

Rethinking and Mainstreaming African Literature in the Academia¹

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Summary

Africa's knowledge, especially as "authored", "created" and packaged in African languages, is inspired by daily life experiences. Its expressive modes mirror traditions and innovations of oral expression. On the other hand, written literature, defined by Western parameters, is classified into different genres specific in form and style. African literature has therefore struggled to fit into this pigeonhole and its strata although a significant component characterising its uniqueness is in the process left out. In such are components laden with African-specific forms of expression, metaphor and rendition when packaged in foreign languages. This observation inspires a rethinking of alternative theoretical approaches to the discursive modes of what is African literature. This article dialogues literary expressions hardly located among traditional literary genres. African feminism as a guiding framework is applied.

Opsomming

Afrika se kennis, veral hoe dit in die Afrika-tale "geskryf", "geskep" en "verpak" is, word deur alledaagse lewenservarings geïnspireer. Die uitdrukkingswyses weerspieël die tradisie en innovasie van mondelinge vertelling. Daarteenoor word geskrewe literatuur, wat aan die hand van Westerse maatstawwe gedefinieer word, in bepaalde genres met hul kenmerkende vorme en style gekategoriseer. Gevolglik worstel Afrika-literatuur om in hierdie voorafbepaalde hokkies in te pas en die lae wat 'n belangrike onderskeidende kenmerk daarvan uitmaak en dit uniek maak, bly in die proses agterweë. Dit is wat gebeur wanneer 'n literatuur wat beïndruk is met uitdrukkingsvorme, beeldspraak en vertolking wat eie aan Afrika is, in uitheemse tale "verpak" word. Hierdie waarneming het daartoe gelei dat alternatiewe teoretiese benaderings tot die diskoers oor wat Afrika literatuur is, opnuut deurdink word. Hierdie artikel bespreek literêre uitdrukkingswyses wat nie gewoonlik in tradisionele literêre genres aangetref word nie. Die raamwerk wat gebruik word om rigting aan hierdie bespreking te gee, is Afrika-feminisme.

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1. This article was inspired and informed by the experiences of the author as a member of the "*Women Writing Africa – Eastern Region*" research team 1997-2007.

1 Introduction

Africa has a long literary tradition, although very little of this is documented. In the absence of widespread *Western literacy* (reading, writing), African literature is primarily oral and passed from one generation to the next through memorisation, performance and recitation. Some African civilisations, however, pride themselves in long traditions of scripted words although most of their literatures still remain oral and integrated into daily life and expression. As a result, African cultures possess a rich repertoire of literary expressions such as epigrams, proverbs, riddles, songs, poems, tongue-twisters, narratives, myths, fables, etc. Struggle, ambition and resistance are expressed in comedy, satire, parody, tragedy, narrative, song, public speech, poetry and even lectures. Such thematically rich expressions often integrate anthropological, sociological, and mytho-historical information,² not to mention the aesthetic and functional properties. Effective speech and social success in the African context, for example, have also been associated with a good command of proverbs and stylistic rhetoric, besides wisdom and worldly knowledge which qualify for location in the literary crucible.

We should therefore talk about African literatures, rather than African literature, to emphasise the many different literary traditions and genres that the term encompasses. Whichever way, the challenge is integration of theory and deconstruction of curricula into the academia to broadly include what African literature is. Multiple perspectives that elicit the power of the spoken word and landscapes that inspire creativity, performance and expression among the population labelled *illiterate* also need to be appreciated and allocated space in the literary crucible. The woman's *voice* in articulating the "*making of her world*" is cited herein as illustration of the argument.

The concept of writing, especially women writing, is redefined in Daymond et al. (2003). This definition includes all forms of expression, oral and written, fiction and non-fiction that speak and voice the African woman's mind, thus acknowledging her role as creator and guardian of knowledge. Among these expressions are songs, praise poems, oral texts, fiction, letters, journals, media articles, historical and legal documents of protest, appeals, petitions and others as "penned" by women.

