



## Unveiling Melodies: Navigating Issues in African Oral Literature through Nkem Okoh's *Preface to Oral Literature*

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### Abstract

The oral literature in Africa has not been taken seriously. The implication is that assertion is a fear of its death as many scholars in Africa have given it less attention. To address the gap and deepen the conversation, this study explored Nkem Okoh's *Preface to Oral Literature* shedding light on its perspective on the ongoing discussions about oral literature in Africa. The goal is to offer a detailed understanding and assessment of African oral literature, using this text as a case study. The analysis relies on postcolonial criticism and a qualitative research approach. Two key questions guide the research: How does *Preface to Oral Literature* contribute to debates on the form and nature of oral literature in Africa, especially concerning identity reclamation and anticolonialism? How does it criticize Euro-western scholars and their distorted views of Africa as a dark continent, contributing to the wider discourse on oral literature in Africa? The findings highlight challenges in the study of African oral literature, including issues related to naming, etymology, nomenclature, the fundamental nature of oral literature, discussions on aligning it with folklore, ownership and royalty dynamics, and the debate between evolutionist and relativist perspectives. The impact of Western biases on the analysis of African oral literature and challenges linked to understanding the consequences of the changing global literary landscape on the status of oral literature in Africa are also emphasized. The study recommends for further research, the need for a comparative analysis and assessment of the contemporary impact of oral literature in African societies.

**Keywords:** oral literature; colonialism; performance; audience

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## INTRODUCTION

Nkem Okoh's *Preface to Oral Literature* offers strong polemics for the exploration of Africa's oral literary expression. Its critical posture is evident in its systematic argumentation and discourse. Beyond its primary focus on oral literary ingenuity, it extends its reach into various areas of study and critical concerns, addressing issues about "writing back" (Boehmer 2010), which refers to the act of responding, challenging, or reinterpreting the dominant narratives and representations that have been imposed by colonial powers. And, reconstructs a way for colonized or marginalized groups to assert their own voices, perspectives, and cultural identities, often through literature, art, or other forms of expression. The text also borders on anticolonialism, Africa's cultural poetics, literary production, national development, and ethnophilosophy. An integral aspect of the text's intervention lies in its significant contribution to the ongoing debates and broader

discussions about the form and nature of oral literature in Africa. The motivation behind the text is the need to furnish Africans with materials authored by Africans, from an African perspective hence, expose students sufficiently to the diverse theoretical considerations, possibilities, and alternatives regarding the field of oral literature' (Okoh, 2010, p. vi).

The text resonates with a distinctive imagination—one that is Afrocentric, yet devoid of blatant idealism or exaggerated romanticization of Africa's past, a setback of the Negritude movement. Instead, it authentically engages with the tangible sociological, philosophical, and moral issues prevalent on the African continent in the present. This is why its unmistakable anti-colonial stance is obvious, demonstrated through far-reaching examples strategically employed to bolster its arguments and deliver pointed critiques against Euro-western scholars and their distorted representations of Africa in discourse, what is termed "unveiling melodies". The melodies unveiled revolve around the dynamic process of exploring African thought and expression. These melodies manifest through the nuanced interplay between indigenous perspectives and external influences from the Western world. The intricate interweaving of themes and narratives within the text itself, which is a transformative force, actively participating in the ongoing discourse of identity reclamation in African literature and the text's ability to actively engage with and deconstruct these dichotomies, contributing to a richer understanding of African literary identity.

Like Elizabeth Gunner, (1986) noted, Oral literature in Africa has not been taken seriously. There is a fear of its death today, as many scholars in Africa have given it less attention. To address the gap and deepen the conversation, this study explores Nkem Okoh's *Preface to Oral Literature* shedding light on its perspective on the ongoing discussions about oral literature in Africa, termed "Unveiling Melodies. While there has been some scholarly attention to this area in the work of Ruth Finnegan, this study asserts that a more nuanced, African counter-discursive perspective is required to counterbalance the distorted representations by Euro-western scholars. The novelty of this research lies in its ability to bridge the gap between oral literary ingenuity and broader critical concerns, including identity reclamation, anticolonialism, and the intricate interplay between indigenous and external influences. This is a burning issue as it challenges existing narratives and offers a fresh perspective on African literary identity. Hence, the study contributes to the ongoing discourse of identity reclamation in African literature through oral literary study. The text's transformative force lies in its intricate interweaving of themes and narratives, actively engaging with and deconstructing dichotomies.

The study raises specific research questions, such as how Nkem Okoh's *Preface to Oral Literature* contributes to the ongoing debates about the form and nature of oral literature in Africa, particularly in relation to identity reclamation and anti-colonialism. Additionally, it examines how the text critiques Euro-Western scholars and their distorted portrayals of Africa as the dark continent, contributing to the broader discourse of oral literature in Africa. These questions align with the primary aim of the study, which is to provide a nuanced understanding and evaluation of African oral literature, using Okoh's text as a case study. The objectives revolve around exploring the implications of the text for identity reclamation, anticolonialism, and the interplay between indigenous and external influences in African oral literature. In contrast to previous research, such as Ruth Finnegan's *African Oral Literature*, which concentrated solely on literary ingenuity, this study places particular emphasis on the African counter-discursive perspective. It highlights the strategic use of examples in critiquing Euro-Western scholars and emphasizes the transformative force inherent in Okoh's text. By addressing these aspects, the research not only fills a gap in existing scholarship, it offers a fresh perspective on the complexities of

African literary identity and makes a valuable contribution to broader discussions in the field.

## METHOD AND CRITICAL FRAMING

This paper employed a qualitative design. The choice of a qualitative research design for this study is grounded in the complex and nuanced nature of the text *Preface to Oral Literature*. Qualitative methods are particularly appropriate when seeking to explore in-depth meanings, interpretations, and the contextual intricacies of a text. In this case, the design allows for a rich and nuanced interpretation of the content, themes, and arguments within the essay, offering a more profound understanding of its structure, chapters, and key concepts. This makes a significant contribution to the study's analytical depth and validity. This is because the qualitative design contributes and enables detailed exploration of the text's content, delving into the layers of meaning embedded in it and providing a comprehensive understanding of how the author's ideas unfold.

