

African Urban Oral Poetry as an Interpreter of Contemporary Realities: The Perspective of Songs by Traders of Nkoulouloun Market in Douala-Cameroon

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Abstract

This study investigates African urban oral poetry as a significant instrument in reflecting contemporary African realities and addressing global concerns in the modern context. Songs are a comfortable platform for discourse in unlimited and varied topics since they easily accommodate and sustain people's collective experiences due to their dynamism and lyric character. The study of African urban oral poetry from the perspective of songs by traders in the Nkoulouloun market of Douala in Cameroon is anchored on the argument that, despite modern forms of communication, African urban orature is a relevant voice of the present. The paper maintains that the visible technological advancement has not replaced oral performance, which continues to survive in African traditional and urban spaces, preserving the historical realities and highlighting issues of both local and global concerns. Using the performance centered approach and ethnopoetics theory as tools for the analysis of the songs collected, the study employed the participant observation and interview methods of data collection and found out that orature is not ignorant of the changes that take place in its immediate socio-political, cultural and economic setting as well as the global stage due to its resilience and sensitive nature. The paper assumes that orature emanates from the collective experiences of its milieu and moment and harbours the mores, values and ethics of the people for whom it is created and performed. The conclusion in this paper is that Cameroon urban oral poetry carries the voices of the dispossessed and acts as an interpreter of contemporary realities and further reflects life in post-independence Cameroon in particular and Africa in general.

Keywords: African, Oral, Poetry, Songs, Urban, Cameroon

1. Introduction

This paper investigates the significance of African urban orature, specifically marketing songs by some traders in Nkoulouloun market in Douala, Cameroon as an interpreter of contemporary realities. The paper illustrates the fact that poetry is a genre that is readily accessible to both the illiterate and the literate communities and can be used to interpret a society and address social concerns at every stage of human evolution. Cameroon urban centers like those in the African continent in general are made up of various ethnic groups with distinct cultures, traditions and customs who find themselves living together and sharing the same spaces and enjoying urban life. As a result of this living together, a culture with a new form of oral expression is emerging among the various groups of people. This new culture has a distinct flavour and colour in terms of language, accoutrement and manner of perception. The Africans like any other human beings on earth move along with their cultures.

Oral literature has been and is still the medium of education in African oral communities. With urbanization, the urban towns as illustrated through the songs by the traders in Nkoulouloun market have provided avenues for live oral performance by live performers in front of live audience during specific occasions in the marketplace. This form of oral poetry is composed in performance by live performers who in their capacity as traders use the songs primarily to flatter and entice customers to buy their products. The collected and selected songs performed by these traders demonstrate that orality in its true form is immediate. In other words, the songs sprout spontaneously in performance in front of the live audience by live performers. This form of artistic expression has definite characteristics, which emanate from its oral nature. This is what Ruth Finnegan (1970) refers to as “the significance of the actual performance.”

The contention here is that unless there is live performance in front of a live audience by a live performer during a specific occasion, an oral text cannot come to live. This implies that oral literature takes place only in a live community. So, her emphasis is on the fact that performance is what gives birth to oral literature. Therefore, the most distinctive characteristic of oral literature is its dependent on live performance for its continuous existence as a living art form. The performers here use their songs to mirror and comment on both local and global issues. Every literature whether written or spoken arises from society and mirrors that very society from which it is produced entirely. The songs collected from Nkoulouloun market hinge on the relationship that exists between literature and the society from which it emanates. The collected songs which are studied in this paper as an interpreter of contemporary realities respond actively to the dynamic nature of the modern society.

Ruth Finnegan (1970) has written that oral poetry takes the place of a newspaper (272), while Nol Alembong (2011) adds that “poetry acts as a vehicle of communication in literate societies as well” (216). Poetry as a natural human phenomenon takes place everywhere and at all stages of human interaction. Alembong writing on oral poetry has further stated: “Oral poetry, like other forms of orature, is an integral part of the oral culture of African peoples. In terms of spread and usage, however it permeates every section and segment of society more than other forms. The sung type appears in almost unlimited number of contexts” (57). Alembong further quotes D.C Osadebay who has maintained: “We sing when we fight, we sing when we work, we sing when we love, we sing when we hate, we sing when a child is born, we sing when death takes a toll (57). He defines oral poetry as “The verbal rendition of feelings and ideas through the exploitation of the resources of language and music. In this regard, it is easily distinguishable from prose” (217). The implication here is that poetry as man’s natural way of expressing feelings readily and easily becomes a platform where human beings, especially Africans respond to events around them. As a natural form of human expression; it communicates what is significant to the well-being of humanity as lived in a social environment. The implication here is that people of all cultures, especially Africans easily and comfortably respond to events around them with songs. African people naturally possess poetry which they use as an outlet during different occasions in their lives.