With the aforementioned perspective in mind, literature in the context of this article is therefore seen to metonymically refer to a blend of verbal and written forms of expression embodying the experiences of Africans and others on the African continent in envisioning their lives in relation to their societies (Daymond et al. 2003). The matrices of spoken and written words represent the creative interaction among people in their actual environments

2. "African Literature", Microsoft® Encarta® Encyclopedia 99. © 1993-1998 Microsoft Corporation.

and the flux of challenges as captured in their social encounters. Their contribution to making their *worlds*, thus creating the challenge of intellectual exploration into these worlds cannot therefore escape the eye, hence the thesis in this article.

Because of the illustrations based on women's expressions, an African feminist approach is selected to inform discourse development. The discourse therefore revolves around the context of *voicing* the African woman as creator of literature. It contributes to studies that seek to

- dialogue indigenous knowledge and appreciate alternative and divergent forms of expression;
- see and critique the world through the African eye, thought process and world view;
- contribute to locating the fault lines of memory within space and time by unearthing the hitherto undocumented and uncelebrated African sources of knowledge expressed artistically – thus contribution to literature;
- change assumptions about the mapping of African knowledge, culture and history as captured in literary expression.

2 African Feminism as Prism in Rethinking African Literature

The African woman's struggle for increased visibility and participation in shaping her destiny has often been perceived as externally generated, especially when viewed within the context of the dominating *feminist* and *womanist* schools of thought that are Western in orientation. From literary, narrative and expressive dimensions, her creativity, often alive and synonymous with her daily endeavours, is hardly included among the indicators that measure literary prowess. In such forms of expression, however, abound creativity in style, aesthetics, sociocultural, socio-political and socio-economic articulations and responses; perceptions, protests, commentaries and evaluations of the world in which she finds herself, including lately, the global and technological worlds to which she is a significant player.

Feminist thinkers, within Africa and the diaspora, have disputed the appropriateness of Western feminism in interrogating African spaces and situations. Differences in cultural and contextual approaches have inspired the articulation of feminist perspectives specific to Africa (Mikell 1997: 2) and against which the articulation of African thought and experience needs to be interrogated.

While resisting feminism as a label (read Western feminism), Miria Matembe, a renowned Ugandan elite and politician, observed:

“I had refused to be called a feminist. The reason was basically that the word feminist did not augur well ... at the time. According to public perception of the period, a feminist was dangerous, a terrible woman ... people would distance themselves from you I came to understand that a feminist is a person who is struggling to uplift women ... challenging systems and structures that oppress women ... if that is the proper designation, then I must call myself a feminist.”

(Matemba in Lihamba et al. 2007: 436-439)³

Matemba’s awakening illustrates the fact that (Western) feminism as a philosophy and term of reference has not gone well down African perception lanes. It has been and still is an ideology considered alien, and whose attributes are negative and contradictory to the African philosophy. The binding factor deriving from common experiences as women in prescribed, proscribed and/or prohibitive society often engender the determination to transform own lives, that of other women and ultimately that of entire society.

(Lihamba et al. 2007: xx)

Arnfred (2005) identifies the following as some of Western feminist perceptions of third-world woman:

- Western feminism has given a paternalistic attitude towards the identity of the third-world woman. I.e. any discussion of kinship, religion, and education are often conducted in the context of relative “underdevelopment” that needs to be “developed” without relating it to what gives the subjects under reference their identity and being. It is important, within this context, to also consider the directionality of third-world power relations, sociocultural dominants and other factors that signify identities.
- Referents to the African woman are presented as: religious (not progressive); family oriented (traditional); legal minors (still not conscious of their rights); illiterate (ignorant); domestic (backward); revolutionary (country in a state of war, they must fight) – without taking time to listen to her, to understand her from her own expression of “self”.
- The images of “self” and “other” are closely interlinked. The patterns are hard to break by the “self” that constructs the “other”. However, seen from the vantage point of the other, as we seek by “reading” and “listening” to these texts could make the matter look different.