Furthermore, the qualitative approach allows for the exploration of the relationship between Okoh's perspectives and those of other scholars, such as Mudimbe and Selasi, offering a nuanced and contextualized analysis. By closely examining the text, drawing parallels with other scholars, and probing its role in ongoing debates on African oral literature, the research establishes a robust foundation for interpretation and analysis. The analysis revolves around the text itself, exploring the author's viewpoints, critiques, and contributions and a thorough examination of the text, extracting meaning from its content, structure, and arguments. The study maps connections between Okoh's perspectives and those of other scholars to provide a broader context. The data analysis entails qualitative content analysis. This is a systematic examination of the text's content and structure in such a manner that themes and patterns are identified, and connections between different sections of the essay are explored. Additionally, the scope of the analysis is limited to the text itself,

The analysis adopts postcolonial criticism as its analytical lens. Postcolonial criticism emerges as a profound cultural and cross-cultural study within an international context, meticulously addressing negative representations of cultures and people, with a determined focus on countering such portrayals (Udumukwu 2021, p. 264; Adesanmi 2008, pp.37–38; Barry 2002, p. 192). Boehmer (2010) sheds light on a crucial facet of postcolonial criticism, emphasizing its concern for "writing back" (p.144). This endeavour is propelled by a robust sense of cultural nationalism, with a purposeful intent to re-establish Africans as "subjects." (Ogude 1999, p.1). Such a reclamation entails taking responsibility for the reinvention of their past and actively shaping the conditions for modernizing their societies (Mudimbe, 1988, p.180). This is an earnest effort to restore agency to Africans, empowering them to redefine their narrative and steer the trajectory of their societies towards modernization.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**How has *Preface to Oral Literature* contributed to the ongoing debates surrounding the form and nature of oral literature in Africa, particularly in the context of identity reclamation and anticolonialism?**

There is a pervasive Afrocentric motif delicately woven through the text, accentuating the imperative task of reclaiming Africa's identity. This thematic thread is meticulously intertwined with the language and tone of the work, purposefully presenting itself as a subdued narrative on the decolonization of African literature. Despite the book's title not overtly articulating this narrative, the discernible nature of its anti-colonial response implies a conscious effort to actively contribute to the broader discourse concerning the reclamation and reshaping of African literary identity. In essence, *Preface*

to *Oral Literature* emerges as a manifestation of African responses to the historical misrepresentations wrought by colonial domination, as elucidated by Abiola Irele (2001, p. ix). Historical misrepresentations were supervised by the Euro-western schools, missionaries, and anthropologists.

The example of Father Placid Tempels, as highlighted in his work *La Philosophie Bantoue* or *Bantu Philosophy*, serves as a poignant illustration of the challenges inherent in foreign perspectives shaping African narratives. Tempels, a Belgian Franciscan missionary and anthropologist, adopted a monolithic view of Congo philosophy, particularly that of the Shaba Baluba people in Zaire. However, this perspective was not immune to criticism, as aligned more with Eurocentric interests than an objective understanding of the Bantu philosophy (Masolo, 1994, p. 46).

Tempels' approach reflects a broader issue in the historiography of Africa, where external observers often assume that Africans themselves lack awareness of their own philosophy. This Eurocentric bias contributes to a skewed representation of African history, ethnography, and oral literature. The issue is that Western analysts often position themselves as the sole arbiters capable of providing a systematic account of African wisdom, thereby perpetuating a narrative that diminishes the agency and intellectual richness of African societies (Hountondji, 2009, p. 123).

The distortion of African perspectives by foreign observers is not merely an academic concern; it has profound implications for the construction of identity. Such misrepresentations of African philosophy contribute to the formulation of a specific type of personality, one that aligns with the idealized, prototypical 'civilized' modern subject as perceived through Western eyes (Jeyifo, 2007, p.609). This process, intentionally or unintentionally, reinforces a colonial gaze that seeks to shape the colonized subject in its own image while simultaneously forbidding true resemblance.

This is the narcissistic nature of the potentate power dynamics at play. The colonizer desires the colonized subjects to mirror their attributes, aspirations, and values, creating a distorted reflection that serves the interests of the colonizing power. This process perpetuates a form of cultural imperialism, where Western perspectives dominate and mould the understanding of African history and philosophy (Mbembe, 2001, p.30). In essence, the misrepresentation of African philosophy by external observers not only distorts the true essence of African cultures but also perpetuates a colonial legacy that influences how Africa is perceived and understood globally. As noted by Mogaji (2021).

What comes to mind when you hear about Africa? That's a question with diverse answers depending on your stake in the continent. Some may see it as a big country that always relies on aid and donations from developed countries, and some may consider it a third-world country. (p. 237)

Through the act of writing, a type of subversive writing which resonates with the tradition of "Writing Back" (Ashcroft et al. 1989, p. 96), Okoh through the text navigates and responds to the challenges posed by colonial dominance, utilizing critical writing as a significant channel for articulation. This not only captures the profound significance of the encounter with Europe and its palpable effects on African societies and cultures but, more critically, delves into the intricate dynamics of the African experience about the standards and principles traditionally associated with the modern West.

In the grand narrative of exploration within it, the text's concern with the examination of African thought and expression unfolds as a dynamic process, exposing a nuanced interplay between indigenous perspectives and the external influences emanating from the Western world. This intricate interweaving of themes and narratives within the text positions *Preface to Oral Literature* as a transformative force, actively engaging in the ongoing discourse of identity reclamation within the realm of African literature. An aspect



of African thought expressed in the text is the anticolonial sentiments articulated. This plays a pivotal role in shaping its critical approach and methodology. Thus, despite being an introductory text in oral literary studies, in reading the text what should not be overlooked is its paradigmatic counter-position, what Mudimbe (1988, p. 17) calls a "dichotomizing system." Mudimbe argues that this dichotomizing system has emerged in discourses by Africans concerning Africa due to the colonializing structure, giving rise to numerous paradigmatic oppositions such as traditional versus modern, oral versus written and printed, and agrarian and customary communities versus urban and industrialized civilization.