Oral literature has been collected from villages by earlier researchers and scholars in the field. But in the present context where the African societies have witnessed rapid urbanization due to several factors including wars, search for jobs and a better life, there is an emerging oral literature in the urban centers. This type of literature that exists in the oral form in urban areas has distinct characteristics when it comes to language, performance, audience and instrumentation. Though African orature has adapted to the digital age utilizing technology and digital platforms to amplify its reach and impact, the market arena is one of the areas where it survives in its natural form through live performance by live performers in front of a live audience. In the Nkoulouloun market of Douala, performers in their capacity as traders communicate the complexities of urban life and the problems faced by city dwellers in general in their songs. These songs, which are listened to by this study as interpreters of contemporary realities mirror economic hardship, socio-political, moral and cultural problems of postcolonial Cameroon in particular and Africa in general. Marketing songs as used in the context of this study refer to the lyrics used by traders to draw the attention of buyers to their different products. The intention of this paper is to demonstrate that these songs are not mere market noise. They comment on matters of economic, social, political and moral concerns and entertain as well.

Oral poetry that has emerged in urban settings across the African continent, represents a blending of oral traditions with the influence of modern urban life, resulting in unique forms of artistic expressions. African urban orature is a vibrant and dynamic cultural phenomenon that reflects the experiences, challenges and aspirations of urban communities in Africa. Finnegan observes that (1970), “The unwritten forms however, are far less widely known and appreciated. Such forms do not fit neatly into the familiar categories of literate cultures, they are harder to record and present, for a superficial observer at least, they are easier to overlook than the corresponding written material (3). What Finnegan observes is that, the unwritten forms are distinct in character, and need keen attention because many listen to the songs as just market noise that is meant for entertainment; but this study seeks to demonstrate that the songs also instruct. In his preface to *Ideology and Form in African Poetry*, Emmanuel Ngara (1990) feels that, “The impacts poets make depend on the significance of what they say about social reality and on how effectively they communicate their vision to the readers” (xi). For a poet to be relevant in his view on social reality, his language and context of performance must be coherent, wherein he or she does not only seek beautiful language but the most meaningful words that collaborate to communicate life experiences. But as Finnegan has pointed out, words are not enough to bring out meaning in an oral text. In live performance as observed from songs by traders in Nkoulouloun market, the extra linguistic features such as facial expression, winking, sighing, nodding, smiling, opening and closing of the mouth, movements of the

arms etc communicate different messages more effectively than the uttered words. This manner of communication that goes beyond the spoken word in oral performance gives urban oral poetry its distinct flavour, as an interpreter of contemporary realities within the African context.

2. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The researcher adopted the participant observation and interview methods to collect data from traders in Nkoulouloun market. The songs were collected from the mouths of the traders through recording and writing and jotting on different occasions. The researcher was present as one of the customers and audience in order to collect the songs while interacting with the performers. This method of data collection helped to ease tension and provided a friendly atmosphere that allowed conversation to flow freely and comfortably between the researcher and the traders. We encouraged them by buying together with other customers who were at the same time the audience. This aspect was important because the traders use the song as flattery to sustain the patience and attention of customers to buy their products. Their primary objective is to sell, so the song and the act of singing are used as strategies to advertise and call customers to buy.

From the responses received when asked why these traders sing, we realized that singing is not only used in the market to flatter customers. It is also an outlet to soothe the worried minds when life is tough and seems unbearable. They sing to ease their stress and frustration as they stand and sell under the baking sun. Many of the traders who sing in Nkoulouloun market are those selling in the open air outside in front of big shops or along the road. These are mostly those who cannot afford to rent shops due to the size of their capital. During the rainy season their frustration takes an acute level because when it rains, they hardly sell because the market would be flooded, making it difficult for costumers to come and buy thereby forcing many of them to stay indoors and face hunger and hardship. This implies that they also sing to celebrate sunshine and good weather.

At the core of the analysis in this paper are performance theory and ethnopoeitics. Through the ethnopoeitic goal, the paper uncovers the uniqueness of oral performance in enhancing the aesthetic value of an oral text within a specific sociocultural context. When Jerome Rothenberg coined the word in 1968, emphasis of ethnopoeitics as it originated among poets like David Antin, Dell Hymes and Gary Snyder was on performances in which the speaking, chanting, or singing voice give shape to proverbs, riddles, curses, laments, praises, prayers, public announcement and narratives. This lens is relevant to the analysis of songs collected from the mouths of traders in Nkoulouloun market because “it does not only take account of words but silences, changes in loudness and tone of voice, the production of sound effects, and the use of gestures and props (<https://www.researchgate.net>).

