

Performer-critics in Oral Performance in African Societies

Susan N. Kiguli¹

¹Makerere University, Literature Department, Kampala, Uganda

snk@arts.mak.ac.ug

This paper aims to use the voices of 'performer- critics' as part of the effort to break out of scholarship based mainly in models of the West that encourage strict categorizations of genres and adherence to understanding form and practice as it presents itself in contemporary Western traditions and culture. Scholarship on African literature has had to admit the central role 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 categorizes the work according to schemas based on writing and Western perception but also concentrates on written literature. The study will utilize examples from Buganda, Ankole (Uganda) and Zulu (South Africa) oral poetry as a way of widening and promoting analysis of commonalities and differences between these specific cultures on the African continent. It is important while examining oral performance in Africa to realize that the practices can only be fairly assessed, understood and used based on how well the practitioners in the field and the academic critics hold a dialogue about how forms are developing in the communities concerned.

My main argument is that it is vital to realize how oral poets and performers conceive their world from their own conceptual worlds and within their value systems. Policy makers and academicians who find themselves performing simultaneously as outsiders and insiders to the culture, have to use as well understand their double role. They have to take into consideration the seriousness with which practitioners take their conceptual culture. I contend that the poets' performances are informed very much by by what Kwame Anthony Appiah calls 'conceptual heritage' and the pretical situation on the ground in the environments of performance. It is therefore necessary to have performers interpret their own work and contexts alongside the researcher. Prioritizing the voices of performers brings their techniques and world views to center stage and that compels the researcher and academic to engage with, involve and question these views in a more informed manner. To understand the function of oral poetry performance, it is useful to understand the work within its specific contexts, time and even intercultural connections without merely imposing on it preconceived rules and subdivisions.