(Arnfred 2005: 6-9)

The African feminist thought is therefore open to the challenges of emerging issues and social challenges, often further traumatised by the

3. This text is part of a public lecture by Matemba – who served as Member of Parliament – delivered in 2002. The lecture amongst others has been part of the data collected during the life of the project *Women Writing Africa: Eastern Region*.

West. Such trauma is here illustrated with reference to a confession by the Norwegian ambassador to Kenya in 2004, Mr Kjell Harald Dalen, regarding development priorities in Africa vis-à-vis Western donor intervention as reported in the media, *Daily Nation*, of Friday, 29th November 2004. The confession refers to the West having erred in its past development policies targeting Kenya. It says in part:

Although most of its projects were of noble cause They failed because no proper prior evaluation had been done [W]e introduced to Kenya projects that worked in Norway without seeing what was going to work locally ... with hindsight we now realize that many things we tried to do with good intention were not properly researched and studied before we started. The lessons have now sunk in that it is not we from Europe or the donor community who know all but it is the local people who know best.

(*Daily Nation*, Friday, 29 November)

The African feminist school of thought owes its origin to various dynamics. Its identification and alignment signal the African perspective that seeks to counter the “silence” and the misrepresentation that have come with Western-oriented perspectives and approaches to her “being” as variously generalised in the Western feminist thought. It signals the desire for African thinking, identity formation/interpretation and approaches as active players in defining, shaping and determining the direction of development of which Africa, especially the African woman, is part. It also seeks to make “right” the misrepresentations and erroneous myths that define her and her environment within the context and scope of the Western feminist thought (Friedman 1998, Mama 2002, Oyewumi 2003).

Approaches, definitions and functions of concepts such as male, female, woman, mother, wife, and male-streaming variously emerge and engage the feminist discourse. The involvement of African women in fighting for their rights and emancipation is compounded by the apparent polarisation under intellectual and popular feminist groupings (Olukoshi & Nyamnjoh 2003). Arnfred (2003) dialogues the critical mass of vocal feminist researchers in thought-provoking discourses on the gender agenda. She observes that gender scholarship is perpetuated in male-streamed scholarship environments. Thus, besides the loading of Western perspectives, gender blindness abounds in the predominant male-streamed scholarship, including “naming” in literature, thus calling for rethinking in the integration of gender and African feminist aspects of knowledge interrogation in the male-stream scholarly milieu.

For example, from an African perspective, “motherhood”, within which is “woman” as a concept, is located in an all-inclusive institution that holds a key place in society. It is looked at with reverence and accorded importance. The logic of motherhood and motherhood as a paradigm is therefore central in that the man-in-the-centre syndrome does not arise. The primacy of the

mother/sister in economic, social, political and religious institutions amongst others does not foreground the attention paid to “woman” as “body”, hence “sexual object”, as is perceived in the West. The African perspective thus looks at woman as social and holistic representation of society in which are to be found male and female. It is within such contextualisation that feminism as prism is applied in discoursing a rethinking of African literature.

African feminist thought also thrives on organisation, solidarity and social relationships in which participatory memberships are key. Gender roles are therefore specifically allocated and tend to shift depending on relationship situations. Oyewumi (2001) argues:

Organizing (associating to attain a purpose) is the process by which traditional Africans wove the very fabric of their societies Besides kinship organizations, age grades, occupational guilds, and religious, social, and political organizations are all features of African community life During celebrations ... rites of passage or other major life events ... in case of death in the family ... he or she was helped by the rest They helped her perform tasks that needed to be done as well as to make the occasion grand with dancing, singing and feasting During the period of courtship, a young man had the support and cooperation of members ... in whatever labour services were required by custom to be rendered In the case of a female, upon marriage, it is members ... childhood friends who join her (in bridal chants) (when it was still customary to do so) and who accompany her to the house of the groom Much of female friendship centers around experiences of shared mothering and continuous mutual support from friends who are at a similar stage in the life cycle ... in the idiom of kinship relations.

