

THE INTERRELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ORAL LITERATURE AND MUSEUM STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

Oral literature and museums are intimately related to each other. While the former is an academic discipline, the latter is an institution. This article examines the historical background of the study of oral literature and the historical development of the museum so that the relationship between the two can be easily appreciated. The article argues that oral literature, as a form of folklore, can help to create good museums and that the museum, on the other hand, can contribute to the study of oral literature. This interrelationship, once appreciated by both oral literature scholars (folklorists) and museologists (museum scholars), will be of tremendous benefit to the study of oral literature as an academic discipline and to the development of more thematic museums, especially in Africa where oral literature is a dynamic aspect of societal life.

Keywords: folklore; interrelationship; museum studies; oral literature

INTRODUCTION

Oral literature exists in every culture and is almost as old as the language in which it is formulated. ‘Oral literature is socially conditioned and, inevitably, reflects the social norms of the society from which it emanates and within which it functions’ (Enongene 2011, 40). On account of its oral nature and the corresponding dependence on human memory for its existence and actualisation, one is tempted to associate its



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fortunes with fragility (Imeyen 2007, 184). As a form of folklore, oral literature describes and prescribes. It reflects what people do, how they think, how they live as well as what they aspire to. It also reinforces the status quo by consistently depicting societal and cultural norms (Asimeng-Boahene and Baffoe 2014, xi). Folklore, as the mother of oral literature, encompasses the entire gamut of traditionally derived and orally transmitted cultural materials, for example literature (all the genres of the oral literary tradition), beliefs and myths, customs and social conventions and material culture. In other words, folklore refers to such materials as are mostly found in indigenous traditions. In this paper, we consider oral literature as folklore. Therefore, we treat folklore both as a study and as a body of materials. The materials that folklore is concerned with are both tangible and intangible.

On the other hand, the museum is an institution devoted to the collection, preservation, documentation, exhibition and study of objects of almost any character. It is a highly technical, educational and research-oriented institution of great scientific value and cultural interest. It is, in theory as well as in practice, for the enjoyment of anybody who may wish to avail himself/herself of its facilities. Objects that museums acquire fall into two broad categories: cultural property and specimens of nature. Cultural property includes all items that are created by human beings out of things available in or from nature. Specimens of nature are things that human beings find readymade, explore or cultivate. In the past, when museums were accumulating objects of various kinds, either as artefacts of bygone days (objects left by our ancestors) or as specimens for scientific analysis, all objects were viewed as tangible products. Many museum objects are now considered to be both tangible and intangible. The educational role of a modern museum demands that objects be displayed in such a way as to enable viewers to appreciate not simply the physical aspects of a thing, but also the inward condition of the mind of its producer and its user.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF ORAL LITERATURE AS FOLKLORE

Oral literature is an important aspect of folklore. The term 'folklore', comprising 'folk' (people) and 'lore' (science), suggests that it is a science of a people or race (Alembong 1996, 119). The term 'folklore' was introduced by William John Thoms, a British scholar, in a letter he wrote to the *Revue*, in Charles Wentworth Dilke's 'Athenaeum', in August 1846 (Martha 2005, 23), to study the ways of life characteristic of people living at a pre-industrial stage of social development or at least at a stage in which the pre-industrial patterns of life still persisted. The concept of folklore was, however, fairly established even before the term was coined by the British scholar. However, this concept came as a result of social transformation in Europe. Since the Industrial Revolution was gaining momentum and shattering the

old order of social and economic relationships, scholars felt that the peasant ways of life were at stake in European society (Doyle 2003, 64). This apprehension aroused an interest in the preservation of both visual and verbal traditions as a repository of a dying cultural heritage. This interest, obviously born out of romanticism, laid the foundation for the study of folklore. Initially, such scholars, who were studying ruins, ancient monuments, folktales, legends, fallacies, strange beliefs, superstitions and quaint customs, were known as antiquarians and their subject-matter was called 'popular antiquities'. It was in Germany that a nationalistic impulse, apart from romanticism, motivated scholars, like the Grimm brothers, to preserve and study household tales. When the term 'folklore' came into use, both romanticism and nationalism typified the study of folklore. With time, the word came to designate the body of knowledge, the customs and arts of a people. But the precise frontiers of the concept have not been clearly defined. The result is that from one scholar to another, depending on his or her orientation, folklore has assumed different meanings and interpretations.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE MUSEUM

