychologically through direct appeals to their emotions and through the use of complex and non verbal forms of communication like histrionics and other extra linguistic devices. The performance context is thus a lively context that enhances more effective transmission of experience than speech-reading or written communication which could be boring and impersonal while the oral context is creative and realized. The dynamic nature of the word, its susceptibility to change and reliability as an evocative medium to reach out to the psychological make-up of the audience or listeners makes the story significantly more effective in the expression of meaning to an audience. This is due to the fact that the strength of the word as an expressive medium in oral discourse depends on the numerous signals available to the speaker in the form of gestures, tonal inflections, movement, associations, visual aids and other such nuances which all work together to elaborate meaning. Through these several

means of creating a picturesque atmosphere in performance, the storyteller has better control over his audience or listeners than the writer has over the reader and what the reader understands from what has been written. All these, however, depend on the skill and resilience of the storyteller. Such a context provides the speaker or artist the needed control over his audience, allowing him to think for them since they have no chance to meditate critically on the presentation he makes before them. The audience in a performance discourse context has no means of rethinking the word and depends on its effects, but the storyteller can read the audience, their expectations, their likes and dislikes, and their dispositions as they respond to his presentation. They are thus able to provide visual cues about the effectiveness of the story rendition and its relevance to societal coherence and growth. The storyteller utilizes the dynamism of the word in context to present an aesthetically pleasant performance or storytelling session to his audience to spur them to a consciousness of their cultural environment. The audience is, however, the final arbiter in the storytelling performance context and the storyteller's effectiveness is judged primarily by the audiences' perception and reception of the final product of his creative capacity. The word and the power it has over the audience, therefore enlivens and makes storytelling a very important and worthwhile event in traditional societies like the Bakor. The cryptic nature, terseness and shortness of the syllabic employment in the words of the oral discourse during performance enhance loaded meaning and extended comprehension of the stories. This is exemplified in performance sessions in the narrators resort to proverbial or symbolic language which embody a wide range of associative meaning in very few words. In the Bakor folktale which is a warning against pride and conceit, the storyteller admonishes the hero-protagonist who, after heroic wrestling exploits, gets beaten by a yaw-infested child thus

1. Nneekor li yimiabongekorkornneajo bane ebun – If a strong man insists on fighting a weakling, he ends up breaking his waist.
2. Eshinjomwukkpokpakenjamtak – The skull of a stubborn man hangs behind someone's house.
3. Mbaneshetokowunghuatung go nkam a kpojoboakpateashe – If a dancer fails to listen to drumming, he falters in his dance steps.

All of these proverbs are pregnant with meaning and represent a cryptic warning to everyone to be wary about over reaching himself or to be satisfied with the little one has in life.

Discourse is open to several definitions as it relates to different fields or disciplines. It can simply be referred to as a write-up or speech meant for communication of specific data, information, or knowledge within which there exist internal and external coherence and relationships since discourses do not exist in isolation but are in relation to other discourses in other disciplines. In the Humanities and Social Sciences, discourse refers to

A formal way of thinking that can be expressed through language, a social boundary that defines what can be said about a specific topic i.e. the limits of acceptable speech in a particular field ([Wikipedia](#))

Discourse affects our view of all things especially ideas, and as such has been redefined in various fields including politics, literature, sociology, linguistics and feminism e.t.c. In oral literature, we also talk about oral discourse to include such areas as verbal or oral communication, non verbal or extra verbal communication e.t.c and each of these modes has its own peculiarities and achieves its own goals in the context within which they are employed or operated. Non literate societies emphasize oral discourse as a major form or mode of communication with its attendant characteristics, one of which is its evocative capacity which is perhaps its most important attribute in storytelling contexts. Its capacity to conjure up mood and feeling is a vital asset to the storyteller in his choice of the best medium of communication for the impartation of his knowledge or ideas.