(Oyewumi 2001)⁴

Kinship terminology and relations on the one hand and social roles on the other, in the African context for example, are much more significant than gender considerations. Seniority within the kinship considerations is significant and such an approach is not fixated on the body (Oyewumi 1997: 42). In actual fact, many African languages do not have gender markers. Of course this order of socio-arrangement is heavily challenged by emerging issues and cultures, especially in the urban areas.

The African feminist thought therefore seeks to “write” the African woman’s social history from the woman’s point of view. It also seeks, in part, to inform policy (Kisiang’ani 2004: 24). It blends with emphasis on culturally linked forms of public participation and alternative initiatives; and encourages attention to everyday, ordinary and seemingly insignificant expressions, referred to herein as *dailiness* of the woman’s life.

The *Women Writing Africa* (WWA) set of projects⁵ has contributed to this approach. These projects encompass socially inflected exchanges and medi-

4. Online reference, page not indicated.

ations that make sites of localised struggles, transformations and expressions. Significant points of reference in these projects dialogue concepts of woman and womanhood; mother and motherhood; family, community and society. Her actions, experiences, engagements and performance speak much louder than words. Her voice in song, laughter, celebration, lamentation, resolution, tears and work therefore contributes to literary expression as herein illustrated.

Mazrui (1999) discourses on functions of cultural responsibilities and role assignment. This discourse presents a holistic view of African culture and society as functioning lenses of perception; spring of motivation; standard of judgement; basis of stratification; means of communication; definition of production and consumption; and also serves as basis of identity while marking frontiers of solidarity.

In discoursing feminist theory, it therefore behoves scholars to develop tools and theoretical parameters for articulating perspectives that make African contexts (Stamp 1989, Oyewumi 1997, Mama 2000). An analysis of feminism and an effort at continental location are therefore based on considerations of culture roles and assignments. Ventures into dialogue on development and planning towards technology and modernity find direction and placement in similarly defined relationships that continue to map African landscapes. The cultural patterns provide symbolic reference points of multiple characters and identities. Multiple forms of acculturation, socialisation, genderisation, subordination and oppression mark the web of social mapping and literary expression (Mikell 1997, Mama 2000).

In rethinking African literature, therefore, such feminist thought appreciates perspectives that engage verbal, performance and literary expressions of sociocultural, economic and psychosocial nature as illustrated herein. Attempts at unearthing, analysing and documenting African “voices” and “writings” that tell of encounters with the environment across time and space will go a long way towards contributing to rethinking of African literature.

3 Women Voices Writing Africa

The concept and series of projects on *Women Writing Africa* (WWA) and women writing any other part of the world for that matter (*Women Writing*

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5. Projects of Feminist Press, City University of New York. African Women scholars from across the continent have been part as researchers, editors and associate editors since the 1990s. The Southern volume (2003), the Western/Sahel volume (2005), the Eastern volume (2007), the Northern volume (2008) are cited with specific focus on the Eastern volume.

in India has existed from 600 BC to the 20th century),⁶ is a venture in conscience raising on the aspect of women agency in self-articulation, mediation and intervention. The series of projects search, unearth and make known voices as yet undocumented, thus assembling actors in “community” of experiences. These are then packaged in institutions of language, culture, politics, science and religion (Smith 2002), dimensions little trodden in scholarship.

Four volumes of WWA series of projects were realised. The Eastern Africa project covers five African countries: Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Malawi, and Zambia. The West Africa and Sahel volume covers franco-phone and anglophone countries including Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote d’Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Conakry, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Sierra Leone. The Western/Sahel project presents English and French as working languages, hence it appears in two volumes. The pioneering project, the Southern region, covers Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, and Zimbabwe. The fourth project, The Northern region, covers Algeria, Egypt, Mauritania, Morocco, Sudan, and Tunisia.