At its birth, the museum was a repository of artefacts. Originally established by Nabonidus (555–538 BC), the last king of Babylon, the museum is one of the oldest institutions of humanity (Mahmud and Rahman 1987, 53). The world's first museum was devoted to archaeology (Mahmud and Rahman 1987, 53). The name of this repository was, however, not the namesake of the museum we have today. We do not know what name it was then called. The English word 'museum' is derived, through Latin, from the Greek word, *mousein*, which means 'the seat of the Muses'. The functions of a modern museum were not at all times inherent in the word 'museum' and were certainly conspicuous by their absence at the time of its apparent origin in ancient Greece. The *mousein* was the temple of nine Muses, each of whom was the patron goddess of an art (Glassie 1989, 36). The Greeks, fond of cultivating the arts and deeply involved in their development, would worship the patron goddesses. The Muses' realm was by no means a place for learning. It was, in fact, a place where the devotees would spend time in a mood of aloofness above everyday affairs. In the course of time, however, features of a sacred temple and an educational institution mingled in Greek Schools of Philosophy where the pursuit of knowledge was regarded as a service to the Muses. Thus, the Greek word, *mousein*, was metaphysically applied to any place where learning was pursued and the arts cultivated. In antiquity, the most celebrated institution having the title of the museum was the Hellenistic Museum (the home of the Muses) that sprang up at Alexandria, in Egypt, in the later part of the third century BCE. In this museum, which was actually an integrated institution consisting of a library, a university and a museum, the emphasis shifted from the religious and ethical to the intellectual. In the

course of time, the museum lost its multitudinous character and became limited to various collections—a wide range of specimens, namely, relics of human life in past periods, objects of art, samples of geology, skeletons of animals, crafts, machines, contemporary products, and so on. So far as the range of specimens is concerned, the museum has no threshold. The accumulation of specimens opened up a spirit of critical enquiry in Europe in the fifteenth century and onwards.

Since the opening of public museums in different parts of the world in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the institution called the museum has undergone such rapid changes that it is currently a complex phenomenon. Museums are now of numerous kinds or types because of the enormous variety of their contents. There are either highly specialised museums, with objects of fewer kinds, or monolithic museums, with a variety of combinations of objects. There is also the variety of environments in which objects are displayed—a palatial structure with an array of architectural features, a monumental building with a wealth of decoration, a huge building claiming either robustness or soberness, a moderate building or a humble abode of a few low-ceilinged rooms.

BASIC QUESTIONS PERTAINING TO ORAL LITERATURE (FOLKLORE) AND THE MUSEUM

We may now come to the basic questions: How is folklore related to the museum? Can folklore help create good museums? Can the museum contribute to the study of folklore? To answer these questions adequately, we need to define folklore in its present meaning and the museum in the context of its current use.

Folklore refers to a body of materials, to the science which studies these materials, and to the art which applies these materials and scientific conclusions about them to practical ends. (Boggs 2005, 3)

As a body of materials, folklore comprises ‘the whole body of traditional culture, or conventional modes of human thought and action’ (Boggs 2005, 3). Furthermore, Boggs (2005, 3) holds that it is

...created informally in a group of persons for themselves, has been accepted widely enough to have attained considerable currency, and over a sufficient period of time to have acquired traditional traits, such as anonymity of authorship and historic-geographic patterns of variants of basic forms.

Ben-Amos (1982, 17) is opposed to the idea of defining folklore as a mere collection of materials and asserts that ‘in its cultural context, folklore is not an aggregate of things, but a process—a communicative process, to be exact’. He has defined folklore as ‘artistic communication in small groups’. Art is one of the broad components of culture and folklore falls in this category as an artistic process. The