Oral discourse, therefore, consists of a variety of verbal and non verbal or extra verbal forms which include body language or gestures, sign language, facial contortions, eye language, chronemics and graphics or cartoons as well as sound produced with instruments to also communicate a message. In the case of non-verbal forms, the sounds or gestures are usually associated with words which then translate or approximate to meaningful linguistic segments that carry messages. Of paramount importance in oral discourse or oral

communication therefore is the emphasis on face to face communication which has a lot of implications particularly in performances of folk material. In the discipline of oral literature or verbal art as some people prefer to call it, oral discourse or verbal artistry makes certain vital assumptions. First of these is cultural uniqueness or affinity between the producers and recipients of artistic objects since each culture possesses a unique identity. The second assumption is linguistic competence or proficiency. Cultural affinity means sharing the same cultural background or knowledge of the cultural norms, signals and practices of a particular community as this writer has with the Bakor as an indigene. Linguistic affinity refers to possession of the same linguistic competence that can enhance an understanding of the deep structures of language used in the delivery of cultural material. Emphasizing linguistic competence in the analysis of performance contexts, scholars of ethnopoetics argue that competence in the native language of oral performers is very vital, necessary and essential for accurate ethnopoetics translation of their words into written texts. Barre Toelkin (2003) posits that Dell Hymes's "Knowledge of the extant Chinookan languages helped him to notice stylistic devices that highlighted certain actions and even performance styles that brought scenes into sharp focus". Given this scenario, oral discourse in performance contexts can best be understood from the perspective of ethnopoetics methods, traditions and theories which attempt to capture the unique aesthetic qualities of particular cultures' verbal or oral narratives. This would include language that is largely symbolic and choice of words and gestures that would depend on the assumption of foreknowledge of associations, connotations and denotations that accompany certain usages.

In storytelling situations or what is usually referred to as performance contexts in oral literature, artists or storytellers employ verbal and non verbal linguistic resources of a given language to impart desired knowledge or ideas. These linguistic resources are employed in a creative manner such that the stories make sense of events and experiences in the lives of the people as they encode thoughts and ideas in the minds of the recipients of the messages for their interpretation. Linguistic manipulation of story materials therefore allows for achievement of a dynamic contextual deliverance of narratives which, in turn, engages the sensibilities of both artist and audience in the conceptualization of their environment. In this sense, the artist provides the images from the environment through apt and appropriate choices of words and accompanying gestures that conjure up these images and register ideas in a picturesque manner in the consciousness of the audience members or listeners. The choice of words sometimes deliberately allows the listener the leverage to fill in many parts of the storyline to enhance effective portrayal of the message(s) being imparted. In this vein, appropriate choice of words registers events in the cultural lives of the audience members that aid the authentication of experience and reshapes the consciousness of the community members in relation to their cultural and ethical values. As earlier stated, the audience members remain the best judges of the effectiveness or otherwise of this portrayal of values through performances as a reflection of culture, and they continually challenge the artist to fill in the narrative or diversify experience through reinterpretation and/or revision of the stories. From the perspective of ethnopoetics therefore, discourse i.e. oral discourse in performance context implies effective and poetic use and manipulation of linguistic resources; both verbal and non verbal, to enhance exchange of thought and ideas during performances that will aid the authentication of culture and creation of identity.

This is not an easy task for the artists or narrators, who, in their narrations or performances always face challenges and criticisms pertaining to the authenticity of their representations of experiences. One of the challenges faced by artists and performers is the accusation of falsehood i.e. creating the impression that they are not being truthful because of their fictional representation of reality. It is, however, consoling to note that the problem of the artist or the poet did not start today. Even Plato banished him from his republic for this same false representation of reality, leading Bill Johnson (1996) to posit that

...The craft of creating a dramatic story that engages and satisfies an audience has long been viewed as a mysterious process. The myth of storytelling holds that certain individuals are touched by a particular muse, and through some obscure, chimeral process, a story comes into being through them. Further, that those not visited by this muse must always view the creation of a story as an unexplainable mystery.

In the light of this controversy, Professor Isidore Okpewho (2003) attempts to resolve the dichotomy in his explication of the performance context when he posits that

...One of the challenges that narrators face is the critical reception of their accounts by the audience. While the narrator is inevitably subject to the imaginative and emotive pressures of the narrative material, the audience tends to take a more rational view of the artistic choices the narrator makes in his effort to construct a convincing account. The “aesthetic discrepancy” that seems to exist between narrator and audience leads some listeners to feel that the narrator is lying.

