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Abstract

The Idea of Performer-Critics

Scholarship in African literature has had to admit the central role that live performance plays in the literary material coming from and focussing on the different parts of Africa. A debate on how oral literature and live performance should be analysed still rages, particularly since many scholars look at the subject from a Western view point that not only categorises the work according to schemas based on writing and Western perception, but also concentrates on written literature. Besides many of the scholars who have examined verbal arts in Africa have not emphasised understanding the work within its specific contexts, time and even intercultural connections without imposing on it preconceived rules or subdivisions.

SUSAN N. KIGULI

Performer-Critics in Oral Performance in African Societies¹

THE IDEA OF PERFORMER-CRITICS

Scholarship in African literature has had to admit the central role that live performance plays in the literary material coming from and focussing on the different parts of Africa. A debate on how oral literature and live performance should be analysed still rages, particularly since many scholars look at the subject from a Western view point that not only categorises the work according to schemas based on writing and Western perception, but also concentrates on written literature. Besides many of the scholars who have examined verbal arts in Africa have not emphasised understanding the work within its specific contexts, time and even intercultural connections without imposing on it preconceived rules or subdivisions.

I am not arguing that no European theories can be applied to African oral literature but scholars should not feel that this is a prerequisite. I concur with Olabiyi Babalola Yai when he states:

In the domain, standard practice by African and non-African students of African oral literatures is to posit a *tabula rasa*. Since African cultures are reputedly 'preliterate', it is assumed that they thereby lack a tradition of literary criticism, the latter being – so it is largely and strongly believed — an attribute of literate cultures. (6)

I propose in the light of the above comment that we should look carefully at what is available in the oral literature that we study and utilise it for a meaningful discourse.

Live performance is widely practiced in the different parts of Africa and one way of acknowledging its significance is by examining its practice within its environment, realizing that it demands its own intellectual space. In my view, performers joining the discussion as actively as academic critics will provide insight into the what and how of African oral performance. As Mineke Schipper argues:

In art history as well as literary studies, certain methods of approach have been mainly developed on the basis of Western material. Today more than ever researchers have become aware of the problems resulting from this academic legacy: the problem cannot be solved but awareness means a certain advantage. (1)

This essay attempts to go beyond awareness to use the voices of performer critics as part of the effort to break out of scholarship based mainly on models of the West that encourage strict categorisations of genres and adherence to understanding form and practice as it presents itself in contemporary Western traditions and cultures. The essay also uses research data from two different countries and

regions as a way of widening and promoting analyses of commonalities and differences between regions on the African continent. A number of studies have pointed out the heterogeneity of Africa's cultures and argued strongly against a monolithic view, especially as far as languages and experiences are concerned. I found the extract below from an interview with V.Y. Mudimbe, a scholar and creative writer who is widely recognised for challenging the canonical paradigms applied to African literary as well as philosophical studies, pertinent here:

Sincerely, I think that the response is quite easy and I gave it to you already by saying that no one has given me the mission of being a prophet in the name of Africa, of being someone committing Africa to anything. By the way we have been using a lot the concept of Africa. I can say that I do not know exactly what this concept means. I can speak about my country, I can speak about my experience, about the communities to which I belonged or still belong. (Smith 976)

As seen in Mudimbe's answer, there has been an effort to reposition the approach to the concept of Africa and how it functions in light of the differences and similarities in, for example, politics, tradition and the arts. It is important while examining oral performance in Africa and, in my case, study of South Africa and Uganda, to realise that practices can only be fairly assessed, understood and used based on how well the practitioners in the field and the intellectuals hold a dialogue about how the forms are developing in the communities concerned. My point is that it is vital to realise how oral poets and performers perceive their world and art and work from within their conceptual worlds and within their value systems. Policy makers and academics who find themselves performing simultaneously as outsiders and insiders to the culture, have to use as well as understand their double role. They have to take into consideration the seriousness with which practitioners take their conceptual cultures. I agree with Appiah when he observes:

We all experienced the persistent power of our own cognitive and moral traditions: in religion, in such social occasions like the funeral, in our experience of music, in our practice of dance, and, of course, in the intimacy of family life. (7)

The poets' performances are informed very much by what Appiah calls 'conceptual heritage' and the practical situation on the ground in the environments of performance. It is therefore necessary to allow the poets and performers to participate in the interpretation of their work and contexts alongside the researcher. Prioritising the voices of poets and performers brings their techniques and world view to centre stage and compels the researcher and academic to contend with, involve and question these views in a more informed manner.

Even scholars devising critical theory from an African perspective have been inclined to treat practitioners as supplementary sources. For example, Appiah in his debate on the role of intellectuals in building an African based knowledge system is astonishingly quiet about the presence of an enormous body of knowledge on oral literature and its producers. He engages with the written work and its critics.