“Texts” were collected from many African languages including English, French, Arabic, and Kiswahili. The process required services of translators from African languages in order to make the texts accessible to the languages utilised in the volumes. The documentation took chronological-order dating far back in time. For example, The Eastern Africa volume dates 1711; the Western/Sahel volume 1739; and The Southern volume 1842. Many other oral and even written renditions are no doubt still “undiscovered”.

The Eastern Africa volume (Lihamba et al. 2007) has texts that communicate thematic and functional knowledge aesthetically presented. These are expressed in different ways such as woman-woman solidarity and advice, self-criticism, storytelling, questioning, petitions, protests, confrontation or outright rebellion. The oral traditions, myths, and legends often place women at the centre of historical and legendary origins of their civilisations. I make mention of the WWA series of projects because they are cases in reference regarding rethinking African literature – not just in the abstract, but also because they facilitate practical collection and documentation thus informing knowledge clusters. This project shows agency of African languages in which much of African literatures is expressed. It required mediation of researchers from multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary dimen-

6. There are two volumes of *Women Writing in India*, edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, published by Feminist Press. Volume I covers the period 600 BC to the early 20th century, whereas Volume II covers the 20th century. These publications inspired the *Women Writing Africa* series of projects whose research started in the mid-1990s with the publications rolling between 2003 and 2008.

sions; and language specialists such as translators, in order to make the works accessible to wider readerships.

4 Reconceptualising African Literature: An Illustration

This section illustrates rethinking African Literature.⁷ We observe that clarity in analytic tools needs to be addressed. Thus, a discourse analysis approach that locates language within contexts of use can facilitate identification of elements that depict metaphoric, figurative and pragmatic usage while serving as framework guiding the reading. In discourse analysis are to be found strategies that release knowledge trapped in language. It is concerned with communication in real time and place by appreciating the function of knowledge as a configuration of human experiences through language use. Through the reading of texts in this approach, it is possible to draw connections between subjective experiences as people move through events and construct meaning and action; and to perceive knowledge and discourse as they unfold and shape their being through time. Discourse analysis facilitates understanding language ecology and conceptualisation of multiple local worlds of significances. Inclusion of afrocentric paradigms in scholarship is therefore inevitable (Steady 2004: 45).

Paragraphs 4.1 and 4.2 below discuss the two contexts addressed in illustrations.

4.1 Oral and Performed Expressions

These include culture- and context-specific songs loaded with thematic, topical and moral significance. Texts that draw from oral and performed narrative expressions are birth-, initiation-, wedding-, funeral- and work songs which have been part of the African forms of expression since time immemorial. They are identified as a cluster of literature. Woman perspectives and perceptions are captured and transmitted over time via the oral word. They blend with dailiness in time, context and space. These literary expressions, however, undergo modifications in order to adapt to, and capture emerging issues and changes across time and space.

The following are examples of culture- and context-specific songs.

7. This article was created in appreciation and acknowledgement of the insights into “our own” that were opened to us as research team from within the Eastern Africa region. The richness in material, aesthetics and expressions as cited is but a grain of sand in the immense ocean of self-articulation and expression that was discovered.

4.1.1 *Mwana wa Mberi Beyaye* [Alas! The Firstborn Child!]

This song literally congratulates a mother on begetting a first child (the sex of the child does not matter). This child enters society with celebration in dance, food and presents. The communal appreciation of fertility and procreation is manifest in communal singing. It is a birthing- and hero-honouring (*Luhya*, Kenyan) song, currently significant beyond traditional and cultural borders that created it. It has been adopted in other situations that require hero-honouring, including marriage, job promotion, political campaigns, university graduation, football and similar situations.