The narrator’s creation of a fictional world for the authentication of reality which Okpewho aptly describes as an “aesthetic discrepancy” is very vital to the realization of a meaningful performance. While the narrator struggles with the choice of appropriate words and gestures to create images that adequately reflect experiences and that transport the audience from the physical world of reality to the story world of fantasy to enable him comment dispassionately on human foibles, the audience busies itself judging the appropriateness and effectiveness of his presentation. Both audience and narrator, therefore, fluctuate between the worlds of reality and fantasy, making the task of realistic and plausible storytelling very demanding as the narrator struggles to aesthetically sustain audience interests in the narrative session. The performance or narrative session becomes an active and interactive event which embodies discourse between narrator and audience with the tale as subject of discourse. The audience must also be convinced about the relevance and appropriateness of the subject of discourse to their cultural milieu, to be interested in the storytelling session and to accept it as a true reflection of their experiences. Bill Johnson (1996) therefore further asserts that

...Only when a story’s audience feels, believes, accepts that something is at stake over a recognizable issue of human need being resolved, can the members of that audience be led to feel invested in the story’s course and outcome.

3. The Significance of the Performance Context as an Event in Oral Discourse

Performance has been viewed from several perspectives by scholars in orality and communication art; foremost among whom are Dell Hymes:1975,1981,2003 etc; Richard Bauman:1984; Alan Dundes: 1964;Isidore Okpewho: 1975,1992; Ruth Finnegan:1970; Bronislaw Malinowski:1926;,1967;Harold Scheub:1974; Dan Ben-Amos and Kenneth Goldstein:1975, and a host of others. In traditional African society, the performance context of storytelling is regarded as an oral discourse that fosters interaction between the narrator and his audience in the onerous task of raising societal consciousness to the power of culture in the development of an indigenous personality profile for African societies. In this regard, the artist-in-performance becomes the prescriber of society’s norms and values and the projector of same to the outside world (Okpewho: 1975). The word or performance of the word becomes more potent because, in relation to effect, the word in performance does not require too much talking or utterances as it is complemented by action which further explicates meaning in the message of the story. Action can thus carry an idea and be more pregnant with meaning than too many words which could be only empty verbiage. Dell Hymes (2003) therefore, argues that a narrative or a tale should best be seen or analyzed as a form “of action, of performance and the meanings it generates are effects of performance.” To Hymes,“the organization of lines in narratives is a kind of implicit patterning that creates narrative effect. Content is [only] an effect of the formal organization of a narrative: what there is to be told emerges out of how it is being told,” and this is the crux of the emphasis on performance since the way an event or action is worded in reportage enhances or sustains the meaning of the intended message therein. The meaning and importance of the word in the performance context, therefore, emerges from the inner structural dynamics of action and histrionics which complement and supplement the verbal utterances thus enhancing the reinforcement of the literary appeal of the tale or story. Since preservation and survival of unwritten texts depend on repeated performances in oral literature, variations to reflect contemporary lives become necessary as a means of maintaining or retaining the integrity of the tales or stories. For this reason each performance is a unique experience in its own right and stands to the culture as the artist to the performance which goes to support the primacy of speech over writing in nearly all cultures of the world. Performance contexts provide the atmosphere for the imaginative use of language which displays the creative potential of the narrators as well as offers them the opportunity to comment on the human condition. Performance contexts also assist traditional societies to understand their

environment and foster man's appreciation of beauty in the landscape or cultural milieu. Performances can thus be seen simply as the linguistic behavior of an individual and in oral discourse, the linguistic behavior of the narrator in accordance with the dictates of his society's aesthetic principles. In performance contexts, the choice of words by the narrator which introduces characters and builds up the story's premise portrays the ability of the narrator to transport his audience into the fictional world of his narrative and into events that can aid the audiences' resolution of their conflicts and consequent fulfillment of their desires. The narrative event or performance context which provides the discourse allows the audience a deeper insight into their circumstances and experiences in life which serve as visible manifestations of the internal conflicts that require resolution through the experiences exemplified in the story characters presented by the narrator. In a performance context, there is established, a tripartite relationship between the performer, the audience and the tale. The tale is passive or inactive but the active and interactive relationship between the narrator and his audience enlivens and gives credence to the story. The interactive relationship between narrator and audience is enhanced through dialogue or oral discourse within which the word becomes an active event in the attempt to conscientize the audience into a knowledge and critical assessment of their culture and aesthetic demands within it. Asserting the potency of the word in oral discourse and particularly in the artistic or dramatic delivery of therapeutic cures in traditional African medicine, Francis M. Ganyi (2012) had this to say about the dynamic and potent effect of the word in context

...it is obvious that word and thought or even word and feeling form part and parcel of the invisible process of creation and, therefore, of healing. A healing process must also commence from the word which links the whole process to the cosmic environment before it can succeed in the task of healing which restores harmony between man and nature.