Ruth Finnegan (1970) has it that, “oral literature by definition is dependent on a performer who formulates it in words on a specific occasion – there is no other way in which it can be realized as a literary product” (4). The argument here is that the uniqueness of oral literature is its reliance on live performance in front of a live audience by a live performer during an occasion to have an existence. These songs collected from the traders in Nkoulouloun market only acquire life during live performance when they are out to sell else it remains lifeless. The traders only sing when there are people who have come in front of them to buy. This underscores the significance of a live audience during live performance by a live performer.

3. Textual Analysis

3.1. Performance Principles and Events of Songs by Traders in Nkoulouloun Market

In the Nkoulouloun marketplace where the songs were collected from the mouths of performers who perform as traders and not as professionals, there are people from diverse cultural backgrounds and heritages who come there to buy and sell. In this study we chose to collect data from Nkoulouloun market because, Douala is the economic capital of Cameroon and this makes it a favourable site for both Cameroonians of all regions as well and foreigners who come there for different businesses. Almost everybody who goes to Douala to buy or sell has much to do in Nkoulouloun market. These songs sprout out spontaneously and are realized in performance and not for performance. These market lyrics, which border on social criticism are performed by both men and women. It is not easy to trace the historicity of these performance in the Nkoulouloun market but it is obvious that the African people generally respond to every event of their lives with songs. Singing is part and parcel of the daily lives of Africans. These songs which have the flavour of urban life mirror the tensions and contradictions of the post independent Cameroonian society.

There are four songs to be analyzed in this work which were collected under these titles: “les wey forts”, “venez me tromper”, “où sont les ma nohs?” and “tear tear money”. The lyrics carry the fears and frustrations of the city dwellers. They also bring the social, economic, cultural and political realities of the nation to light. The songs evoke issues that have both local and global validity.

(French)**No 1 : Les weys forts**

Les vrais choses sont ici
 Les weys forts
 Voici les vrais silips, pour porter
 et aller montrer l'enfant
 A son vrai père.
 Venez acheter.
 Ne partez pas demander
 Les silips et les soutiens
 Chez les voisins.
 Voici les bons soutiens
 Pour aller montrer l'enfant
 A son vrai père.
 A combien?
 A cinq cinq cents
 Prenez pour vous
 Donnez l'argent
 La vie est belle.
 Tournez, tournez,
 Le secret c'est de tourner.
 Tournez, tournez,
 Comme on vous tourne à cinq heures.
 Où sont les connaisseurs?

(French)**No 2 : Venez me trompez**

Trois trois cents
 Trois trois cents, les pantalons
 C'est ne pas pour appeler
 Le marché
 Papa moins cher est là
 C'est trois trois cents
 Où sont les vrais hommes?
 Papa moins cher est là.
 Trois trois cents
 Si je mens Dieu coupe ma chose.
 Trois trois cents. Si je
 Mens Dieu m'envoie en Europe.
 Où sont les femmes ?
 Douala est bien, C'est ne que la maison
 Qui est chère.
 La vie est belle au Cameroun.
 Quand Yaounde respire,
 Tout le pays est bien.
 Je suis sur le soleil pour vous sauver
 A trente ans on a déjà les rides au Cameroun
 Mes gros diplômes mes donnent la nausée.
 Venez acheter pour vos maris.
 Voici les pantalons au prix de rien.
 Trois trois cents.
 Où sont les femmes ?
 Comptez sur moi pour arranger vos mariages.
 Trois trois cents, trois trois cents.

(Approximate English Translation)**Les weys forts**

The real things are here.
 les weys forts
 These are the real pants to wear
 and go and present the child to its
 father.
 Do not go and ask for pants and
 breast wears from neighbours.
 Here are good breast wears to wear
 and go and present the child to its
 real father.
 For how much?
 Five, five hundred francs.
 Take yours and pay.
 Life is beautiful.
 Turn, turn,
 The secret is to turn them
 Turn, turn them as you are being turned at 5:00 am.
 Where are those who know?

(Approximate English Translation)**Come and Deceive Me**

Papa less Costly is there.
 Three three hundred francs
 Three three hundred francs
 For trousers
 It is not to call customers.
 The price is three three hundred francs
 If it is a lie God should cut my thing
 Three three hundred francs
 If it is a lie God should send me to Europe.
 Where are the women?
 Life is good in Douala.
 The only thing that is expensive is housing.
 Life is beautiful in Cameroon,
 When Yaounde is breathing,
 The whole nation is fine.
 In Cameroon we develop wrinkles at thirty.
 My big certificates give me nausea
 Come and buy for your husbands.
 Here are trousers, almost free of charge
 Three, three hundred francs.
 Count on me to fix your marriages.
 Three, three hundred francs.
 Three three hundred francs.

(French)
No 3 : Où sont les ma nohs?

eee eee
 eee eee
 Cent cent francs
 Où sont les ma noh?
 Venez me noh ici
 Les moins chez sont là
 Accouchez beaucoup,
 Comptez sur moi.
 Habillez les enfants
 Le secret c'est de tourner.
 Accouchez beaucoup, comptez sur moi
 Tournez, tournez, le secret c'est de tourner.
 Où sont les connaisseurs?
 Achetez beaucoup, volez un peu.
 Tournez, tournez comme
 On vous tourne à cinq heures.
 Cents, cents francs.