The celebratory narrative is repeated over and over again with words of praise and items for “baby showering” being mentioned and offered practically. The song, by capturing the original tradition, mentions grains which are brought forth, oils and presents worthy of a celebrant, or showering a new baby. The repetitive aspect enhances the tempo and rhythm while raising the jovial mood of all involved. The thematic and stylistic function and effect of repetition in narrative, story and song; function of body language especially facial expressions; interjections of pause, rhythm and chorus further enhance the aesthetic and thematic value of the song (Finnegan 1970), with varying stresses, tones and ululation.

Within the context of sharing joys, especially as pertains to procreation, social responsibility and collectivity in purpose go beyond the nuclei of identity, and are constructed and reconstructed based on common contextual and situational denominators. Most Kenyans will sing along to the song, regardless of their cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

'Mwana wa mberi... [Alas! The Firstborn Child!]

'mwana wa mberi beyaye

'mwana wa mberi

Beyaye 'we

Mwana wa mberi ne shiekhoyero (repeat stanza)

Mwana wa mberi ni (mention celebrant)

Ni (mention celebrant)

Mwana wa mberi ne shiekhoyero

Beyaye okhali na 'undi no!

Mwana wa mberi

'na' undi, no?

Mwana wa mberi ne shiekhoyero (repeat stanza)

Lera tsimbande tsia wabikha

Mwana wa mberi

Khufuye omwana

Mwana wa mberi ne shiekhoyero (mention cereals & grains)

Eee omwana wa mberi

Ee omwana wa mberi ne shiekhoyero
Ee omwana wa mberi
Ee omwana wa mberi ne shiekhoyero (repeat stanza)

[Alas the firstborn child!
The firstborn child
Alas indeed
Indeed the firstborn child is real joy (*repeat stanza*)

The firstborn is ... (*mention celebrant*)
Yes it is (*mention celebrant*)
Indeed the firstborn child is real joy

Alas there is no other!
A firstborn child
You have another one
Indeed the firstborn child is real joy (*repeat stanza*)

Bring precious grains you have stored
For the firstborn child
We shower the child
Indeed the firstborn child is real joy (*mention cereals & grains*)

Oh yea the firstborn child
Indeed the firstborn child is real joy
Oh yea the firstborn child
Indeed the firstborn child is real joy (*repeat stanza*)]⁸

(Luhya community of Kenya)

Traditional treasures such as groundnuts, *simsim*, beans and other cereals are symbolically and literally offered and showered upon celebrants. These signify abundance and blessings. The stanzas reflect the soloist's desires in praise or tribute to the new child or celebrant. This gesture and demonstration of joy and plenty that blends song, celebration, performance and material possession as immortalised in this song contradicts the ever-decried poverty and food insecurity associated with contemporary Africa. Such poverty mocks the celebration and plenty as implied in this song.

How, therefore, can this historical and cultural background help in addressing poverty issues while acknowledging how Africa has previously sustained herself in order to ensure stability and food security? How can poverty alleviation campaigns be carried out without necessarily appearing to vilify and condemn Africa for irresponsibility?

8. Orally shared and transmitted in Luhya folk music and socio-cultural activities. It therefore is originally from among the "Luhya community of Kenya" but has been variously rendered by musicians and is sung at many functions even by non-Luhyas. Translation by Naomi L. Shitemi.

4.1.2 *Gidmay: Farewell to a Bride: A Wedding Song from Tanzania*⁹

In this wedding song from Tanzania, we find a parody that depicts spousal relationships and domestic violence. Lifelong lessons are given to the young bride through song laden with words of caution. Through song and dance the women voice what is not acceptable, yet enshrined in culture. Such settings serve as naming and shaming occasions that decry women's condemned situations. The tone of the song is sad.

If you take life with lust, you will face those sticks long stored on the roof
The sticks full of dust, you'll think they are for herding calves
But alas! They are for teaching you a lesson.