He treats verbal arts as the first step towards a more established and higher form (132). This could be the same reason he discusses modern literature as entirely separate from the traditional and does not acknowledge the crossing of boundaries in these categories. He suggests that the Western body of knowledge and analysis and the thinking of African educated intellectuals is the way to understanding and creating a stable body of critical theory:

Let me say, finally, why I think that the gap between educated Africans and Westerners may not be so wide for much longer, and why all of us will soon find it hard to know from within the nature of an individual. *The answer is simple enough; we now have a few generations of literate African intellectuals and they have begun the process of examining our traditions. They are aided in this by the availability of Western traditions, their access to which, through writing, is no different from Westerners.* The process of analysis will produce new, unpredictable, fusions. Sometimes, something will have to give. What it will be, I cannot predict, though I have my suspicions, and you will be able to guess what they are when I say that it seems to me that the overwhelming political and economic domination of the Third World by the industrialized world will play its part. The fact that our culture's future has the chance of being guided by a theoretical grasp of our situation is an extraordinary opportunity.

(Appiah 216 [my emphasis])

In my opinion, Appiah needs to acknowledge that working primarily from our own systems of knowledge may in fact be central to a more sensitive interpretation of both our intellectual and literary practices.² In his argument about intellectuals, Appiah is largely informed by the work of Frantz Fanon. Although Fanon's analysis of the position of the colonised and the coloniser and alienated intellectuals is a groundbreaking one, his observation is made in general terms and does not point out the heterogeneity of Africa's pre-colonial structures. As David Caute notes, Fanon had 'a single vision for the continent and a single solution' (79).

Femi Osofisan has an effective argument when he comments on Africa's marginality in the 'popular' postcolonial debate. Our concern should not be the creation of Western equivalents of theory or literary models. I think we should not seek to create performances that simply echo European modes but rather to give space to the analysis and consequently the understanding of how our contexts work. Osofisan observes:

In Africa we have our own battle of Identity, of course, but it is not the same as that of postcolonialism, and where it concerns individuals and the private psyche, not the most urgent of our preoccupations. And this no doubt, may be one of the reasons Africa, so far has featured only marginally in the wonderful 'postcolonial' debate. (1)

I share Osofisan's view that our urgent concerns should not be concentrated on demystifying the 'racist myth' or even on recovering the past, but rather on the importance of connecting with our own artistic productions and perceptions. This would focus discussion on the creation of a body of critical works that come from us as participants in the production of systems of understanding our own current discourse by focusing on the poets' and performers' views and performance, I

am attempting to position the debate on them as producers and critics of their performances. As Osofisan further notes:

Obviously, then, if we have a great battle to fight for survival at all, the first place to start *must be on the home front*. Thus, while the target of orientalism — and of postcolonialism, its offspring — is the West (a front which we must leave to our diasporic kinsmen and women to fight) the target of our own battle must be, and has been, ourselves. (5)

As Osofisan points out, we can only fully comprehend our literary products by being in touch with what is taking place in our communities. I argue that one way of being in touch is to speak to the performers of oral works who serve a significant part of Africa and reflect the current reality of the particular places and performers that produce them.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o has argued consistently on the issue of perception and presentation of literature that comes from and talks to its own people. In his case, he concentrates on how African literature in general stands vis-a-vis the colonial and the neo-colonial world. Ngugi also points to one rather crucial but perhaps general point, the centrality of acknowledging one's location in order to obtain a full and meaningful existence. The poets' views firmly define the 'groundedness' of their creativity. This may also explain why the poets I interviewed or whose performances I attended were keen to point out to me the importance of the performer-audience relationship and their connection to 'traditional' or cultural memory.

It is crucial to question and to place these performances using a cultural understanding of history, literature and society as a whole. In his studies of the importance of oral performance Richard Bauman points out its rootedness in people's ways of thinking and life. Performances spring from what he refers to as 'deeply situated human behavior'. The text in this situation is not independent of the techniques of composition or situations of production; rather, it constitutes a whole event. In essence the examination of the performances and the material produced should seek to make meaning of the locatedness of what is being performed. To understand the function of oral poetry, it is useful to understand the actual composition and performance processes. Mazisi Kunene highlights the importance of performance in oral poetry:

Zulu poetry is traditionally composed to be performed whether it is a nursery rhyme or a heroic poem. Performance is such an integral part of Zulu traditional poetry that its meaning can only be fully realized in the dramatization. The public nature of the performance requires not only a skilled presentation by an actor-poet but also the active involvement of the audience. It is not uncommon for the members of the audience to make complementary side comments on the episodes of a poem as the poet narrates and acts out his words. (Kunene xxxi)

Performance is a communicative process in which performer, audience and the social practice of oral poetry are vital for the interpretation and understanding of the genre. The performer is important in the performance event and analysing his

or her views will contribute to understanding the relationship between performer, composition process, audience, purpose and the overall context in which the performances of oral poetry occur.