A prime illustration of this dichotomy lies in the attention devoted to the evolution implied by the transition from traditional paradigms to modern ones in Africa. Mudimbe's assertion highlights the multifaceted nature of the challenges posed by colonialism, where dichotomies are created, shaping perceptions of Africa's past and future. Preface to Oral Literature actively engages with this dichotomizing system, utilizing anticolonial sentiments to deconstruct and challenge the prevailing narratives associated with these oppositions. The transformative role of the text is evident in its ability to unravel and question these paradigmatic binaries, contributing to the ongoing dialogue of reclaiming and reshaping African literary identity. Within the structure of Preface to Oral Literature, there are five divisions, essentially chapters, each meticulously crafted to contribute to the overarching purpose of the book. These chapters serve as focal points, enriching the reader's understanding of oral literature and its significance.

Chapter One plays a pivotal role in setting the tone for the entire work. It commences by addressing critical concerns related to the debate surrounding the naming and definition of oral literature, a discourse complicated by its Latin etymology. The primary objective here is to present a unique perspective on the subject from an African scholar's standpoint, aiming to disentangle African literature from any perception of being merely an extension or appendage of Western literature. One of the crucial themes in Chapter One revolves around the identification of the literary status of oral literature. The chapter endeavours to answer the fundamental question of what confers upon something the status of literature within the oral tradition. By addressing these concerns, the chapter sets the groundwork for a broader discussion on the distinctiveness of African oral literature and its rightful place within the broader literary landscape.

Within this chapter, there is a harmonious blend of linguistic and cultural considerations. The Latin etymology issue serves as a focal point, symbolizing the colonial legacy that necessitates a deliberate re-evaluation and redefinition of African literary concepts. Additionally, the exploration of the literary status of oral literature reveals the intricate interplay between indigenous forms of expression and the established criteria for literature, highlighting the richness and complexity of African literary traditions. As the reader traverses through Chapter One, the melodies become apparent in the carefully woven narrative that seeks to establish a foundation for the subsequent chapters. The chapter not only enlightens the reader about the complexities of defining oral literature but also lays the groundwork for a more profound appreciation of the unique contributions of African oral traditions to the broader literary discourse.

In its intricate tapestry Chapter Two emerges as a crucial segment where Okoh delves deeper into the naming of African Oral literature, placing significant emphasis on its inherent nature. This exploration is particularly manifested through key concepts such as orality, transmission, and the essence of being in oral literature and the challenges associated with characterizing oral literature. Okoh meticulously addresses these challenges under subtitles that bring forth the complexity of the subject. These include the priority of performance in oral literature, the role of the audience in such performances, and the dynamic interplay of creativity, variability, and stability within the oral tradition.

The naming and conceptualization of oral literature, as elucidated in Chapter Two, form a melodic symphony that resonates with the nuances of African cultural expressions. Orality, as a central concept, becomes a lens through which the distinct nature of African storytelling is refracted. What this suggests is that the transmission of oral literature, intricately tied to the essence of being, reveals the living, breathing quality of these narratives within the cultural context.

An obvious dilemma, which I described as the text's problematics is its intensification with the nuanced explanations of the challenges of its being or existence. How does oral literature exist and have its being? To answer this question, the priority of performance is focalised. This underscores the dynamic and participatory nature of oral storytelling between performer and audience. This is such that the role of the audience becomes a keynote, highlighting the communal aspect of oral traditions, where narratives are not merely presented but co-created with the listeners. This also underwrites the features of creativity, variability, and stability adding further layers to the melodic composition, illustrating the dynamic and adaptive nature of oral literature within the African cultural milieu. Moreover, while commending Okoh for the excellence displayed in Preface to Oral Literature, it is imperative to juxtapose this work with contemporary realities, as seen in the issues raised in Taiye Selasi's essay titled "African Literature Doesn't Exist." Selasi's exploration introduces a new dimension to the geopolitics of African literature, contextualized within the landscape of globalization and contemporary literary production.

Selasi's argument is influenced by the impact of corporate globalization on literary production today. It introduces a contrasting harmony to Okoh's melodies. The juxtaposition of these perspectives reveals the evolving dynamics of African literature, resonating with the changing global currents that influence both the production and reception of literary works. Thus, Chapter Two not only enriches our understanding of oral literature but also invites us to reflect on its place within the broader context of contemporary literary discourse and globalization. According to Selasi (2013) in a talk which she gave, she notes that:

The title of my talk tonight is "African Literature Doesn't Exist"—but, as you may know, I live in Rome, and so start, as we do, with confession. Confession number one: I'm a recovering academic, one decade past my Oxford days, but still prone to making provocative statements whether or not I can defend them. Confession number two: I'm sure I'll regret having given this talk once the scholars swoop in, but for now, I'm young and idealistic enough to relish the risk of defeat. So, that's confession done. On to the good part. The blasphemy. African Literature Doesn't Exist. What do I mean, or do *not* mean? By "African literature," I refer not to the body of written and oral texts produced by storytellers on and from the continent—but rather, to the category. African Literature is an empty designation, as is Asian Literature, European Literature, Latin American Literature, South American Literature, North American Literature, and so forth. My very basic assertion is that the practice of categorizing literature by the continent from which its creators come is past its prime at best. Our dogged insistence upon doing so, in the case of the African continent, betrays a disregard both for the complexities of African cultures and the creativity of African authors. If literature is, as its finest practitioners argue, universal—then it deserves a taxonomy neither based on nor supportive of racial distinction, but reflective of the workings of the race-less human heart. (p.53)

What Selasi calls "the Blasphemy" is worthy of consideration, even if it appears so *innocent* a statement and fails to take into consideration the geopolitics of literary production which informs her idea of Afropolitanism. The point Selasi raises is the fact

that globalisation is redefining the naming and characterisation of literature: whether regional or national, oral or written.