(Lihamba et al. 2007: 166-168)

Domestic violence has a long tradition of existence and justification erroneously tolerated as in this song. Exposing learners to literary analysis of such songs can raise debate on gender equity and respect for persons in families and society. Such wedding songs are therefore not sung for the sake of singing and entertainment, but constitute educational "modules" of life skills and a body of knowledge that are *African literature*.

Gidmay: Farewell to a Bride

Gidmay son of Da'ati, Gidmay the bulls are fighting
Gidmay the bulls are fighting, in the land of Masabeda,
In Masabeda at the house of Tekwi Yawari

Lanta, my dear, when I saw decorated walls
When I saw them decorated, I thought this was done for mere beauty
Thought it was for mere beauty, but I realise it's because you are leaving.

Be strong, that you have to leave is your parents' decision
Be strong, even though you've been sprained while very young
You've been sprained very young, the spider of true color.

Had I been your parents you wouldn't go there
I'm not your parents, what can we do?
My dear Lanta, be strong

This distant stranger, why did you accept him?
Why did you accept him, this one with heels as rough as roof tiles?
This one with rough heels, like those of salt lake warthogs

9. Song sung in Iraqw, a Tanzanian language, and translated into English by Martha Qorro and Yusuf Lawi (see Lihamba et al. 2007: 166-168).

You have accepted a stranger, you've already accepted him
You've accepted a stranger, whose back is covered with dirt scales
Whose back is covered with dirt scales, like that of a hyena from Gorowa
land.

The man you have accepted
The man you have accepted has a back covered with dirt scales
His back is covered in dirt scales like the earth-roofed house of the cold
uplands (song continues)

(Lihamba et al. 2007: 166-168)

4.1.3 Luweere Okhulangwa ... [It Is Finished, It Is Over]

This funeral dirge, in the Luhya language (Kenya), solemnises the demise of a loved one, especially an adult. It is often sung during the night vigil before a burial in solidarity with the bereaved. It can also be sung during the process of lowering the casket into the grave. The venom, sting, finality and stark reality of death are satirised, thus communally shared. There is dual and rhetoric address of “death” and the “dead”. The dead are particularly reminded how they are no longer part of the living, while by inference the living are told of final separation from the dead. The inevitability of death is decried in a manner similar to St. Paul’s cry in 1 Corinthians 15: 55, “Where O death is your victory? Where O death is your sting?”. The sting of death is thus made bearable and its pain lessened through solidarity and empathy. Finnegan (1970) expresses the following (with slight paraphrasing by this author):

The printed words alone represent only a shadow of the full actualisation of the song as an aesthetic experience for singer and audience. In it are overtones, symbolic associations of words and phrases, the actual enactment of the song and the integration of the emotional situation of a funeral – beauty of voice, sobs, facial expressions, vocal expressiveness and movements, all indicating sincerity of grief and the entire musical setting dramatic use of pause and rhythm, the interplay of passion, dignity or humour, receptivity to the reactions of the audience render the performance live and lived.

(Finnegan 1970: Introduction; my paraphrasing)

Luweere Okhulangwa

Luweere okhulangwa mama luweere
Luweere, luweere
Luweere okhulangwa mama luweere
Luweere, Nyasaye akhulinde

[No more to be called mama no more
No more no more

No more to be called mama no more
 No more may God bless you]

(Repeat stanza with mention of many other kinship connections between mourners and the dead.)

(Luhya community of Kenya)¹⁰

The repetitive aspect of the song renders both stylistic and thematic emphasis. It ensures continuity and length in narrative while listing as many attributes as possible in select and varied components of the song. The soloist leads and creates the stanzas while the mourners who make up the audience respond in chorus. The tone is solemn and the mood pensive. The singers could also weep silently, developing a highly emotive text. The song is, however, never sung for youth and children, nor in any other contexts but death.