(Approximate English Translation)

Where Are the Ma Nohs?
 eee eee
 eee eee
 One one hundred francs
 Where are the ma nohs?
 Come and noh me here
 The very cheap ones are there.
 Make many children and count on
 me.
 Dress up the children
 Make many children and count on
 me
 Buy much and steal very little
 One one hundred francs.

(French)

No 4: Tear tear money

Argent déchiré
 Argent déchiré
 Argent rongé par les souris.
 Les vieux billets,
 Les billets noicis,
 Tear tear money
 Tear tear money
 Argent mouillé
 Argent moisissures
 Argent brûlé
 Les dollars, les euros,
 Tous monnaies etrangeres.
 Apportez on change.
 Apportez on change.
 Tear tear money
 Tear tear money
 Tear, tear money.

(Approximate English Translation)

Tear tear money
 Torn Bank Notes
 Torn bank notes,
 Bank notes eaten by rats,
 Old bank notes,
 Bank notes that have turned black.
 Tear, tear money,
 Tear, tear money.
 Wet bank notes,
 Moulded bank notes,
 Burnt bank notes,
 Dollars, euros,
 All foreign currencies,
 Bring let's change.
 Bring let's change.
 Tear tear money.
ar tear money.
 Tear, Tear money.

3.2. Urban Oral Performance as Interpreter of Global Concerns

The Cameroonian urban oral artist is a commentator on issues of both local and global concerns. As earlier stated, the African uses poetry/song during both happy and sad moments and for various purposes. The urban oral poet, specifically the performer in Nkoulouloun market in Douala performs during the day in the market arena. The traders' primary objective is to flatter their customers to buy their goods. The poets here engage their creative abilities in spontaneous performances, which reveal information about the type of life and problems faced by African youths in general and Cameroonians in particular.

In the song the performer X-rays the African society in a tone that laments one of its predicaments-migration. The song does not have a highly specialized and restricted form but continues to serve as it flourishes in the new literary space with a new performance flavour; engaging the audience on the burning problems of the moment. The performer in song No2 uses words that bring to mind issues of migration, one of Africa's challenges in the global era. When the poet sings: "if I lie God should cut my thing/If I lie God should send me to Europe", it is inferred that migration is a call for concern. One can deduce that though this form of oral expression crops up in the marketplace primarily as a tool to flatter customers to buy, it harbours and transmits information on the complexities of urban life and the difficulties faced by African youths, especially those who feel that life out of Africa is better than what they are experiencing in their different countries. Reading from the performer's voice, migration is a complex topic for discourse. People in the towns migrated from various villages and came to live in the

urban areas for varied reasons but his voice insinuates that there is still an empty desire to leave the urban center and move to Europe and the poet sees this going away as a source of pain.

In a light mood the poet sings that his second handed tops cost two hundred francs and reassures his customers that if he lies God should either cut his thing or send him to Europe. So, sending him to Europe as punishment for a lie has the heavy penalty whose weight is as that of cutting off his manhood and making him an object because he will be deprived of what makes him a human being. What this suggests is that when one migrates to Europe, he or she loses what cannot be replaced easily. The song is a comment on the issue of migration referred to by Cameroonian youths as “bush falling”. What the performer perceives through his song is that migration in the context of “bush falling” is not a pleasant exercise. But from the perspective of Edward O. Ako and Sarah Anyang Agbor (2012), “A common feature of all human histories is migration. Though the phenomenon is as old as humanity itself, the pace has been accelerated in the twenty first century by the significant developments witnessed in the domain of transport and communication. These developments naturally imply the rapprochement of the local and the foreign, of ‘here’ and ‘there’ and ultimately of the ‘known’ self and the unknown ‘other’ (II). This view reveals that the phenomenon of migration is as old as the history of human existence goes.

The urban oral poet through this song offers a broad perspective on the major pressing issues in literary circles regarding the theme of migration. In so doing, the song highlights, the themes of culture and identity in this era of globalization through a rich and spontaneous selection of words that suggest a wide range of complexities relating to and resulting from migration and its cultural implications. When the performer sings: “If I tell a lie, God should send me to Europe”, his tone, facial expression, the mirthless laughter that follows, the movement of his mouth, the unpleasant sound he utters, the audience’s responses with laughter, varied facial expressions and mockery comments insinuate that the phenomenon of migration to Africans in general and to Cameroonians in particular triggers both positive and negative feelings. From this afore mentioned analysis, one deduces that these songs by traders in Nkoulouloun market provide an expressive channel through which the urban oral artist mirrors the economic, socio-cultural, political and moral tensions and contradictions of this era. From his wish that God should send him to Europe, it is inferred that the urban oral poet in Cameroon deploys the song to explore contemporary realities thereby appropriating a new voice in the literary circle. This expression can be read as a lamentation and regret, given that many families in Cameroon have lost members who leave their homes for Europe on foot through the harsh conditions of the Sahara Desert or through Mexico to get to America.