In this essay, ideas of what the performer does are analysed with emphasis on the interpretation of the performer and the environment of performance in terms of values, beliefs and ideologies at play. The context then has not been read narrowly as constituted by the text but as socially constructed and culturally determined construct that is subject to the dynamism of change and timing.

There are tensions, such as reconciling the rhythms and structures of an oral performance to an academic and predominantly literate space, faced by critics dealing with the field of orality that makes critics such as Tim Couzens use inverted commas when referring to oral literature (6). He seems undecided on the literariness of the oral genres but does not provide an explanation for his discomfort. The literary debate in South Africa, for example, is still dominated by the written text. More on what is happening in the field of oral literature needs to be heard. As Landeg White puts it:

We need an aesthetic deriving not from external models or theories of orality but from evidence of African texts and from the comments of performers and audiences in Africa about the nature of the literature they value. This task has barely begun. (1989 35)

White emphasises the importance of transforming the perceptions of African oral literature by taking approaches that use it as a centre of its own theorisation. I found in the course of my research that in Buganda for instance, the performers had a number of critical terms they used that they considered central to the construction of an oral poetry performance. They painstakingly explained terms such as *ebisoko* (which primarily means poetic idioms), *ebikwate* (which means received used interchangeably with crammed or sometimes spoken poetry or a high form of prose) versus *ebintontome* (which refers to chanted or recited poetry with an implied meaning of it being highly original) and *ebigambo ebiwerere* (which means refined prose).

The failure to place the work within its context leads to the impression that these performances cannot occupy a central locus in the main literary discourses of Africa. In my understanding of African situations, it is when these genres that are usually labelled informal are taken up and studied with an awareness of the environment within which they operate that they can begin to acquire prominence.

ORAL POETS IN BUGANDA

A keen sense of the development of both poetic and musical forms embedded in the life of Buganda as a kingdom pervades discussion on the life and work of oral poets. A body of debate surrounds the idea of Buganda³ as a kingdom/nation (*gwanga*) whose people are conscious of their identity and are eager to assert their history and connect themselves to the kingdom. Devotion to unity is still vital to identity even in the post-civil war era where the central government of

Uganda has political control over the kingdom of Buganda. The kingdoms in Uganda are currently cultural institutions without any political powers and the 1995 constitution clearly states their apolitical status.

In my interviews with performers on the nature and role of performance and their relationship to social change, there has been constant reference to the influence of the generations of past oral poets as well as to the musicians at the Buganda court on the life and work of the contemporary poets. The king's palace, the chiefs' courts and cultural functions in the kingdom have direct connections to the poetry and music that is produced in the kingdom. Most poetry in Buganda was put to music both at the royal court and outside it. The kings' harpists in past generations are said to have sometimes chanted poems at court but the harpists who now play before the king do not recite poems before him.

Recited poetry in Buganda is associated more closely with life outside the court. The folk poems in circulation are very popular in the countryside and in schools. In 2001 I visited Lugazi West Primary School in Mukono district in Eastern Buganda and the children recited folk poems without effort. One of Buganda's well known poets, Phoebe Nakibuule Mukasa explains:

Recently in July, 2001, I adjudicated at the annual poetry competitions for Buganda schools. The poems had to be in Luganda. The children from rural areas did better than the urban children. Yet they were all composing on the same theme. Some very old folk poems still exist in rural areas. If you go to the village and hear children at play, you will realise that many old poems still exist. (Kiguli 2001b np)

The oral poems are not all regarded as children's rhymes. Old poems that seem to have been composed by adults are being taught to children in primary schools. Nakibuule Mukasa who recorded and co-edited a book of oral poems points out:

I recorded oral poems and wrote them down to preserve them. I showed the collection to Professor Livingstone Walusimbi and later the poems were printed... The poems are indirect and have deep hidden meanings. Children even recite them without being aware of the hidden meaning. We realised this and this particular book was elevated to an 'A' Level text. Children all over Buganda recite these poems but serious study of them is at a higher level. (Kiguli 2001b np)

The composers of folk poems are not known but most people know the names of the people who recorded and edited them. Most poets in Buganda are also musicians, and I found very few that did not recite as well as sing. The poets who recite also feel a strong sense of loyalty to the king, and even though their compositions are more to do with day-to-day experiences, they point out that they compose poems on the kings and the kingdom. One of the poets, Kaddu Mabbirizzi, who won the title Poet of Poets in Buganda (*Sabatontomi wa Buganda*), three times in the Buganda poetry competitions organised by the king's court, says that he has composed more about the dead kings than the present king. His aim is to recreate their lives for the children who have no immediate sense of what it was to live under the past kings. He says:

In my life, I avoid political themes, especially when I learnt the cause of Kawadwa's murder under Amin... But when it comes to the king, I compose with all my heart. I feel that my love for the kingdom comes from my very being therefore composing about kingship is part of me. I love the king very much and when I compose poems about him I feel everything coming together. My king is in my blood: he is my blood. In fact I have recited before the present king several times. I was chosen to recite when he was on tour. I was chosen from Kaggo Malokwezi County. I wrote a beautiful poem for him. It was even broadcast on Radio Uganda. Ooh! When it comes to *Ssabasajja, Bbenne, Ccuccu, Mukono Nnantawetwa, Ssemanda* - I do my very best.