folklore process is artistic, because the factor of rhythm, as Ben-Amos (1982, 18) points out, 'changes human noise to music, movement and gesture to dance, and object to sculpture'. Innumerable examples of this sort may be cited to illustrate the artistic nature of folklore. Folklore is a communicative process, because it is found in any communicative medium: musical, visual, kinetic, or dramatic. By a 'small group', Ben-Amos (1982, 14) meant 'a number of persons who communicate with one another, often over a span of time, and who are few enough so that each person is able to communicate with all others, not at second-hand through other people, but face-to-face'. He adds that 'a group could be a family, a street-corner gang, a roomful of factory workers, a village, or even a tribe' (Ben-Amos 1982, 13). For the folkloric act to happen, as Ben-Amos holds, both the performers and the audience have to be in the same situation in which 'people confront each other face to face and relate to each other directly' (Ben-Amos 1982, 13-14). He argues that even when a certain literary theme or musical style is known regionally, nationally, or internationally, its actual existence depends on such small group situations. Both Boggs (2005) and Ben-Amos (1982), though belonging to two different schools of thought, have to be taken into consideration seriously. According to Boggs (2005, 3), currency and tradition constitute the acid test of folklore. It cannot be denied that tradition and oral transmission are the two key components of folklore. The people, as in Swaziland or South Africa, use tradition in their daily lives and in times of crisis. Folklore explores the dynamics of tradition and creativity in diverse cultural settings. Culture is the totality of socially transmitted behaviour patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions and all other products of human work and thought. Cultural traditions are 'persistent configurations of basic technologies and cultural systems within the context of temporal and geographical continuity' (Willey and Phillips 1958, 37). On the other hand, Ben-Amos (1982, 14) is also right in his assertion when he says that folklore is 'artistic communication in small groups'. By recognising art as one of the broad components of culture, Ben-Amos has expanded the scope of the study of folklore enormously, though in small settings. Also, Ben-Amos' definition of folklore touches on some key features of oral literature. For example, he sees folklore as folk literature which is socially conditioned, which is secular in intent and which performs social, political and economic functions. Thus, it is this association of oral literature with folklore that has led some well-meaning, but misdirected literary scholars to refuse to ascribe the status of literature to oral literature (Tala 2013, 4). Fortunately, the situation is changing very fast.

The museum, as defined by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and as adopted by UNESCO at its 10th General Meeting in 1974, is a non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of man and his environment (Mahmud 1993, 142). As already stated, museums may reveal

remarkable diversity in form, in content, and even in function, but all museums have as common goals the preservation and interpretation of material aspects of society's cultural consciousness.

HOW THEN IS FOLKLORE RELATED TO THE MUSEUM?

The relationship between folklore and the museum is so apparent that it can be recognised at the very first instance. Just as folklore is a body of materials, so the museum is a repository of collections. The materials folklore studies are varied in nature. The objects the museum collects are also varied in nature. Communication, which is at the very core of folklore, is one of the fundamental goals of the museum today. It is the communicative process that makes folklore extremely distinctive as an academic discipline. In the museum, the object communicates itself directly to the viewers, in a way not possible through other interpretive media. A museum, especially a public museum, apart from being a place of research, is now an aid in general education. An awareness of the museum as a means of general education has dawned with the increasing consciousness of the need for the improvement of existing educational standards. It should be noted that when the museum becomes an aid in general education, its objects have to be presented in such a way as to communicate with the viewers, who benefit from acquaintance with rare and beautiful specimens. The educational role of the museum is further expressed by a developing tendency towards using its collections as an aid in the education of school children. The communicative process is considered so important in the education of school children that many museums make special arrangements for them by exhibiting objects with models and charts, which are likely to appeal to young people. Another effective way of strengthening children's interest in the museum is to allow them to touch certain objects or to lend specimens to schools. In the developing countries, on the whole, efforts at using the museum as a means of communication are still modest. The vigorous contemporary activities of the public museums in the United States exemplify how effective communication could be when education is considered a primary function of the museum. Of course, the choice of objects has to be considered in conjunction with manners of presentation. We may now safely hold that folklore, an academic study, is closely related to the museum, an institution, both in content and function.

CAN THE MUSEUM CONTRIBUTE TO THE STUDY OF FOLKLORE?