The increasing rate of urbanization in Cameroon and its new attendant cosmopolitan identity and desires have inspired the artist to authenticate the existence of a new literary perspective, thus creating a literary view of the emerging social realities in the urban community. In this way the urban oral poet negotiates a new literary space and invents symbols and patterns with which to explain their society on various learnings of experiences on Cameroon contemporary life. The song which reveals that migration is one of the challenges faced by Cameroonian youths reads beyond the phenomenon of migration as just movement from one place to another. The migration of youths from Africa in general and Cameroon in particular portrays the underlying problem of unpatriotic leadership, that has resulted to a crippled and sick economy clothed in insecurity. One cannot deny the fact that though they are push and pull factors that push African youths to flee their different countries in search of greener pastures, this popular practice of “bush falling” among youths in Cameroon x-rays the deplorable socio-political and economic conditions of post independent Cameroon. Kalejaiye Oluwakemi Abiole (2023), shares this opinion when he observes: “In *Americanah* Chimamanda Adiche explores the deplorable condition of post-colonial societies premised by political malaise and crippling economy which has resulted in the mass migration of youths within the working-class age (51). The urban oral poet thus finds migration a fitting subject for his poetic fulfillment. Seen from this perspective, urban oral poetry becomes a relevant instrument in interpreting contemporary realities.

The singers in the Nkoulouloun market of Douala have various visual resources at their disposal. They are typically face to face with their audience and possibly take advantage of this situation to enhance the impact and even the content of their words. In this vein, Finnegan (1970) maintains that, “what in literate cultures must be written, explicitly or implicitly in to the text can in orally delivered form be conveyed by more visible means-by the speakers’ gestures, expression, and mimicry... This visual aspect is sometimes taken even further than gesture and dramatic bodily movement and is expressed in the form of a dance, often joint by some members of the audience” (7). The emphasis here is on the general atmosphere of the performance. This song which enhances the global issue of migration is composed in performance. The light-hearted enjoyment of the song by the audience is not only conveyed by the performer’s verbal evocation of mood but also by dress, accoutrement, and Finnegan’s position on this is that, “the verbal content now represents only one element in a complete opera-like performance which combines words, music and dance” (7).

The performers in their songs point to the fact that African oral poets are not passive observers but active commentators of local and global matters. This highlights the dynamic and sensitive nature of oral performance in the urban setting. The song brings to light the manner in which the oral performer in the urban center in Cameroon interprets and internalizes the phenomenon of migration. The performer’s facial expression, voice, tone and movement of the body and hands illustrate the fact that African oral literature in its enduring and evolving character is committed to issues of global concern. In this view, Enongene Mirabeau Sone observes that,

African societies have long relied on oral traditions not merely to preserve memory or transmit values but also to explain, critique, and make sense of conflicts, power, and moral ambiguity. From ancestral wars and liberation struggles to colonial encounters and postcolonial challenges, oral forms—from folktales and war songs to praise poetry and political allegory have offered critical platforms for public reflection and resistance. (2)

Sone's emphasis is that African oral performance represents powerful sites of cultural interpretation and political awareness. The expression, "if it is a lie God should send me to Europe" is not mere embellishment but a reflection of a cognitive strategy through which the urban oral artist relates to the question of migration as he filters through collective memory and lived historical experiences. It is not new that going to Europe always presents undesirable tales in most cases. Many Africa families in general and Cameroon in particular bear painful memories of family members and friends who have died in very blur and unexplained circumstances in the desert or in the sea. This performance illustrates the view that Cameroon urban oral poetry is not a mere voice meant to attract the attention of customers in the market arena, but echoes that offer distinct insights into both national and international worries.

3.3. Urban Oral Performance and Social Activism

The urban oral artist as exemplified by the traders of Nkoulouloun market of the Douala metropolitan city is committed to issues affecting city dwellers. The performer uses the song as a tool to comment on the challenges and complexities of urban life in Cameroon. In song No 2 titled, "come and deceive me" and song No 4 titled, "tear tear money" the poets examine and bring to life the difficulties people face in crowded circles. The traders use the song to negotiated a new literary space thereby inventing symbols and patterns with which to prop into the urban society on various learnings of experience. In song No 3 titled, "where are the ma nohs?" the audience is plunged into a new linguistic zone as the word, "Ma nohs" is imported from one of the languages in Cameroon into the French language which they are using to perform their songs. This mixture of language gives the poem a new linguistic aura making the performance unique in nature. The use of words such as "Ma nohs", cheap, steal and buy emphasize the difficulties of coping with life in the urban area.