In Chapter Three the textual focus shifts to a meticulous exploration of the diverse forms of oral literature, delving into its various genres such as prose, proverb, the poetic genre, genomic form, and dramatic form. A central tenet emphasized by Okoh in this chapter is what he terms "the premier attribute of oral literature," namely its supreme dependence on performance, particularly before a "live" audience (2010, p. 131). This critical insight becomes a foundational pillar for researchers engaged in the collection, classification, study, and analysis of oral literature. One of the key revelations from Chapter Three is the set criteria for any data to qualify as analysable in the field of oral literature. Such data must exhibit literariness, this is known as the "literary phenomenon" (Okoh, 2010, p. 131). This notion underscores the artistic and expressive qualities inherent in oral literature, requiring researchers to discern and appreciate the literary essence of the material they engage with. Further enriching our understanding, Chapter Three delves into the dual nature of oral literature, considering both its content and form (2010, p. 134). Okoh elucidates the multifaceted aspects of classifying oral literature, encompassing dimensions such as "what is spoken/what is sung, fixed-phrase/free phrase, narrative/gnomic forms" (Okoh, 2010, p. 132). This chapter provides a comprehensive framework for researchers to navigate the intricacies of oral literature, offering a nuanced lens through which to approach its analysis.

Chapter Three also gives significant emphasis to the proverb as a type of prose. This emphasis reinforces the significance of traditional forms within oral literature, shedding light on the intricate interplay of genres within the African cultural context. Furthermore, Okoh presents a visual representation in the form of a tree diagram or classificatory algorithm of African oral literature in Chapter Three (2010, p. 172). This illustrative tool serves as a valuable guide for scholars and researchers, providing a structured approach to understanding the intricate web of oral literature genres and their interrelationships. In essence, Chapter Three not only enriches our comprehension of the diverse forms and genres within oral literature but also provides a methodological foundation for researchers, offering insights into the performative nature, literariness criteria, and classification intricacies of African oral literature. The chapter resonates as a harmonious composition, echoing the vibrancy and complexity inherent in the oral traditions explored by Okoh.

Chapter Four unfolds as a comprehensive exploration of the study of oral literature, offering valuable insights into the methodologies, considerations, and prospects that shape this field of research. The chapter commences with a thoughtful examination of how to conduct a study through fieldwork, underscoring the importance of direct engagement with the oral traditions being studied. A key focus in Chapter Four is the strategic consideration of oral literature and its prospects. Okoh guides readers through the intricacies of fieldwork, emphasizing the significance of this approach in unravelling the layers of meaning embedded in oral narratives. The chapter serves as a beacon for researchers, providing a roadmap for navigating the challenges and opportunities inherent in the study of oral literature. An integral element discussed in Chapter Four is the explanation of the importance of fieldwork in text generation and analysis, shedding light on the dynamic process of collecting and interpreting oral data. The term "preservation" is introduced, encapsulating the vital role of recording and safeguarding oral traditions for future generations. This is why translation emerges as a critical aspect of the study of oral literature. Its centrality is underscored as it bridges linguistic and cultural gaps. The act of translating from a source language to a target language becomes a pivotal step in presenting oral literature to a broader audience, ensuring its accessibility and relevance beyond its original context.

But, this must begin with the capturing of the data through field research where documentation takes centre stage as a means of providing elucidation. This involves the careful recording and annotation of collected oral data, contributing to the preservation and dissemination of cultural knowledge. Data analysis, another essential component, involves the systematic examination of recorded data to extract meaningful patterns, themes, and insights. To illustrate this, consider a researcher embarking on a study of a particular oral tradition. Through fieldwork, the researcher engages directly with the community, participating in performances, documenting narratives, and recording the oral expressions of the community members. The preservation aspect involves not only capturing the words but also the nuances of intonation, rhythm, and cultural context. Translation comes into play when the researcher seeks to share these oral traditions with a wider audience or academic community. The act of translating ensures that the essence of the oral literature is conveyed accurately, preserving its cultural richness and authenticity. In essence, Chapter Four serves as a compass, guiding researchers through the intricacies of fieldwork in the study of oral literature. It emphasizes the importance of meticulous documentation, thoughtful data analysis, and the role of translation in facilitating a deeper understanding and appreciation of oral traditions. Through these insights, Chapter Four contributes to the methodological foundation of oral literature research, fostering a more nuanced and comprehensive approach to the study of this vibrant and dynamic cultural heritage.

Chapter Five unfolds as a critical exploration of the profound relevance of oral literature, particularly in the context of a technologized and urbanized world. Okoh delves into how oral literature can make meaningful contributions to society in the present age, emphasizing its potential impact on the socio-economic development of Africa. A central theme in this chapter is Okoh's advocacy for a balanced literary education in Africa a hybrid system where technology is deployed in archiving literary data for posterity. This is crucial because part of the challenges of present-day Africa is that its past was not properly documented. This resonates as a crucial proposition, representing a strategic move towards decolonization. By advocating for a balanced literary education, Okoh aims to dismantle the lingering vestiges of colonial influence on education and foster a more inclusive approach that integrates the rich tapestry of African oral traditions. Illustratively, consider the scenario of an educational system that incorporates oral literature into its curriculum. Students are exposed to the diverse narratives, folklore, and cultural expressions embedded in oral traditions. This not only broadens their literary horizons but also nurtures a deeper connection to their cultural heritage. The integration of oral literature in education becomes a catalyst for decolonization, as it challenges the dominance of Western literary canons and fosters a more inclusive representation of African literary traditions.