(Kiguli 2001a np)

Recited poetry is still very important in Buganda. It is not strictly identified with the court but it recognises the existence of the king and his relationship to the community.

PERFORMANCE CULTURE IN ANKOLE AND ITS DIRECT RELATIONSHIP TO *EBYEVUGO*

Whereas in Buganda, my main focus has been on the poetry sung to music, particularly that originating from the king's palace, in Ankole the focus will be on the heroic recitations because of their centrality to the cultural life of the Banyankole. Scholars have pointed out that Ankole is a colonial formulation born out of the expansion as well as the mispronunciation of the name Nkore during colonial expansion.⁴ The pre-colonial kingdom of Nkore was smaller than the present counties of Kashari, Isingiro and Nyabushozi in Ankole. With the coming of the British, Ankole was formed and the independent states of Igara, Busimba, Bunyaruguru and Buhweju were incorporated into the kingdom. The former kingdom of Mpororo, which includes the current counties of Kajara, most of Rwampara and most of Sheema, also became part of Ankole, and the Ankole Agreement of 1901 officially recognised the expansion of Nkore into Ankole. Presently, Ankole is composed of the districts of Mbarara, Bushenyi and Ntungamo.

Ankole is made up of two groups, the Bahima and the Bairu, although currently there are other groups of people settled in Ankole, among which are notable populations of Banyarwanda, Bakiga and Baganda. The Bairu are said to be the original inhabitants of the area and currently comprise eighty percent of the population. Theories defining and seeking to explain the Bahima's aristocratic status say they originated from the horn of Africa and claim Hamitic origins for them. The Bahima and the Bairu of Ankole speak the same language with dialectical variations. While the Bahima are pastoralists, the Bairu are agriculturalists. The Bahima speech is rich in cattle terminology. Although the Bahima are far less in number than the Bairu, they traditionally formed the aristocratic class of the Nkore kingdom. The royal clan, known as the Bahinda, belongs to the Bahima ethnic group. Traditional accounts in Ankole indicate that there are four main clans — the Bahinda, the Bashambo (from whom the royal family of the former Mpororo kingdom originated), the Bagahe and the Baishikatwa.

Presently in Ankole, *omugabe* (king) has not been restored because of strong anti-monarchy feelings among the Bairu. Whereas Prince Charles Aryajja

Rwebishengye Barigye is recognised as an heir-apparent to the kingdom, he has not officially been installed. The main argument has been that re-establishing the monarchy will lead to civil strife. A number of people interviewed argued that for unity and integration to continue in Ankole, the monarchy ought not to be restored.

In my interview with Stephen Rwangyezi, the founder of Ndere Troupe, national chairperson of Uganda Development Theatre Association and *omwewugi*⁵, he was reluctant to discuss the political and social inequalities among the Bairu and the Bahima and when he did, he was very careful to explain the Bairu-Bahima relationship as he perceived it:

You see, Bahima and Bairu, I would say are rather derogatory terms that developed with time. We had Banyankore, the people of Nkore. If you return to the creation myths, for example that of the three sons of Ruhanga, this myth tells you of children that lived together without distinction until a certain time when the father had to name them and give them a test. 'Hold this milk and I will check on you in the morning'. The youngest son fell asleep and his milk poured out, and his brothers topped up for him and he did not sleep again. Later in the night, the eldest slept and poured all his milk, and the rest refused to help him because he had absolutely nothing left. The second son had half because he had given some to the youngest, and the youngest had a full gourd. When the father came in the morning, he declared the youngest king and said that all his descendants would be kings. The second, Kahima, with a half gourd, would keep the cows and be near the king and Kairu, with absolutely nothing, was declared the servant. That justifies the roles in traditional society. If you went to work for a wealthy *muhima* you became his *mwiru* (servant). There are two types of servants. *Omuchumba* is a destitute and will work for food and shelter but *omwiru* is someone who comes to work for pay and eventually goes back to his own farm. The *mwiru* identity crept on to the family of the person who had come to serve and they were all labelled *abairu*. With the coming of colonialism, these differences were polarised. (Kiguli 2001 np)

Rwangyezi's views of the socio-political relationships in Ankole before colonialism correspond with the historian Samwiri Karugire's. They both argue that the Bahima-Bairu relationship was a symbiotic one where the system of *okuchuroka* (equivalent to barter trade) existed. According to this view, occupational differences also determined the differences in social behaviour and manners. They point out that even though Bahima and Bairu shared many customs, religious practices and beliefs, there were instances where the codes of conduct were different. Most people I interviewed argued that it was important to understand these relationships in order to understand why in the past most Ankole praise poets were Bahima and even currently Bahima praise poets tend to think they know the art better than the Bairu ones.