In retrospect, it is in the spirit of culturally inherent communal sense of responsibility and minding each other's welfare that we find the elderly grandmothers taking up guardian responsibilities towards the destitute and orphans, especially following the ravages of HIV and AIDS. The "children's homes" and "orphanages" phenomena are alien to Africa, yet there have been orphans all along.

Such are the attributes of African culture that need celebrating and propagating – a communal responsibility in shared joy, sorrow and social responsibility. The "Harambee" spirit of "let us pull together" or "let us join forces" upon which the Kenyan nation was founded at independence must have had its grounding in such premises and paradigms as propagated in this song.

4.2 Narratives and Written-word Expressions

This section focuses on narratives and the written word: fiction, non-fiction, letters, and memoirs that are time- and author-specific, topical and thematic. The letter, the memoir and recorded/mediated non-fiction narratives are cited. The scope of the written word is diverse. It can include lectures, speeches, reports and minutes to mention but a few.¹¹ These embody woman's participation, manipulation, adaptation and control of her social,

10. The song is orally shared and transmitted in Luhya folk music and specifically sung during funeral ceremonies among some of the Luhya of Kenya subgroups. Translation by Naomi L. Shitemi.

11. See the definition of "writing" and "literature" in the Introduction to *Women Writing Africa* (2007: XV-XVI) as adopted from Daymond et al. (2003: XVII-XVIII).

cultural, economic and physical environment. The literary attributes and thematic contexts take us into specific communities and time.

4.2.1 Pioneer Education for Girls in Butere, Kenya¹²

Miss Lissette Chadwick, a missionary teacher, arrived in Butere in 1914. She worked among the “women and girls” in the region for twelve years until her retirement in 1925. By 1918, she had attracted a large number of girls to the school from which the present-day Butere Girls’ High school in Western Kenya has grown. She also worked elsewhere in Africa, including Uganda.

Miss Chadwick established Butere Girls’ School in Western Kenya and pioneered in the establishment of the Butere Boys’ School (currently Butere Boys’ High School). Besides being an educationist, Miss Chadwick, a trained nurse, rendered health care services. The memoirs and letters¹³ of varied thematic content give us insight into the challenges faced by both African pupils and missionary teachers, the travails of pioneer girl-education in rural Western Kenya, and the traditional funeral practices and rites of the relevant community. The taboo-like fear with which the girls seeking education were viewed is illustrated by how Kitandi (Miss Lissette’s favourite student, and around whom the narrative is developed), is treated upon the death of her mother. Sociocultural and anthropological information abounds in this narrative. The church appears as avenue of escape for the culturally traumatised.

The tribulations of establishing education in colonial Kenya are highlighted and can be resourced for scholarly and archival inquiries. Such works can also inform courses on the foundation and history of education and curriculum diversification and development in colonial Kenya. For example, it is possible to glean the nature of educational curricula offered to African girls at the time. Pioneer African educationists and elites who otherwise might not appear in annals of history can be identified and celebrated. A comparative approach cannot be escaped. The aesthetically graphic manner in which the narrative is presented renders the work pleasurable to read. Research and commitment to publication and dissemination become inevitable if such works are to be unearthed, documented and utilised.

12. Published in the *Women Writing Africa*, VI. III, Eastern Region as “My Students”, pp. 103-106.

13. Miss Downer’s memoirs, Miss Chadwick’s extract and others not herein included were retrieved by Mrs Fran Etemesi during her 1995-1996 archival research at the University of Birmingham, United Kingdom, when she sought information on Christianity in the former Kavirondo (Nyanza and Western) region.

5 Conclusion

The discussion in my article appreciates the literature in the African field and beyond, yearning for collection, documentation and anthologising. It also celebrates the works already collected though stored in repositories inaccessible to most of the African academia. Benchmarking against the *Women Writing Africa* series of projects is used to demonstrate possibilities that illuminate effort at unearthing and rendering public such works while actualising the desire to rethink African literature.

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