Furthermore, Okoh underscores the imperative of an interdisciplinary synergy in the study of African oral literature. This call for collaboration across academic disciplines seeks to foster a holistic understanding of the field and the African experience. For instance, researchers from anthropology, sociology, linguistics, and literature may collaborate to unravel the multifaceted dimensions of oral literature and its impact on contemporary African society. Imagine an interdisciplinary research project that examines the socio-economic implications of oral literature in a specific African community. Anthropologists may study the cultural practices and rituals embedded in oral traditions, sociologists may analyze the communal dynamics shaped by these narratives, linguists may delve into the linguistic nuances, and literature scholars may explore the artistic and literary aspects. This collaborative approach enriches the study, offering a comprehensive perspective that extends beyond the confines of a single discipline. In essence, Chapter Five serves as a clarion call for a holistic re-evaluation of the role of oral literature in the



contemporary African context. It urges educators, policymakers, and researchers to recognize the transformative potential of incorporating oral traditions into educational frameworks. Additionally, Okoh advocates for a collaborative and interdisciplinary approach to the study of oral literature, highlighting its interconnectedness with various facets of African life. Through these initiatives, Chapter Five envisions a future where oral literature actively contributes to the socio-economic development of Africa, fostering a more inclusive, decolonized, and culturally vibrant society.

### **How does Preface to Oral Literature Critique Euro-western scholars and their distorted representations of Africa's as a Dark Continent and contribute to the broader discourse of oral literature in Africa?**

There are burgeoning issues and trepidations the text raises. One such is the issue of Western scholars and prejudice and their distorted representations of Africa as a dark continent which engendered a prejudiced view of Africa's oral literature as one of the pressing challenges in the early study of oral literature in Africa. Okoh explains the fact that the study of oral literature as we know it today was not what it was many years ago. The reason is that those who studied it before Ruth Finnegan had no literary background (Okoh, 2010, p. 12). Thus, their opinion on the subject was enmeshed in prejudices and misinterpretations. An illustrative example of such prejudiced perspectives is exemplified by scholars like Edgar Burrough Rice, and Burton. Burton, in 1865, famously argued that Africa lacked essential literary elements such as poetry, meter, and rhyme (Okoh 2010, p. 10). The assertion by Sone (2009) that there are three categories of literature in Africa—oral literature in African languages, written literature in African languages, and written literature in some European languages—highlights the rich and diverse literary traditions on the continent. Among these, oral literature in African languages stands out as the oldest and most prevalent form of literary expression in Africa (Sone, 2018).

Burton's perspective, as noted by Okoh (2010), had profound implications, extending beyond literature to encompass language, culture, art, and civilization in Africa. Burton's narrative contributed to a distorted image of Africa, perpetuating stereotypes that portrayed the continent as devoid of intellectual and cultural accomplishments (Okoh, 2010). This narrative framed Africa as a metaphor for backwardness, fostering a Eurocentric viewpoint that depicted the continent as technologically disadvantaged and culturally inferior. This prejudiced perspective not only influenced academic discussions but also shaped broader societal perceptions of Africa, depicting it as a 'dark continent' mired in negativity and underdevelopment.

The 'dark continent' metaphor, explored by scholars such as Curtin (1964), Achebe (1978), Hawk (1992), Bunce (2015), and Dokotum (2020), represents a cognitive mapping of the "Africa-in-crisis trope" (Iheka, 2021, p.2) or suggests institutional deformities rooted in Africa's problematic history (Mudimbe, 1988). This metaphor implies the absence of progress, development, culture, and civilization in Africa. Its origins can be traced back to colonial texts influenced by Eurocentric ideologies espoused by figures like Shakespeare, Hume, Jefferson, Cuvier, and Hegel (Hall, 2003; wa Thiong'o, 1997; Adichie, 2009). Such framing significantly shapes how Africa is constructed, disseminated, and consumed in various discourse modes, including cinematic vision and news media (Dokotum, 2020; Self, 2020).

This disproportionate focus on negative aspects of Africa has lasting consequences, contributing to the perpetuation of Afro-pessimism. Afro-pessimism reflects an apprehension of hopelessness, negativity, gloom, corruption, and underdevelopment attributed to the continent (Gikandi, 2011; Nothias, 2012). It underscores the importance of challenging and reframing narratives about Africa to promote a more accurate and nuanced understanding of its rich literary, cultural, and historical contributions.

However, Okoh contends that these preposterous assumptions no longer hold sway today, thanks to the diligent efforts of African scholars in the field. Figures such as Tanure Ojaide, Godini G. Darah, Helen Chukwuma, Bekederemor Pepper Clark, Kofi Anyindoho, and Kofi Awoonor have played pivotal roles in debunking these Western-centric biases. Through their scholarship, these African intellectuals have offered counter-narratives that celebrate the richness, complexity, and sophistication of African oral traditions. Tanure Ojaide's work demonstrates this in his oral traditions of the Niger Delta, or the insights of Kofi Anyindoho, who has delved into the intricacies of Akan oral traditions. These scholars have not only challenged the prejudiced views of the past but have also actively contributed to the reclamation and appreciation of African oral literature on a global academic stage. In essence, the issue of Western prejudice, as delineated by Okoh, serves as a critical point of reflection on the evolution of the study of oral literature in Africa. Through the lens of historical biases and misinterpretations, Okoh invites readers to appreciate the transformative impact of scholars who have worked tirelessly to dismantle these prejudices, paving the way for a more inclusive and accurate understanding of Africa's rich cultural heritage. The works of these scholars point to the growth and expansion of the study of oral literature as Okoh (2010) rightly argues while citing Andrzejewski, Pilaszewich, & Tyloch that:

Oral literature in Africa is an expanding field, with methods of research and presentation becoming more sophisticated and accurate. Particularly encouraging are the developments in African universities, and the centre of gravity in the subject is already steadily shifting towards the continent where it belongs. Outside Africa, the subject is pursued both in research and instruction in several universities, and a most welcome innovation is the linking of this work with the work of literature departments, a change which represents academic recognition of the essentially literary nature of the subject. (p. 247)