The answer is in the affirmative. We may explain it by citing the example of material culture, an enormous field of study in folklore. Material culture consists of tangible things made, manipulated, designed, shaped, altered and used. It is art,

craft, architecture, furnishing, clothing and food. More importantly, it is the totality of these things in the everyday lives of individuals and communities. It is deeply personal and social, mental and physical. It is an embodiment of socially transmitted knowledge and behaviour patterns, of practice and creativity, and of production and consumption. It is a visible process that extends ideas and feelings into three-dimensional form. Given the depth and intricacy of functional and innovative acts inherent in the material culture, material culture research is not merely the study of things, it is the interrelation of objects and techniques in social life. It is, in essence, a study of the cultural integration of people. A museum may pursue a project for material culture research to cover the following topics: Pottery, Mat Weaving, Woodwork, and Vernacular Architecture. The geographical area of research for each topic may be the whole of South Africa. We are proposing a landmark work on each topic. Based on extensive fieldwork, each work will focus on regional variations of form and style, identifying the geographical/ecological, ethnic, religious, social, technological and all other factors that account for the variations. The artists/craftspeople will not be anonymous; they will come to the forefront, for we need to know the creators.

An important part of material culture research is to record the observable behaviours of persons making things, of persons receiving objects, of participants in events in which objects are used. Another goal is to understand how symbols are created and changed, how objects function for people and how designs are conceived and executed. The fundamental premise of material culture in folklore is that objects and actions speak louder than words and researchers are actively looking at material culture as communication and learning. The data gathered and analysed will lead to the publication of four volumes. These volumes, besides enriching the contextual display of the museum, will greatly augment folklore research.

CAN FOLKLORE HELP CREATE GOOD MUSEUMS?

A folklife museum, a museum of history and even a museum of art can benefit tremendously from folklore. But first, we need to understand these three kinds of museum. A folklife museum is a very special kind of museum. More than any other museum, it conforms to the ICOM definition of a museum, because in it 'material evidence of man and his environment' is best reflected. A folklife museum consists of representative examples of folk housing and of workshops that house artefacts, used by craftspeople to demonstrate folk crafts and activities. These are transferred from their original locations to a common site and then restored or reconstructed on that site as museum pieces to constitute congruent groups in such a way as to be broadly representative of the time and place that is thematic to the collection—the types of houses or workshops that originally formed an actual village or other type of settlement and that have been validated by historical research. The artefacts in the

collection are also historically validated and are consistent with the folk architectural collection in time, place and ethnic tradition. The craftspeople, often appropriately costumed, are skilled in one or more of the traditional crafts and activities and they engage in demonstrating these skills to visitors on a regularly scheduled basis (Mahmud 1993, 144).

A museum of history generally presents the historical evolution of a country or a region or simply depicts a particular period of great national significance. The timeframe may be long or short, depending on what it represents. A national museum of history builds up a coherent and continuous story of the people in different aspects of life in chronological sequence. A museum of history may simply illustrate the people's struggle for liberation from colonial rule. In South Africa, the Ditsong National Museum of Natural History in Pretoria was founded as the Staatsmuseum of the ZAR in 1892. This museum is the premier natural history repository in South Africa. Among its important exhibits are various fossils, the evolution of life on earth and birds of southern Africa. It is the only natural history museum in Gauteng and one of the largest in the country and is renowned for its fossil record. It is worthy to note that Ditsong is an amalgamation of eight national museums with collections covering the fields of fauna and flora, palaeontology, military history, cultural history, geology, anthropology and archaeology. From the outset, this museum's collection policy has focused on cultural and natural history. Other history museums are the National Museum in Bloemfontein, Nelson Mandela National Museum in Johannesburg and Mthatha, Sammy Marks House in Pretoria and the Kruger House.

A museum of art focuses on expressions and techniques of art. It falls into many categories, of which a museum of folk art is more closely related to folklore. To be folk art, there must be art that is not folk (Glassie 1989, 92). Folk art is not fine art. The two are studied apart by scholars. A museum of folk art is a specialised museum containing objects reflecting the traditional knowledge as well as traditional cultural expressions that have survived through centuries as a result of the spontaneous embodiment of human endeavour and creativity, more or less conditioned by a given environment. Museums of folk art may be local, national or international. The Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico, United States of America, is a good example of the third category (Glassie 1989, 1-2). In South Africa, these museums are housed in prestigious historical buildings, in cutting-edge modern constructions, on university campuses, in cultural villages or in old houses. Some are even aspects of the natural landscape, such as the caves which protect ancient rock art.