H.F. Morris presented *ebyevugo* (heroic recitations) as if they exclusively belonged to *bahima* (10–11). In my discussions with different people on the issue of the heroic recitations, it emerged that it was not as straightforward as Morris made it seem. Rwangyezi observed:

If we are talking about *kwevuga* being for Bahima, then there would be no *byevugo* in Kabale so the historical thing was not merely according to class but it was about

Banyankore–Bakiga as tribes. The difference between them is thin, only the Bakiga are more republican and are agriculturalists. (Kiguli 2001 np)

Rwangyezi argues that we cannot view *ebyevugo* as a possession of one group of people within Ankole since the neighbouring tribe of the Bakiga also have *ebyevugo*. Kigezi borders the north and east of Ankole. In *kiga* tradition, for different occasions such as marriage ceremonies, hunting preparations, war preparations, victory celebrations as well as beer parties, men would come out and praise themselves. He further points out that among the Bakiga, the art of composing and performing recitations was exclusive to men. Men were expected to celebrate the qualities of bravery, hard work, courage, endurance and patriotism because according to traditional custom, it was men who usually went to war or hunted dangerous animals.

But according to Patrick Kirindi, well-known Ankole writer, elder and *omwewugi*, in Nkore recitations were composed by both men and women and the distinctions lay in the themes the different sexes discussed. While those composed by men concerned past wars, those by women concerned their beauty. Rwangyezi agrees with this idea when he says:

Yes, traditionally, *ebyevugo bya bakazi* is a completely different form (and he demonstrates). They will talk about the family and they will talk about cattle in their colours, beauty and productivity. Unlike the men who usually talk about cows in terms of famine and wars, the women will praise the actual animal. They have a completely different form although these days, some women recite male *ebyevugo* and people look on in amazement. But that usually goes back to cramming someone else's *ebyevugo*. This can be done by anybody, women, slaves, anybody, but it will not be theirs.

(Kiguli 2001 np)

Mzee John Byaruhanga an elder in Rushere, Nyabushozi also observed exactly the same thing (Kiguli 2001d np) — that in Ankole while men sing and recite about bravery in war and the survival of the cows, the women, who usually accompany their *ebyevugo* with a harp, sing about the beauty of cows and women and the bravery of men. But he also pointed out that times are changing and some women now recite on the same topics as men.

Although a number of sources pointed out that the practice and performance of *ebyevugo* was not exclusive to Bahima — other sources such as Isaac Tibamanya, a renowned *mwevugi* in Nyanga — Rushere expressed the view that in the past, *abevugi* were predominantly Bahima and insisted that he is outraged at the state of the performance of heroic recitations. He said that the strangest change is that people are so ready to recite other people's recitations and that the Bairu basically recite compositions that are not theirs. He even referred to the cases when *ebyevugo* are recorded on tape and 'agriculturalists' put on their radios and listen to them while cultivating their land. He sounded quite puzzled by this phenomenon as he evidently thought that this was a devaluation of the status and philosophy of *ebyevugo*.

Ebyevugo, commonly referred to as heroic recitations, are a very dynamic part of the art of the Banyankore. *Omwevugi*, a person who performs heroic recitations, is seen as a thinker and a social observer. In the past an *omwevugi* was regarded as a person of status. Rwangyezi explained the concept of *okwevuga* at length:

I think the word *okwevuga* has survived more in Runyarwanda than Runyankore. Because of the influence of other people, we adopted the word 'okwegambaho' which literally means 'talking about yourself'. But *okwevuga* is to self praise so *ebyevugo* have the element of praising yourself for those heroic activities that you had undertaken. You either had succeeded in war and were talking about those very difficult situations that you only went through because of your great tactics, bravery and tough manhood ... or you are talking about cows because cows are everything: it is a convertible currency you have them and you have everything. If you are a good cattle keeper you know about sorting out breeds. You know which breed will give milk, which bull will give you which breed and which cows are resistant to diseases and drought. A cattle keeper will be talking about these cows, but one cannot talk about cows without talking about defending them, and you cannot talk about defence without talking about fighting for them. If you have cattle in their thousands, the pride-worthy ones are the ones with smooth, long white horns, particularly well shaped. We say '*kongambe ente totamu nkankondo*'. In other words, when you talk about cows, we do not talk about the ones with horns facing inwards; we talk about the ones worth talking about. If you have a large herd then you are rich and other things such as social status follow... It is that kind of person therefore that does *okwevuga* because he will be listened to.