Okoh's exploration of etymology and definition in the context of literature, reveals a profound challenge that goes beyond linguistic origins to touch upon fundamental assumptions about the nature of literary expression. He traces the historical roots of the term "literature," to its Latin derivation from "Littera," which indeed signifies a connection to written forms and the alphabet. However, the critical insight provided by Okoh highlights the inadequacy of limiting the definition of literature solely to its written aspect. His argument rests on the premise that the etymological association of "literature" with written expressions has led to a historical bias that excludes the oral dimension. This exclusionary tendency arises from the presumption that literature, by its linguistic roots, is confined to written forms. Okoh contends that such a narrow definition overlooks a crucial aspect of literary traditions, particularly in the African context, where oral traditions have been integral to the fabric of storytelling, cultural preservation, and historical transmission. Literature such as "Littera" fails to recognize the richness and complexity of African literature, which encompasses both oral and written forms. The crux of Okoh's argument lies in challenging the normative constraints imposed by the term's historical roots. By asserting that literature extends beyond the written mode, he emphasizes the need for a broader, more inclusive understanding that encapsulates the multifaceted nature of literary expression in African traditions.

Okoh's perspective invites a reconsideration of the very definition of literature. Instead of confining it to the written word, it encourages a more expansive conceptualization that embraces orality as an equally legitimate and significant mode of literary expression. African literature, in this context, becomes a dynamic interplay between the written and the oral, each contributing to a holistic understanding of storytelling, cultural narratives, and the transmission of knowledge. From a logical standpoint, Okoh's argument underscores the importance of context-specific definitions

that capture the diverse ways in which literature manifests itself across cultures. It challenges the notion that a Eurocentric etymology should dictate the boundaries of what qualifies as literature, especially when applied to regions with rich oral traditions. This perspective prompts scholars and readers alike to move beyond linguistic origins and acknowledge the coexistence of written and oral forms within the broader realm of literature. It also opens up avenues for a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of literary expression, particularly within the diverse and vibrant landscape of African literature.

A distinctive feature that sets these two modes apart is the tangibility and susceptibility to the destruction of the written form by external elements like fire and rain. In contrast, the oral mode is intangible, residing in the collective memory of a people and impervious to physical threats. This delineation challenges the conventional understanding of literature confined to written texts, expanding the scope to encompass the resilience and enduring nature of oral traditions. Okoh's perspective aligns with the stance taken by Rene and Austin (1948) on the existence of literature. They argue that oral literature and written literature share the same essence but manifest in different forms (p. 142). By addressing the question of the nature of literature's existence in "Preface to Oral Literature," Okoh liberates oral literature from the multitude of nomenclatures associated with it. Terms like native literature, folk literature, unwritten literature, oral art, orature, and aural literature, which have been historically ascribed to oral traditions, are reconsidered and redefined (Okoh, 2010, p. 62).

The issue of naming and categorizing African oral literature is another complex terrain that extends beyond linguistic nuances to encompass broader challenges related to interdisciplinary boundaries and scholarly identity. Okoh's emphasis on the term "orality" as a descriptor for African oral literature reflects a logical response to the unique characteristics of this literary form. This perspective involves recognizing the multifaceted nature of the naming controversy and its implications for scholars in the field. Okoh's focus on the term "orality" underscores the distinctive nature of African oral literature. By emphasizing the capacity of such literature to be transmitted orally and to come alive in performance, "orality" captures the essence of storytelling traditions that are deeply embedded in African cultures. From a logical standpoint, this term serves as a more inclusive and accurate descriptor, acknowledging the dynamic and performative nature of the literary form. It also suggests an interdisciplinary overlap and identity concerns. This is because scholars in oral literature often engage in fieldwork alongside researchers from history, linguistics, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, political science, and ethnology. This interdisciplinarity, while enriching the study of African oral literature, raises concerns about the perceived identity of scholars in the field. Okoh's analogy of the scholar appearing like a "stray or errant cat" or a "Jack-of-all-trades" highlights the challenges of disciplinary categorization and the potential for scholars to be perceived as lacking a defined scholarly identity.

The foregoing suggests an evolving nature of scholarship in oral literature and the need for flexibility in interdisciplinary boundaries. While interdisciplinary collaboration is enriching, it also calls for a nuanced understanding of scholarly identity. The challenge lies in reconciling the expansive and interconnected nature of African oral literature with the compartmentalized expectations of traditional academic disciplines. A logically sound perspective involves recognizing the value of interdisciplinary collaboration while advocating for a more inclusive and fluid understanding of scholarly expertise. Thus, rather than viewing the interdisciplinary nature of African oral literature studies as a detriment, Okoh's perspective invites a shift towards holistic approaches to research. Scholars in the field can position themselves as experts who draw on diverse disciplines to provide a comprehensive understanding of oral literature. This approach challenges the

notion of a rigid disciplinary boundary and embraces the richness that interdisciplinary engagement brings to the study of African oral literature.

In a general sense, while oral literature is an art and is drawn from the folklore, or oral tradition and performance of a people, not every performance, folklore, or oral tradition is oral literature. The reason is, that oral literature is what it is because of its literariness. This is why masquerade dance; festivals are not oral literature per say but may contain materials for the study of oral literature if they demonstrate literariness. Furthermore, Okoh explains that the parameters for classification of the written literature such as drama, prose and poetry, are the same for the oral form. Thus, in this naming controversy and palaver the name folklore poses a problem. Okoh notes that folklore should not be confused with oral literature (2010, p. 63). The term folklore is not a valid descriptive nomenclature for any of the genres in oral literature, for example, the prose oral literary narrative of a people. The term folktale folklore has its etymology from two words, folk -people, or community, and tale or lore- a narrative or story. It refers to oral expressions in traditional society studied to understand the customs, religion, norms and taboos of a people. It also has a strong negative connotation to it, that is, it is derogatory because of the word “folk”, which suggests a group of people who lack creativity or imaginative expression.