However, for this to be effectively or adequately achieved depends on the rapport which must first be established by the narrator-medicine-man who dramatically realizes or utilizes

Poetry in the chants, invocations and dramatic dialogue[which] establish a relationship that serves as an identity of communal experience so that it becomes impossible to separate the healing process or experience from the formal expression of the words (Ganyi:2012).

In the oral discourse of the performance context, just like in the healing process which also entails performance, the word establishes the context and aids the accomplishment of the desired task and so to separate the word or the quality of the linguistic utterance from the creative process is to render the cure in medicine or the aesthetics of the story telling exercise in a performance context, ineffective and banal. In the same way, and for emphasis, removing or isolating an oral narrative or a story from its performance context with its attendant aesthetic touch, kills the vitality of the experience and renders the performance worthless as a cultural event. The narrator's interaction with the audience revitalizes the word and establishes it as a fitting and relevant understanding of the culture, the cosmic viewpoint or belief system that explicates the entire performance context. In the oral discourse of performance contexts, there is a very close link between the events of the narration and the choice of words employed by the narrator in the delivery of his material or story, all of which make up the aesthetics of performance and help to enhance or explicate the meaning of the performance and its relevance to the community or cultural milieu within which it is produced and realized. Performance conceptualists have, therefore, argued that

the concept of folklore apply not to a text but to an event in time in which a tradition is performed or communicated. Therefore, the whole of performance or communicative act must be recorded. The collector can no longer simply write down or tape record texts, for the text is only part of each unique event. (Culled from Mary Magoulick: 2012)

In the attempt to adequately centre the word and understand its importance as an event in a performance context, Dan Ben-Amos has argued that

...since contextualists' insights go beyond the text into the holistic aspects of a folkloristic event—be it a story telling event or a dance performance—they take into consideration the multidimensional paradigm of the context of such an event. For instance, a story telling event to the contextualist means, besides the text,

the narrator, the occasion, the style of narration, the audience, the interaction between the narrator and the audience and the entire cultural background which forms the event.

It is the totality of this contextual experience that validates and gives meaning to any story telling session since through the story telling, experiences are shared and interpreted to give credence to culture. Stories become the universal means for bridging cultural, linguistic and social gaps while at the same time serving to authenticate the uniqueness of each culture within the framework of globalization and the validation of cultural norms and values. For oral or pre-literate societies, storytelling enhances effective teaching and learning as the stories provide an authentic social environment for the application and validation of knowledge systems. From this standpoint, we can now attempt an analysis of Bakor performance contexts to see how the narrator relies on graphic use of language to create events and situations relevant to Bakor life as he attempts to put into focus, in fictional terms, the realistic experiences of the people, their perception of their environment and nature as well as their notion of the universe and natural phenomena.

4. The Dynamics of Performance Contexts in Bakor Story Telling Repertoire

The Bakor performance context approximates to what Meghan Perry refers to as “performance poetry,” which according to him is

- Sometimes known as the “spoken word” [and] is connected to oral traditions that date back to ancient times before the written word...the poet’s use of gestures or body language while performing the poem is also important. This can be connected to an earlier form of performance poetry in which theatrical events were the venue for this type of art. Music may also be part of performance poetry; for example, beat poet Allen Ginsberg often incorporated the spoken word with Jazz. While performance poetry cannot be captured for the mass audience in the same way that a written poem can, audio recordings have made it more assessable to a larger number of people.