The song is a comment on hardship. Some city dwellers go to the market and steal from traders and others. The expression "Buy much and steal less" gives the performer a channel to decry such negatives. The voice demonstrates their experiences gathered from constant contacts with customers who steal their goods. The sound "eee, eee" is produced alongside the repetition of the amount "one one hundred francs" to achieve lyrism and sustain the attention of the customers. The performer in doing these uses facial expressions, bodily movement and gestures to enhance purposeful calculated shifts in voice and tone. Here one notes that the performer has the capability of summoning some additional resources and a number of extra literary devices to give the performance more force and easthetic impact. In this vein, one concurs with Nkem Okoh who in his *Preface to Oral Literature* opines, "virtually every study on the concept oral literature lays stress on the concept of performance" (88). When performance is observed keenly, the deep meaning is reviewed through the extralinguistic gestures and this is what captures the centrality of live performance in front of a live audience on a specific occasion in orature. In this line, Finnegan's remark that, "there are certain definite characteristics of this form of art which arise from its oral nature" is validated.

The performers' selection of words illustrates the fact that cameroon oral poetry in the urban centre in its oral verbalization easthetics and convolution of cosmic space, displays the linguistics, gnomie and cultural symbols which reinforce its unique identity in its relatively complex statues. What is pivotal in this form of oral performance that takes place live in the market is that the traders' rich cultural heritages have helped them in their positing and unveiling of the easthetic beauty enshrined in their souls through the songs.

The performer refers to customers in the song as "*mah noh*". *Ma noh* has evolved from its original usage among the Bamilike villages in Cameroon, where it refers to Fons' wives living in the palace to a new environment with a new linguistic and social implication. When the performer sings, "come and *noh* me here", the audience's vocabulary is enlarged because "*noh*" in the Bamilike oral culture is a noun used to name the section of the palace where the Fons' wives live. *Ma noh* refers to a woman who lives in *noh*. But in the context of the performance in the Nkoulouloun market, it is an action verb which means to cheat, make me lose or deceive. *Ma noh* is generally used by traders in this market to describe customers who ask for much discount when they are bargaining to buy. In this context, the expression "*ma noh*" has become a noun, and an adjective while "*noh*" has become a verb. What is observed here is that though urban oral literature arises from a complex cultural space, it is at the same time sustained by a social and historical context. The use of the expression "*ma noh*" which is incorporated into the language of performance emphasizes the fact that every human being moves about with his or her culture.

Another layer of the meaning of this expression is that, it mirrors the economic hardship that many people, especially the masses face in the urban centers. When the performer highlights misery in the song thus:

Where are the *ma nohs*?
Come and *noh* me here
The very cheap goods are there...
Buy much, still less
One one hundred francs

From this citation, the singers in their capacity as traders are also surgeons of the living conditions in urban area. The rhetorical question aids the performer to identify the category of customers who will readily be attracted to his goods because of the price. This further suggests that they are different classes of customers in the market. Prices are therefore a mark of social class since the very cheap ones are for the *ma nohs*, those who cannot afford goods of higher quality because of the prices. Through their songs, they diagnosed some of the problems many city dwellers face. The song reveals that poverty and general misery characterize the lives of the masses in crowded urban spaces. The performance depicts the performer's vast knowledge on African oral culture and rural life, as they sing from a new cultural space in the city.

Urban oral poetry bears the burden of the masses in details. It gets into the depths of the worries of city dwellers. In song No 4, "tear tear money", the performer brings to light another difficulty faced by the masses; that of bank notes which are either eaten by rats or moulded. He uses the song as a newspaper to announce that he has the solution to the various challenges they have with bank notes. It is common to find people stranded with bank notes in their hands not able to buy because their money is rejected on account that it is old, torn, moulded or eaten by rats. The performer of this song in certain contexts plays the role of a town crier because he wanders in the market hawking his services. His actions key into Finnegan's view that oral poetry takes the place of a newspaper (272).

These derisive songs by traders which are studied in this paper as an interpreter of contemporary realities shade into topical issues in general. The songs give vivid personal views of the general conditions of the masses who are facing different challenges at various levels of their daily activities. The song calls on the victim of torn bank notes to come when he sings "Bring let's change". The singer is sensitive to the existence of different cultures in the city as he uses the chorus "tear tear money, tear tear money" to emphasize the kind of services he renders. The performer is conscious of the fact that there are people who do not understand the French language, especially those from the North West and the South West regions who mostly use Pidgin English in informal circles especially in the market places to ease communication. In the context of the socio-political crisis in the two English regions of Cameroon, the traders in the Nkoulouloun market have customers who are IDPs and these can only express themselves in Pidgin English in the market. The song in its sensitive character takes into account this complex linguistic presence, thus validating the dynamic mode of African oral performance. The repetition of the chorus, tear money, tear money enhances the melodic quality of the performance which inhere the motion of the singer who moves about singing. In the poetry produced in Nkoulouloun market, several recurrent sounds are possible including alliteration. The music in the poems performed in Nkoulouloun market does not exist parallel to meaning. The repeated phrases like tear tear money, turn turn, one one hundred francs and sounds like eee, eee add to the melodic quality of the performance thereby reinforcing meaning. The sounds and repetitive phrases further clarify meaning by emphasizing keywords thus contributing to the mood and tone of the performance giving this poetic framing in the market a distinct literary quality and atmosphere.