The problem of whether oral literature is also folklore arose because early scholars of African oral tales, such as James Frazer, and Edward Burnet Tylor and the German linguist and missionary Koelle and Thorn whose essays dictated and influenced the early study of the oral literary genre were anthropologist. These scholars were not quite familiar with the African oral literary peculiarity, therefore, they lacked cognate knowledge about African oral literature. This is why their views had a lot of faulty assumptions; as they tend to create a discourse about Africa based on the way they understood it. The problem with their view is that it was clouded with prejudices and they associated oral literature with the notion of folk, the common, ordinary aspects of a people's culture. Okoh's *Preface to Oral Literature* is an attempt to correct this mistake and erroneous use of the term “folk” in referring to African oral literature.

*Preface to Oral literature* also underscored the issue of ownership and royalty of/from the oral literature. This was not a problem before, because oral literature is communally owned (Okoh, 2010, p.93). It is collectively owned, and transmitted through word of mouth, and no single performer can lay claim to it, in terms of ownership. But, today, the patronage of oral literature is greatly challenged by written literature. This is because of the better return on investment associated with written literature due to the commercial value of the copyright. This has encouraged the upsurge in the production of written literary works because a form of royalty could be obtained from it, which is not nearly so in the oral literature. This affects the way, manner, study and funds available for oral literature. It has also informed how the African oral literary artists and critics respond to oral literature and may determine the survival of the oral literary genre, in the future.

The foregoing literary situation may affect the number of available oral literary artists such that griots and bards who tell oral literary art in the traditional sense of it may become extinct. This is carefully explained in another essay (see Okoh, 2007, p.368), where Okoh stressed that for the fact that oral literature lacks the preserving power of print, it may be susceptible to extinction. This is crucial because the death of a storyteller or griot may signal the end of an oral literary performance tradition and ecosystem if there is no apprenticeship to continue such tradition. This is because the place of performance cannot be overemphasized, since oral literature is synonymous with performance or what Okoh (2010) calls “composition in performance” (p. 117). Importantly, performance is the only avenue through which oral literature comes alive (Okoh, 2010, p.129). The overall importance of performance is hinged on the fact that it shows other extra-literary devices



such as facial expressions, costuming, bodily gestures, histrionics, vocal pyrotechnics, idiophonic, tempo, mime dance (Okoh, 2010, p.103-104) while allowing for audience participation. The preceding is a real threat to the existence of oral literature.

The dichotomy between the evolutionist and relativist schools of thought regarding what constitutes drama in African oral literature, as presented by Okoh, unveils a complex discourse that goes beyond theoretical perspectives to touch upon cultural interpretations and the application of Western frameworks to indigenous forms of expression. Analyzing this dichotomy involves considering the logical foundations of both views and the implications for the understanding of drama within African oral literature. The main argument of the evolutionist school is presented by scholars like M.J.C Echeruo, Kalu Uka, and Ola Rotimi, who assert that traditional festivals are not qualified as drama. Their criteria, focusing on the absence of a traditional plot, dialogue, and adherence to Aristotelian unities, reflect a Eurocentric perspective. From a logical standpoint, Okoh contends that these scholars are applying Western theatrical norms to judge African oral literature. This perspective raises questions about the universality of dramatic criteria and the potential imposition of Eurocentric standards on diverse cultural forms. On the other hand, scholars like Emmanuel Obiechina and Ossei Enekwe, aligned with the relativist school, argue that traditional festivals do constitute drama. Their perspective emphasizes communal drama and considers spatial and temporal considerations as valid criteria for defining drama within the African context. This relativist approach acknowledges the cultural specificity of African oral literature and challenges the notion that it should conform to Western theatrical conventions. From a logical standpoint, this view advocates for a more context-sensitive understanding of what constitutes drama.

The dichotomy between evolutionist and relativist perspectives reflects a broader debate in cultural studies—between cultural relativism and the pursuit of universal criteria. The evolutionists, in applying Western standards, lean towards a more universalist approach, assuming that certain criteria define drama universally. The relativists, on the other hand, emphasize the importance of cultural context, asserting that definitions of drama may vary based on cultural traditions. A logically sound perspective involves recognizing the validity of both positions within their respective cultural contexts. Okoh's perspective, situated within the relativist framework, emphasizes the importance of allowing African oral literature to define its parameters of drama. These challenge the imposition of external criteria and encourage scholars to embrace an African-centric understanding of dramatic expression. From a logical standpoint, this perspective aligns with cultural autonomy and the right of African oral literature to be evaluated on its terms. The dichotomy between evolutionist and relativist schools of thought regarding drama in African oral literature highlights the ongoing tension between universalist and culturally specific perspectives. A logically sound perspective involves recognizing the cultural context of African oral literature, acknowledging the validity of diverse criteria for defining drama, and challenging the Eurocentric biases inherent in applying Western frameworks to indigenous forms of expression. This nuanced approach fosters a more inclusive and culturally sensitive understanding of drama within the rich tapestry of African oral literature.

Okoh's position aligns with the relativist schools of thought. One of the strongest points put forth by the relativist school of thought is that African festivals last more than a day, for example, the Asara festival of Ukpok in Nnewi South Local Government Area, the Nwaotom of Opobo in Rivers State, the Kundam in Ghana, the Madingo plays in Mali, and the Ozzidi Saga of the Izon nation. However, both the views of the evolutionist and relativist should be considered, especially if one is to look for what is literary in festivals and masquerades. Importantly, any submission on drama should consider it as a creative enterprise in an oral literature sense. This may include masquerades, festivals,

rituals, performances, and ceremonies of dramatic manifestation (Okoh, 2010, p. 167). It is important to note that Okoh's suggestion that "those African phenomena and realities must be measured by authentically and exclusively African parameters" (Okoh, 2010, p.170) is quite ambiguous. It fails to explain what African parameters are and if these parameters are static or dynamic and provide for Africa's present realities. Importantly, it also calls for concern for the need to evolve an authentic African theoretical model for the study of African oral literature, since what we call the evolutionist or relativist models are mere copying of euro-western models.