In this interactive context, the word becomes communal property and operates as a given continuum of knowledge available to everyone in the narrative repertory of the community that depends on orality as the primary medium of communication. Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps(2009) therefore opine that

- The word cannot be assigned to a single speaker. The author (speaker) has his own inalienable rights to the word, but the listener also has his rights, and those whose voices are heard in the word before the author comes upon it also have their rights (after all, they are no words that belong to no one)

Ochs and Capps therefore present a narrative situation which is aptly described in the Amazon review of their book in which Tara Goodreads posits that the authors

- Develop a way of understanding the seemingly contradictory nature of every day narrative... as a genre that is not necessarily homogenous and as an activity that is not always consistent but consistently serves our need to create selves and communities.

Like most other oral societies, the Bakor people rely largely on storytelling as a means of educating their young ones and keeping younger generations abreast of their knowledge systems. Bakor culture, cosmology and ethical values are all encoded in their stories and the oral narrative repertoire is a rich and veritable means of Bakor linguistic development over the years. Being essentially an agricultural community, the ecology of the environment provides the rich imagery from the landscape that catalyses the imagination of the narrators whose responsibility it is to construct the identity and personality of the Bakor people through appropriate manipulation of the linguistic resources available to them. Story telling as an art form is, therefore, challenging and exacting as the narrator’s imagination runs through the Bakor landscape as he judges the expectations of his audience in his bid to entertain and educate the citizens and authenticate their culture and experiences. Story telling becomes an aesthetic enterprise which demands knowledge and retention of what was, attention to what is in present action and then appropriate projection or anticipation of what the future holds for the community. The narrator or traditional artist is what Isidore Okpewho calls “the guiding sensibility of the communal myth of his people,” who is the conglomerate of different voices as he acts out

dialogue; speaking in a variety of accents and registers. He interacts and addresses his audience while communicating through arguments for or against various positions that are representative of the ideological standpoint of the community. Active and dynamic story telling performance contexts provide the Bakor child the opportunity to learn about his environment, identity and culture and proffer solutions to practical problems in life. The Bakor story teller is therefore expected to be articulate, resilient, imaginative, foresighted and subtle in his ability to arouse and sustain the interest of his audience members particularly as everyone is expected to play a role in the education of children. In Bakor community, therefore, everyone is a potential story teller while there are those regarded as “accomplished artists,” and those considered to be novices. Accomplished artists are versatile story tellers whose narrative repertory encompasses the entire gamut of Bakor cultural life. Most elders in Bakor community possess a stock of stories which they constantly rely on in the process of child upbringing but accomplishment as a story teller goes beyond the immediate family cycle. The accomplished artist also performs outside his family cycle and holds his audience’s interest through aesthetically pleasant performances that enhance audience understanding and knowledge of the message of the tale or story. He subtly transports his audience into the fictional worlds and convinces or leads them to suspend disbelief and accept the validity of his narrative. To effectively achieve this, the Bakor narrator relies on his skill and resilience which he brings to bear on narrative openings to attract and hold audience interest. Narrative openings of story sessions often start with either hand clapping or running round the potential audience who sit in a semi circle while the narrator calls out

Narrator: *tuvtuvwa wan eeh*

Audience: *mboong*

Narrator: *tuvtuvwa wan eeh*

Audience: *mboong,mboong.*

This opening formula is repeated several times until the audience’s attention is guaranteed and the narrator now takes his position in-front of them at the open end of the semi-circle. Bakor performance sessions usually take place in late evening preferably under moonlight when the day’s farm chores are done with. Elderly men and women then gather children from various homesteads together for narrative sessions. In most cases women tell the stories while men sit quietly, smoking pipes and listening and intermittently interjecting corrections or prompting the story teller when there is a seeming mix-up or loss of memory on the part of the female narrator. Female narrators do not perform in the community playground but are restricted to family cycles while male accomplished artists can traverse the community and perform wherever they choose to. Sustained narrative sessions are only rampant during the harvest and early planting seasons between the months of December to February when accomplished story tellers appear on village playgrounds where children and even elders come out to admire the gusto and rhetorical or narrative competence and accomplishments of some story tellers. Such narrative sessions are usually very vibrant as the narrator prances about from side to side imitative of all the animal characters in the narrative: the elephant with his heavy guttural voice; the dishonest hare, with his babyish pronunciation; the deaf and stupid iguana; the fetish spider; the nimble and deceitful monkey; the brutish tiger and the tricky, crooked footed tortoise; all appear in the personality of the story teller as he weaves his way through the intricate narrative thread. The playground also comes alive with song and dance as the narrator keeps the audience afloat with participatory folktale songs, dances and dramatization which also enable him to comment on the themes of the narratives. Narrators also take jibes at audience members by juxtaposing any audience member of their choice with an animal character to facilitate illumination of ideas while objectifying experience. Bakor folktale songs are numerous and varied and directly reinforce the thematic thrust of the narratives. The songs also offer good opportunities for interactive dialogue between the narrator and his audience. Good folktale songs provide grounds for formal orderly and extended expression of thought on the subject of narrative and aids organization of knowledge, ideas and experience embedded in the language being utilized within the context of delivery. A good example of dramatic dialogue in an interactive discourse occurs in the folktale song where crab is intentionally cheated by his hunting colleagues and to pay them back, he drains water from all rivers and streams into his deep-hole home. On their return from the hunt, the colleagues have no water to