(Kiguli 2001 np)

The idea of talking about oneself and one's cows seems to be at the very centre of the Banyankore's idea of *okwevuga*. *Omwevugi* Tibamanya kept referring to the idea that it was possible, for example, to talk about other people's cows and he admitted reciting about President Museveni's cows, but he emphasised, and I will quote his own words:

By the way, I cannot recite about someone else's cows and fail to recite about mine. I am always with my cows. I start with my own cows. (Kiguli 2001c np)

The core of *okwevuga* springs from the ability to be proud of one's achievements and talk about them. All the respondents I talked to had a low regard for people who they said just learnt and recited other people's compositions. They said that it was acceptable to quote someone and explained that quoting or referring to the same event was not the same as copying another *omwevugi*'s poem. The two *bevugi* I interviewed at length vehemently denied reciting other people's compositions.

Susan: Was this really your own composition?

Byakatonda: Yes indeed. It is mine.

Susan: Or did you hear it from someone else?

Byakatonda: No, not at all. Except in instances where I met problems, then I had to sit down in a quiet place and write what I was composing on paper, then I would recite what I had written. (Kiguli 2001e np)

The same idea runs through Tibamanya's interview too:

Susan: Did you learn this from your father?

Tibamanya: Yes, I did. He was a great poet.

Susan: Did he help you?

Tibamanya: Yes, I first recited his but later I began to compose my own. I can even sing. I can for example compose and recite about my interview with you today.

Susan: Are there people, especially elders, who helped you in some of these recitations?

Tibamanya: No, I only listened and then later composed my own. All those I recite have been composed by me...

Susan: May be one other thing I forgot to ask, did all the other reciters you know learn them like you did?

Tibamanya: Well, some others learn from friends and they recite other people's recitations.

Susan: Is that so?

Tibamanya: Because some do listen to others, they will recite what others recited before... But I do not recite other people's recitations. (Kiguli 2001c np)

Abevugi insist that they compose their own poetry not because they want to own the process but mainly because the practice of simply learning other people's recitations violates the core concept of the purpose and what most of them referred to as the philosophy of recitation. *Okwevuga* should start from a person who recites; he must have played a central part in what he discusses. Tibamanya explained that there were cases when different *abevugi* talked about the same events and that was acceptable as long as they did it in a way that showed that they were recounting events in which they participated.

Okwevuga as understood by the Banyankore is regarded as a formal way of getting up to talk about one's own exploits while everybody else listens and agrees as well as approves. The signal for approval is the audience's response of 'eeh' after an *enkome* (stanza). The audience give the performer time to state his exploits and explain the roles he took on during the different events and then chorus in agreement. Traditionally, the performer holds a spear and recounts his heroic deeds. The spear used is a long one, which the performer thrusts back and forth, and when he finishes his performance he plants it in the middle of the circle formed by his audience. Usually the person who thinks that his exploits are better or equal to those of the previous performer picks up the spear and starts talking about himself. Often the gathering follows one theme at a time.

I was told about three other sub-genres which respondents said were related to *okwevuga*. The first is *ekirahiro*. Morris talks about *ekirahiro* as a recitation in praise of a man's cattle where each cow or bull is praised in detail.⁶ Isaac Tibamanya also talked about '*okurahirira omuntu*', still in connection with recitations about cows. He described the origin of '*okurahirira omuntu*' as being inspired by a friend going to visit another and the host delivering a recitation in appreciation of the visit. In the recitation, the person talks about the beauty of the

cattle and the various troubles experienced and overcome by the herdsman and his cows. According to Tibamanya, the recitation presents to the visitor the pride of his host which essentially lies in his possessions, the cows.

The third type mentioned in relation to *okwevuga* was *okwesimirana*. This is a form that one person uses to tell another in public that he is, for instance, wealthier than the person he is addressing. It enumerates what the challenger has and questions the status of the person being addressed. *Okwesimirana* is said to occur at a generally casual level that could degenerate into quarrels and fights. Whereas *okwevuga* is regarded as a formal and higher level and when a person is performing *ekyevugo* the audience give their undivided attention, *okwesimirana* was explained as confrontational. If a person decides that he wants to sit on a better chair or place occupied by the person next to him, then he confronts this person and challenges him to give up the chair. This form originates from the belief that wealth and confidence are necessary features of success. If one falls on hard times then one cannot sit with other men of higher status because one would be challenged using the *okwesimirana* form. Increasing and keeping a large herd among the Bahima is central to their status and identity. The more cows one has the higher one's status. It is a source of concern to the older Bahima that the younger generation find selling a cow an easier task than they did. Rwangyezi explained:

If I told my father that I wanted to sell a cow, he would not sleep that night. 'Sell a cow? Remove a cow from the kraal?' Not unless there is a real disaster. To tell him to sell a cow and reduce their number and for example turn them into books sounds like insanity to him. How will he sit with other men when they are counting the heads of cattle because for every one hundred cows a bell is put on the one that is chosen as the leader of the herd. The bell is called *milere*. So the logic is simple: the number of *milere* is counted and if you have one, you sit with those of one in that order. For my father to start selling and reducing ten *milere* to one, he would rather commit suicide. This whole set up explains the basis of *okwevuga*. It is when a man has that status and can stand before people and pick that spear and openly put it up. If a man's cows are being raided and he runs away during the fight, then he cannot talk. If he comes and finds us talking about cattle, he cannot join in. (Kiguli 2001 np)

The driving force behind *ebyevugo* is proving one's worth as an individual. It begins with the individual and then elaborates or discusses how that particular individual sees other people. In *ebyevugo*, the poet will talk about other people or relations in connection with his experiences.

THE PRACTICE OF PRAISE POETRY AND POPULAR SONG IN KWAZULU NATAL

The recognition of Zulu as a nation began with King Shaka and his military genius in forming a powerful nation out of the Nguni-speaking clans, some of whom live in what is now known as Kwazulu-Natal. The legends of the founding fathers of the Zulu nation play a dominant role in the psyche of the Zulu to date. The Zulu family tree based on genealogical data of kings is part and parcel of royal *izibongo*. From Shaka's reign in 1816, the king's presence and control over events in the Zulu kingdom has been very powerful. This is not to say that the kings

before Shaka were not recognised, but Shaka's power and military campaigns made the royal presence far stronger than it was before. Shaka assimilated a large number of states around him and created a bigger Zulu nation. As noted by Landeg White:

Though the intellectual rules keep altering, Shaka survives as a central object of fascination, and the shifting fashions have themselves become an object of study.
(1982 15)

In Zululand, like other Southern African Bantu speaking nations, praise poetry is regarded as a significant account of historical and social events. The form is common to the Xhosa and Zulu who call it *izibongo*, while the neighbouring Sotho have a similar form they refer to as *lithoko* or *lifela* and the Tswana call it *maboko*. As noted by various scholars, this form is widespread across Africa. During my research, I was struck by the compelling similarities between the praise poetry of Ankole and Zulu.

In Zulu experience however, the form has been strongly associated with the kings by different writers and most probably as a result of that more discussion of the *izibongo* of the kings has taken place. It does not mean that the form was not and is not used beyond the court, it was and is and studies have been done on *izibongo* that centre on ordinary families, clans and individuals. Yet it must be said that the figure of the *imbongi* (praise poet) as a prominent figure at court was and is still prominent.

Praise poetry does not simply refer to just praises; the *imbongi* did and still does more than just praise. He is an analyst of the times in which he lives and those in which his ancestors lived before him. The *imbongi* transcends the moment of performance and is a voice that synthesises old and new experiences.⁷ In an interview with Mazisi Kunene, he explained that the word *izibongo* approximately translated as praise poem coming from the root word *bonga* which could mean either praise or censure and reproach depending on the situations in which the poet was performing or the circumstances of composition. He explained that *izibongo* in Zulu traditions exists along with other poetic genres such as *izithakazelo* translated as clan praises, *amaculo* (songs) and *izaga* (proverbs). He also talked specifically of Zulu traditional lyric poetry which is especially composed to be sung.

Most people emphasised that the *izibongo* of the past kings were very important because they revealed a lot about the nation's history, religion and social structures. *Izibongo*, according to current Zulu beliefs, give a cohesive account of the nation, kings and survival. These claims become important especially since the discussion of events in the *izibongo* give the poets' view of what happened and is happening in the Zulu nation. According to *imbongi* Peuri Dube, it is an analysis presented 'from the ranks of the people' and therefore it reveals in part the thinking and philosophies of the Zulu nation.

Although *izibongo* is more than just court poetry, its link to royalty particularly in the formation of the Zulu identity, cannot be overlooked. The words and voices

of the *izimbongi* have immortalised the kings of the Zulu and created complex figures of history that have partly formed the conscience of the Zulu nation. The term *izibongo* as has been pointed out by various scholars is an elastic one and is linked invariably to other subgenres. Gunner and Mafika link it in particular to *izigiyo* which they translated as the songs to go with the war dance. They show a connection between praising and the performance of *izigiyo*.