The text directs attention to the dynamic shifts occurring in Africa's rural communities, emphasizing the transformative responses of the continent and the pivotal role of oral literature in the overarching project of national development. These shifts manifest as urbanization, technological advancements, the emergence of a novel audience, and the challenges posed by storage and transmission through television satellites. These changes not only mark new horizons for African oral literature but also present distinct challenges that demand profound commitment from scholars in the field. Such challenges include Urbanization and technological progress which represent significant facets of this evolving landscape. The once predominantly rural communities of Africa are undergoing a metamorphosis, and the embrace of technology introduces a new dynamic to the traditional modes of oral literature. The emergence of a different audience, shaped by these urban and technological influences, necessitates a reevaluation of how oral literature engages with and impacts the evolving societal fabric, furthermore, as the broader contextual challenges, including migration, war, trans-border syndication, and nuclear proliferation. These issues intricately interlace with the study of African oral literature, demanding not only scholarly attention but also a nuanced understanding of how these external factors shape the narratives, themes, and transmission of oral traditions.

In this complex tapestry of change, what is subtly underscored is the role of oral literature in contributing to national development. The very acknowledgement of these shifting tides implies that oral literature is not a static entity but a dynamic force capable of adapting and responding to the evolving needs of society. As Africa grapples with multifaceted challenges, the scholar's commitment to the study of oral literature becomes a crucial factor in navigating these complexities and harnessing the potential of oral traditions for the greater project of national development. In addressing the critical challenge of underdevelopment in Africa, the pivotal question arises: How can oral literature contribute to national development? This inquiry delves into the sociological benefits inherent in oral literature. From the insights drawn from Okoh's *Preface to Oral Literature*, it becomes evident that oral literature holds functional benefits, although not explicitly articulated in the tangible markers of modern development such as skyscrapers and technological gadgets. Rather, its contributions extend to the refinement of the human mind, the fostering of an ethically driven society, the advancement of intellect, and the cultivation of symbiotic relationships among individuals. Contrary to the misconception that national development solely hinges on infrastructural growth, Okoh's perspective challenges this notion. In the Nigerian context, where ostensible infrastructural progress coexists with the pervasive issue of corruption, Okoh underscores that true development transcends physical advancements. Instead, he directs attention to the transformation of the human mind as a cornerstone for national progress.

Okoh's emphasis on mind transformation aligns with the intrinsic capacity of oral literature to humanize, reshape mental paradigms, propagate truth, instil moral values, and foster the evolution of a national consciousness. Crucially, he contends that oral literature does not merely reflect the status quo but actively engages in prescribing ethical actions, articulating not just what is but what ought to be. This ethical dimension is indispensable for navigating the complexities of societal challenges and fostering a

collective commitment to moral principles. A fundamental assertion made by Okoh is that oral literature contributes to the evolution of a national consciousness—a cohesive identity that binds the people of a nation into a united soul. This national consciousness, he argues, is a prerequisite for genuine development, transcending mere economic progress to encompass the cultivation of a shared ethos and values. Without a developed national consciousness, he suggests, no nation can progress optimally. In essence, Okoh's perspective underscores the profound role of oral literature in addressing the nuanced dimensions of national development. It becomes a catalyst for societal transformation by influencing individual and collective consciousness, promoting ethical behaviour, and nurturing a sense of shared identity. Thus, the question of how oral literature contributes to national development extends far beyond tangible infrastructure, reaching into the very fabric of the human psyche and societal cohesion.

## CONCLUSION

The exploration of oral literature, as examined through the lens of Nkem Okoh's *Preface to Oral Literature*, reveals a dynamic and multifaceted landscape. The critical analysis has traversed various dimensions, including the dichotomy between evolutionist and relativist schools of thought, the influence of Western biases, challenges posed by etymology and nomenclature, and the foundational nature of oral literature. These discussions extend to the alignment of oral literature with folklore, the complexities of ownership and royalties, and the impact of the evolving global literary landscape on African oral traditions. One significant contribution underscored in this examination is the role of the text in advancing the study of African oral literature, offering a distinctive perspective within the broader context of Igbo oral traditions. The text transcends theoretical discourse, manifesting in tangible applications and implications for the understanding and preservation of African cultural heritage. The intricacies of its themes underscore the fact that oral literature is not a static entity but a living, adaptive force that responds to societal changes, technological advancements, and global influences. The challenges posed by Western-centric perspectives and evolving dynamics necessitate a nuanced and context-specific approach to the study of African oral literature. Ultimately, the text reinforces the idea that oral literature is not only a repository of cultural narratives but a vital component of national identity, ethical consciousness, and intellectual advancement. The critical scrutiny of these themes invites scholars to engage with oral literature not merely as an object of study but as a dynamic force that contributes to the ongoing narrative of cultural resilience and evolution in Africa. The text serves as a testament to the enduring relevance and transformative potential of oral literature in the ever-changing landscape of African societies.

## RECOMMENDATION

This paper has several recommendations it seeks to make, the first is the need for a comparative analysis of African Oral Literature across regions. This is to explore how linguistic diversity, cultural variations, and historical influences have shaped distinct oral literary expressions. By examining specific case studies from various regions, researchers can provide a more nuanced understanding of the similarities, differences, and unique characteristics within Africa's oral literary landscape. The second recommendation is a comparative analysis of the need for an assessment of the contemporary impact of Oral Literature in African societies. This will provide insight, particularly in the context of rapidly changing technological and urbanized environments. It will also deepen understanding of how oral traditions are adapting to modern challenges, the role of technology in preserving and disseminating oral narratives, and the influence of globalization on the transmission and reception of oral literature. This research could

provide insights into the dynamic nature of oral traditions and their relevance in shaping contemporary African identities.

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