drink after food. They realize what crab has done and send several emissaries to him to plead for water. When they knock on crab's door, this dialogic song ensues

Crab: Yinneworkatimkembu?karemgbehkamgbeh

Emissary: Mmewor kata kembu

Crab:Woji baa jenkor?

Emissary: Me ji baa alapkor

Crab: Worjishongkareyinnae?

Emissary: Me jishongkarenjokeh

Crab: Alapkorrnjok,nyiamkorrekal

Translated as

Crab: Who knocks on my door?

Emissary: I knock on your door

Crab: You, who came for what?

Emissary: I, who came for water

Crab: You, who'll give towho?

Emissary: I, who'll give to elephant.

Crab: Elephant thirsts for water; crab thirsts for meat.

To the entire dialogic song, the audience response is simply kare mgbeh,ka mgbeh.

While the song focuses on the themes of injustice as intricate human experiences, it also portrays a graphic picture of the Bakor landscape which comes alive through the methodic descriptions presented by the narrator through the several emissaries sent to crab culminating finally in the cheetah who captures crab and restores water back to the rivers and streams. Worthy of note about Bakor community is that story telling is strictly forbidden during the daytime because, as an elder informed this writer, it retards the growth, both physical and mental, of the story teller. It is, however, obvious that as a predominantly agricultural community, farm hands are valuable during the day and no one encourages anybody to laze about telling stories during work hours while others are at work. Such leisure engagements are reserved for night-time or festive periods which explains why even sex in the day is sometimes considered abominable. A typical Bakor performance session is sustained with riddles and jokes after opening which solicits brainstorming to keep the audience alert after which they are followed with long narratives, song and dance. Since the Bakor narrator always has a clear purpose of entertainment and education, his folktales are often structured in three parts; the introduction, the body of the narration and the conclusion. The introduction solicits audience attention, the body of the narration is an interactive or participatory encounter between artist and audience with the artist as lead performer and audience as interlocutory or active participants to encourage and spur the narrator into creativity. The conclusion is usually a didactic interface which admonishes the audience and draws a moral lesson for their edification. In all these, the narrator is at liberty to choose between several methods of delivery of his material either through song or dance, through dramatic dialogue or plain verbal utterances which may or may not be poetic. Apart from the introductory formulas, narrative commencement also has several opening formulas some of which include:-

a) Ngor mane, mane, mane, mane

--meaning, Since a long longlong time ago

b) Ngorngarenyimfamkpeke li mfam

--meaning, In the past when the world was the world

c) emonghorjamebomo go alanjok

--meaning, My story commences from the elephant's belly.

d) emonghorjame long gornjini a njini

--meaning, My story commences at the beginning of time.

e) emonghorjame li bade----

--meaning, My story is about ----

f) Wunghinatung wan wuknsholemonghorjame

Meaning, Listen carefully to the happenings of my story.