3.4. Urban Oral performance and Moral activism

The allure of immortality in the Cameroonian contemporary context, in general and the crowded metropolitan cities in particular provide the performers in the Nkoulouloun market with the occasion to examine the human manners of their generation. The song thus becomes a fitting lens to prop into the darker aspects of human nature and critique contemporary social and moral aspects of life. This is illustrated in song No 1, "Les weys forts" when the performer sings: "Here are the exact pants to wear and go and present the child to its real father". Watching the performer, who waves the pants in the air to show the customers before him who are also his audience, his facial expressions together with the responses of the audience, allow one to question the state of morality in the 21st century urban areas. The expression, "real father" infers a new form of negative, which is easily perceived from the performers tone and the mockery laughter and comments of the audience. The song provides the occasion for the audience to reflect on the pitiful falling value of marriage and the question of family life and parenthood. The family unit is a crucial aspect of society because that is the nursery of a nation. The fact that the organized family unit as the bedrock of a nation is dwindling as inferred in the expression "go and present the child to its real father" is a call for further reflection on the marriage institution, the concept of family life and parenting. Fatherhood is almost becoming absurd in the urban center. It is deduced from the song and the conversation it has sparked among the audience that fatherhood has regrettably acquired a new definition; where one could distinguish between real and fake father. The eloquent speakers and singers in their capacity as traders are surgeons of the society and interpreters of the morality of their social environment.

The expression "go and present the child to its real father", the expression on the singer's face and the response and comments of the audience key into Finnegan's view that, "The significance of performance in oral literature goes beyond a mere matter of definition- for the performance itself can make an important contribution to the impacts of the particular literary form being exhibited" (5). The song pleases and appeals to the senses though the traders do not set out to produce literature but their performances pride for literary accomplishment of the ethic mission that literature is called to perform. These songs thus provide the audience with a channel to delve into the depths of a society that has evolved significantly over time, reflecting changing societal values and cultural norms. The singers used their songs as platforms to explore the nuances of human nature in a way that is both thought – provoking and entertaining. They sing and evoke themes of immorality and social deviant in new and innovative tones. The voices in the songs demonstrate the relevance of oral performance as well as its ability to adapt to changing societal values and norms. The performer in this particular song puts stress on every word that coincides with

action as he gathers the pants and breast wears, turns, and shakes them in the air, giving his performance a dramatic quality and a beautiful rhythm.

The voices of the singers and their manner of performance in front of their customers who stand as their audience give their performance a distinct taste. In oral literature, performance determines the success of the literary piece being exhibited. The protest voice of the performer is read from the expressiveness of tone, gestures, facial expression, dramatic use of pause and rhythm and receptivity to the reactions of the audience. These devices that the singers in Nkoulouloun market employ as they sing to sustain the attention of their customers are not mere embellishments but an integral as well as flexible part of the full realization of the song as a poetic piece worth the attention of literary researcher. These devices that the singers deploy further reinforce the significance of Cameroon urban performance as an interpreter of contemporary realities.

Watching the performances and the devices at the performers' disposal in the market setting, one must be reminded that in African orature, what is classified as poetry is designed to be performed in a musical setting, and the musical, verbal and non-verbal elements are interdependent for both cohere to enhance the success of the performance as a literary product. Their choice of language as exemplified in the expression "real father" implies that they have mastered their society thoroughly and are appalled by the dwindling state of family life, fatherhood, marriage and parenting. These performers have various visual resources at their disposal and those resources sometimes communicate more effectively than words. These traders employ different dramatic gestures including dance and other bodily movements to keep their customers so that they select their pants, breast wears, trousers etc and buy. In doing this, performance combines words, music, gestures, facial expression, bodily movement and dance. The song thus becomes a comfortable spot for the traders to comment on moral, social and political norms, prompting critical reflection and the desire for reforms. They use their songs to raise awareness as they highlight societal ills such as stealing, lies telling and deceit.