In the folklife museum, personnel has to be both museologists and folklorists so that they can achieve a much higher measure of reality and authenticity in the aspects of presentation than perhaps in any other kind of museum and, as a consequence, visitors should feel that they are watching and enjoying folklife in its natural context. The folklife museum can be one of the major teaching and educational agencies of

the community that it serves. Folklore can contribute substantially to the organisation of the folklife museum.

Most scholarship on collections of museums of history has separated objects from their contexts, because these museums generally do not collect objects on the methodological considerations of current folklore research. By these methodological considerations are meant the methods of the ethnographer. A museum of history will turn into a very good museum, if museologists become interested in the contexts in which objects were produced and used. Therefore, museologists who collect objects for museums of history, especially for a national museum of history, should pursue the methods of the ethnographer. The ethnographer can inscribe social discourse in such a way that he/she can turn it from a passing event into an account (Geertz 1973, 19).

How then does folklore help create good folk art museums? A folk object bears the mark of the culture of the folk. It is made at a particular time and place in response to a specific need, to perform a socially meaningful function and expresses values through design, ornament and creativity that are a part of a definite cultural tradition. The total aesthetic expression of Bengali culture, for example, is more typically represented by folk art than by fine art. In fact, the mainstream in the art of Bangladesh has been in the hands of folk artists/craftspeople rather than fine artists, though fine artists are often influenced by folk art.

Folklore will really be effective in the creation of good museums if folklorists are employed in museums of folklife, history and art and are trained to become museologists. Folklorists generally pay more attention to the qualitative analysis of material culture (Kenoyer 2003, 391). Kenoyer (2003, 391) suggests that folklorists should not shy away from the systematic and quantitative study of material culture, so that they can implement standard methodologies for classification and analysis of various objects. Ideally, folklorists should work with the following objectives in mind:

- to search and find the roots of the national culture
- to learn and understand the cultural legacy of the people and to develop respect for it to preserve and integrate the traditional culture and its various creative expressions as a dynamic process
- to focus on those centres where living masters/tradition bearers teach skills and techniques of traditional arts or crafts in a non-formal way, that is, orally and with practical demonstrations
- to conserve and promote the nation's cultural legacy by encouraging and supporting the study and recognition of human cultural resources such as basket makers, potters, sculptors, painters, woodcarvers, weavers, embroiderers, blacksmiths, bell-metalsmiths, brass-smiths, silversmiths, goldsmiths, braziers, casters, engravers, and other artists/craftspeople

- to understand the transmission of their skills and techniques to the succeeding generations
- to develop new arts/crafts centres, preferably in community or open-air museum settings, where exponents of living art and crafts can practice and teach their skills and enrich contemporary designs
- to identify the aspects/components of traditional art considered important to a cultural community
- to ensure that these aspects/components of traditional art are imparted to the young in a manner that they can be perpetuated
- to realise the mutually enriching relationship between traditional culture and modern culture
- to understand the social and cultural aspects of living traditions

The benefits of their work can be advantageous to South Africa in particular and Africa as a whole. The results of such research will be relevant to cultural anthropology and folklore with regard to the aesthetic and creative aspects of art and to problems of the alteration in form and content owing to the forces of change; in sociology with regard to the effects of urbanisation and industrialisation on traditional culture; in art history with regard to problems of the genesis and development of art styles, the multiple determinants of technique and aesthetic values in their cross-cultural manifestation; and in history with regard to an understanding of the development of a national culture.

CONCLUSION

While the museum has a history steeped in a past of thousands of years, folklore as a concept for the study of the ways of life of a people is comparatively new, hardly older than the seventeenth century. In their current meanings, both folklore and the museum have a common goal: each serve as a major means of imparting information and cultural enlightenment to people. Visual and tactile three-dimensional objects, when observed and studied as a specimen of material culture (in the context of folklore research) or when displayed and enjoyed in the museum, appeal to the intellectual inquisitiveness of people. It also appeals to their emotions and serves as an aid in blending the two (folklore and museum) together, to create an experience of spontaneity and creativeness comparable with an artistic one, whatever the character of the object may be. The reality of the object, both in folklore and the museum, invites a scientific approach to accurate observation and self-determining judgment and is thus useful to human knowledge.

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