These and more opening formulas can come handy as the narrator's imagination roams the Bakor landscape to come up with new improvised and exciting opening formulas that can arouse and hold audience interest. In narrative or performance sessions the artist's main concern is often to validate the events of the narrative while enhancing aesthetic appeal. Dramatic dialogue, gestures and facial contortions assist the narrator to succinctly build up his imagery to the audiences' appreciation. In some cases even digressions become part of the narration as was the case with this writer who was welcomed into a narrative session by a narrator who referred to the writer as another "ashang" or hare, the hero-protagonist of most Bakor folktales. Without interrupting the progress of the narrative, the narrator, on sighting this writer, uninterestedly digressed from the main strand of narration with this observation

"ashangjikorkpibakhe, yejikpokpiliamonghorngorawerrnyannen

Meaning, the other hare is approaching, the one who teaches stories in big schools.

The digression effectively blended into the narrative and so went unnoticed by most audience members and so the audience accepted the narrator's view that this writer was as tricky as the hare and always lured them into performances, sometimes against their wish. Narrative conclusions offer the narrator the opportunity to moralize or to teach lessons to his audience particularly the children. There is, therefore, a vastly used stock-ending to which most narrators resort even though, again, they are at liberty to improvise their own endings. The stock phrase only serves to draw audience attention to the narrator and allows him to say what he wishes to impart to his audience. The stock-ending phrase often runs like this:- O-llellellellelle, which utterance really has no meaning beyond a ululation, but allows the narrator to draw a moral or offer an explanation for a phenomenon at the end of the narrative e.g.

O,lellellelle, the hare has a red buttocks

O,lellellellethe chicken cannot urinate

O,lellellelle elephant felled a palm tree etc

Story endings are often highly prone to debate as the morals drawn at the end may be controversial and may not be entirely acceptable to every member of the audience who may then decide to challenge the narrator and spark off a long debate while other audience members take sides. Resolution of such debates teaches young ones the rubrics of Bakor cultural life and values. Improvised story endings are sometimes more interesting than stock-endings because they come impromptu and comment on contemporary happenings in the community. This writer was opportuned to witness one such improvised ending which addressed the audience thus

Emonghorjameebkolo, emonghorlifereyebingbaleh, kam wan nyiam a mfung meh nli.

My story is ended, but if my story was interesting, give me buffalo flesh to eat.

This writer was at pains to find out the relationship of buffalo flesh to the narrative or events of the narration which seemed unconnected and then learnt that buffaloes were attacking the community and one had been killed but several were still at large and they required brave hunters to hunt them down. This was, therefore, an indirect charge to young hunters to rise up to a communal responsibility.

Story telling sessions sometimes become tense and the artist is forced to introduce anxiety reduction techniques to relocate his audience from the fictional to the realistic world. Several methods are again available to the Bakor narrator to douse tension some of which include

a) Song and dance sessions usually in relation to the narrative content.

b) Direct jibes at audience members whom the narrator compares with his fictional characters e.g. the hare went and carried a pumpkin pod that was as fat as Gaga's head, all of which cause laughter and relax the tense narrative atmosphere to allow the narrator build up the story.

c) Direct comparison of tale events and actions with real life situations and occurrences in the community, eg then hare picked an apple and threw it as far as Esham for spider to run and pick it up. Esham is a real Bakor village which is interposed with the narrative events. The story teller deliberately creates realistic physical distances which he then juxtaposes with the fictional events of the narrative. Bakor stories centre principally on animal characters leading to the often erroneous assumption that African stories generally lack serious import. This ploy only aids objectification of experience and allows narrators to comment on human foibles dispassionately and without repercussions from audience members who may feel hurt by the narrative events. The body of the narration centers on events and exploits surrounding these animals around which human foibles and idiosyncrasies are built for objective view and criticism. For this reason folktale analysts have argued that

for many indigenous people, experience has no separation between the physical world and the spiritual world. Thus, indigenous people communicate to their children through ritual, storytelling, or dialogue for everything comes from the great spirit or creator and is one. Everything, including inanimate objects, has a soul and is to be respected. These values, learned through storytelling, help to guide future generations and aid identity formation.