THE IMAGE OF THE *IMBONGI* IN PAST AND PRESENT

The *imbongi* has been claimed to be 'the poet of the nation' not only in the present but also in the past. The *imbongi* as a figure in national history has been used to recount the lives of individuals both royal and ordinary, events, victories as well as crises. Some claim the *imbongi* as an official poet whose role is to celebrate national events.

Some respondents commented that one of the things that shaped an *imbongi* is his love for cattle. The young boys learnt praises as they herded cattle. They would recite the praises of their fathers and as they grew older they would develop their own praises. When the cows disappeared as colonial forces took over other sources of inspiration such as a desire to keep the identity of nation and individuals alive took over. An *imbongi* then claims the connection to his ancestors as a point of survival and maintenance of the community's identity and solidarity.

For the modern *imbongi*, the connection to the ancestors and to the cultural knowledge seemed very important. The vital element in their calling seems to be the service to the wider community. Some of the praise singers in Durban also performed for money and were being hired by companies to market the company agenda to the public. An interesting fact for me is that other poets performing in Durban who are not *izimbongi* referred to the *imbongi* and *izibongo* as points of inspiration for them. There are fewer women poets than men. Still they were present and claimed that this trend was started off during the days of the struggle against apartheid when poets such as Nise Malange took to the platform beside the male counterparts such as Alfred Qabula. There was a wave of *imbongi* who were seen to be directly confronting the oppressor and the *izibongo* were then used as part of the weapons of struggle for liberation. *Izibongo* became part of the discourse of protest in the struggle. *Izibongo* and the *toyitoyi* were performed together at rallies, funerals and workers meetings. The worker *izibongo* in what is now Kwazulu Natal was a part of a massive campaign and it was widely recognised.

After the fall of apartheid the form had to be redirected to different purposes. The focus is now on using the *izibongo* to make the community aware of how to improve themselves and in recent years the form has been used in varying degrees to create awareness on issues of health and to fight AIDS. The performances have now ceased to happen in the same way they did in the years of the struggle. Although the system for the royal *izimbongi* has not changed and they still recite for the king, the more visible and accessible *izimbongi* focus on community work

and many of the younger ones use their poetry to earn a living and work for various companies or drama groups depending on the demand.

PERFORMANCE AS UNDERSTOOD BY ORAL POETS I INTERVIEWED

Performance as understood from my interviews with oral poets with whom I interacted is not just about language and action; it also deals deeply with expressing layers of meaning located in both the present and the past. The poets presented their performance as an intense interaction of knowledge, alternative perspectives and experiences in a way that compels both performer and audience to engage in a mental and physical conversation. They mostly thought of performance as a particular way of being, conditioned by performer, audience, time and the cultural context, which compels all participants to engage in analysis of their beliefs, perceptions and prevailing situations. The poets I interviewed came across as possessors of very intimate and critical knowledge about their work. They insisted that their links with their specific historical, cultural and literary locations provide insights into the value of performances and the meaning of content and the general effect of performative events on both performer and audience.

NOTES

- ¹ Some of the ideas in this work are excerpted from my forthcoming book on *Oral poetry and Popular Song in South Africa and Uganda: A Study of Contemporary Performance*. I would also like to acknowledge the support of the American Council of Learned Societies- African Humanities Programme for the post-doctoral research support. I would also like to thank The 4th European Conference on African Studies- ECAS4 for providing me with a conference grant to present this paper on panel 33, ECAS4.
- ² Oyekan Owomoyela in his argument that African Studies should epistemologically and paradigmatically reflect the spirit of the continent points out that Appiah in his analysis of intellectualism suggests that literacy is an epistemic necessity. This reasoning suggests advantage for literate cultures over non-literate ones. Owomoyela, 'With Friends Like these... Critique of Pervasive Anti Africanisms in Current African Studies', p. 80.
- ³ It is essential to point out that from the root 'Ganda' a number of prefixes are added to derive meanings. Buganda stands for the kingdom while Obuganda could mean both the territory as well as the set of cultural norms and values. Luganda refers to the language, Baganda to the people, Muganda to one person and Kiganda to the styles and ways of doing things in Buganda.
- ⁴ See Samwiri Rubaraza Karugire, *A History of the Kingdom of Nkore in Western Uganda to 1896*; Pius Zirimu, 'Some Aspects of the Phonology and Grammar of Runyakore with special reference to Nominals, unpublished M.A Dissertation (Leeds: Leeds University, 1969).
- ⁵ An Ankole oral poet who chants Ankole praise poetry or what may be termed heroic recitations.
- ⁶ See H.F.Morris, *The Heroic Recitations of the Bahima of Ankole*; G.P.N. Kirindi, *Ebyevugo N'ebyesongoro bya Nkore*.
- ⁷ See Archies Mafeje, 'The Role of the Bard in a Contemporary African Community' and Liz Gunner and Mafika Gwal, *Musho: Zulu Popular Praises*.

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