In the course of narration, the narrator is alert to audience active participation and criticism because such an audience tasks his imagination and consciousness to respond appropriately to societal expectations in the creation of a viable image of society. In this way the Bakor artist maintains a close interactive link with his audience since his narrative is, in any case, meant for them. Good performances, therefore, imply that the narrator presents his characters and events in appropriate and compelling language with powerful imagery such that the audience identifies with his presentation. The audience is equally expected to interact and to judge the character portraits the narrator has presented because they are the final assessors or arbiters in this exercise of cultural authentication or personality profile development. They judge the characters and what they stand for or represent in the society or cultural milieu. Thus, given the appropriate physical, intellectual, emotional and social context, the Bakor story teller and his story telling context can be described as the event in oral discourse which utilizes the word to create a world of perfection for the audience to emulate. The importance of the performance context in Bakor society, therefore, lies in the fact that it provides a milieu with stories that create a world of entertainment, a world of education, a world that develops our imagination and memory, a world that presents society with morals and social standards and a world that authenticates historical, cultural and linguistic developments of communities for critical assessment. The Bakor performance context creates a complex fictional protagonist who is a representation of similar qualities and behavior as human beings. The protagonist is a cunning trickster, a liar and a cheat, but he is equally an embodiment of Bakor heroic qualities and all that is cherished and valued in Bakor society. The Bakor performance context is thus an embodiment of cultural life, with appropriate props and linguistic accompaniment. This kind of story telling context sustains a narrative, illuminates ideas and highlights images thus eliciting and illustrating new ideas and associations and enhancing knowledge rather than distractions. The histrionics of performance also help to focus attention and allows the narrator to make contact with the word in oral discourse, to vocalize it and to enliven it with gesture in order to communicate effectively and successfully with that word. This is the importance the Bakor attach to storytelling in performance contexts which is, as well, the goal of ethnopoetics

to show how the techniques of unique oral performers [can] enhance the aesthetic value of their performances within their specific cultural contexts.

The importance and uniqueness of performance contexts for the realization of verbal folklore, particularly in traditional societies, is further elaborated by Catherine S. Quick, who argues that the study of performance was accentuated by Jerome Gothenberg who

Had recognized that “most translations of native American oral traditions...failed to capture the power and beauty of the oral performances on the written page,” especially when “Western poetic styles” were imposed upon these written texts.

Most African communities will, therefore, continue to depend on the strength of the word in oral discourse as a most succinct way of authenticating experience and educating younger generations on African knowledge systems even in the face of the current global emphasis on literacy and writing and its consequent interface with orality.

5. Conclusion

What we should aim at today is to record these raw contextual performances as much as we can before subjecting them to written translations. This way we can attempt to arrive at the vitality and dynamism of the traditional storyteller in context and also appreciate the dynamic interaction of the word as a verbal utterance with actions in a performance context to enliven and expand our comprehension of discourse in storytelling sessions. We can then see storytelling, not just as a mere past-time in traditional societies but in terms of a conscious patterning of folk material within a performance context which implies the primacy of the aesthetic functions of narrative and hence the importance of narrative or storytelling as a complex cultural genre. Storytelling should thus be seen as an aesthetic endeavor on the part of the narrator or performer rather than simply an analysis of the recorder’s input. The narrator’s choice of words or the aesthetics of narration would imply his capacity to make himself understood exactly the way he intends to be understood as a representative of a unique cultural entity. This is more-so as we realize that a story never just grows out of the imagination. It requires arrangement of story elements to bring out the force of narration. It also requires crafting through careful choice of words, particularly in oral situations, with attendant performance accoutrements to enliven and enforce its imagery on the audiences’ consciousness. The word as event in performance context endows the story with a dynamic status thus making it prone to adaptation to several diverse situations and landscapes created by the narrator in the audiences’ imagination for their edification and fulfillment.

For the Bakor of Northern Cross River State in Nigeria, storytelling as a veritable traditional indulgence is fast evaporating from the consciousness of most young people and the community is faced with the unpleasant but undeniable possibility of extinction of not just a valued means of communication but also an invaluable cultural activity that serves the dual purpose of education and projection of a Bakor identity and personality to the outside world. It is in this vein that this write-up is considered a contribution to the furtherance of the Bakor project of cultural rejuvenation spearheaded by the current clan-head of Ekajuk, one of the clans that make up the Bakor union, Ntul-a-tulMahyim Innocent Nwake on the occasion of his coronation. It is hoped that one day and soon too, storytelling will re-occupy the pride of place in Ekajuk in particular and Bakor in general as a formidable means of cultural revival and linguistic development which capture the intricacies and complexities of the Bakor narrative repertoire

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