3.5. *Urban Oral Performance and Political Activism*

The urban oral poet has a dramatic relation with language and words. While language may be an enabling medium for both oral and written, it is a special force in the urban area, for the looming position of the traders of Nkoulouloun as poets derives first of all from the issue of language. The poet deals with new subjects and themes emanating from post independent disillusioned life of the Cameroonian people where leaders stay in power and become living ancestors while their great grandchildren develop wrinkles at thirty due to hopelessness and stress. The lives of African youths are characterized by hunger, unemployment, poor living conditions and general malaise. In song No 4, the phrase, "In Cameroon, we develop wrinkles at thirty" is a metaphor of protest registered against the unpatriotic leadership that has plunged Cameroonians into a state of emptiness. The performers in their capacity as traders have taken the language of poetry, the diction of figurative language to the marketplace. Here their songs become a popular daily press, because the masses find their voices, thoughts, feelings and frustrations in these lyrics. The tragic-comic voice of the performer has a revolutionary undertone which assumes the character of an informing aesthetics. The singer demonstrates that he has a thorough mastery of his nation which he hopes it gets better. This is evinced in their metaphoric and semantic range which are copiously and manifoldly wide.

The traders in the means and logistics of their poetic creations and execution express worries about their nation as this particular one performing song No 2 sings: "when Yaoundé breathes, the whole nation is fine". This phrase is a lamentation which the poet uses to express disappointment in the unpatriotic and selfish leadership that Cameroon has experienced for more than four decades. The phrase is an irony which the poet deploys to register his protest against the inhumane dealings of the regime in Yaoundé that cares less about its citizens. The response of the audience in this performance was characterized by sighing, twisting of mouth, sounds of disgust such as hmm, ooh and mockery remarks which indicate that the masses are tired of a regime that does not have the interest of its citizens at heart. The messages in song carry depths and passion, which fuse with lyricism to communicate the thoughts of the oppressed who are represented by the live audience. The mockery comments of the audience in response to the piercing messages in the lyrics of the Nkoulouloun market traders symbolize the collective voices of the dispossessed Cameroonians whose aspiration for better living conditions desperately beg for a transformative change.

The song acknowledges the fact that contemporary African poetry whether written or spoken is a site for innovative critical discourse with a relevant conceptual framework on the plight of the oppressed. The depressed performers express the most basic truth of their age in relation to education as the song is used to lament: "my big certificates give me nausea". This lamentation is a metaphoric interpretation of the emptiness of certificate-oriented education that Cameroon has practised for decades. This is one of the causes of corruption and unemployment because youths are not trained to create. They go to school to become job seekers and that is one of the reasons that the negative space of the Cameroonian society is bursting at the seam.

The poet's observant and sensitive eye on society and its numerous problems yield the inside that urban oral poetry as an instrument of education discloses the yearnings of the heart of the Cameroonian people and by extension the will to change and the will to live in freedom. The poet in the quoted line is of the opinion that the educational system in Cameroon should be reviewed so that certificates obtained should not be as irrelevant as his. The voice in the song demonstrates that meaningful change can only occur if the people identify the gnawing problems of their generation and frankly call them by their rightful names; for this is the only way to have the right methodology and approach that will lead to lasting solutions. Listening to this

voice, one can assume that the song is an efficient spot for protest against the type of educational system that does not serve the nation and its citizens. Urban oral poetry is therefore a medium and idiom that carries the burden of the nation's idealistic projections. The message in this line is an appeal for change and a warning against certificate-oriented education. The poet in other words is a victim and an eye witness to the consequences of this system of education that celebrates, grades and certificates and not entrepreneurial spirits. The performer's song performs the ethic mission that literature is called to fulfill in that the song serves as a warning to the Cameroonian youths who have not acquired other skills in addition to their certificates. The songs seek to conscientize and sensitize against lack of skills for it leads to high rate of unemployment and this further triggers ills such as stealing, prostitution, occultism and human trafficking that have ruined many families today. The performer uses the song to spark a conversation on poor leadership that knows nothing but greed. The song symbolizes the cry of the destitute as the poet discloses:

When Yaoundé is breathing,
The whole nation is fine
In Cameroon, we develop wrinkles at thirty
My big certificates give me nausea

The poet makes use of digression to comment on political issues plaguing post independent Cameroon. Yaoundé is the capital city of the nation, Cameroon but the perspective of the poet insinuates that it is a symbol of trauma and pain to the dispossessed. The digression gives the poet the opportunity to remind Yaoundé, which is the seat of political power that all is not well on the side of the youths and the under privilege in general. The poet's criticism is directed towards selfish leadership. The leaders are greedy, irresponsible and passive to the plight of the citizens because they do not look at the nation beyond where they are. The preceding lines of the song activate the audience's mind to reflect deeply on the kind of leadership Cameroon has and to act courageously. The song is a statement on the absurdity of life in Cameroon where those who rule focus on their stomachs while the ruled lavish in misery. Youths develop wrinkles at thirty in Cameroon because leaders do not have the future of the nation at heart and this makes them stay too long in positions of power that these youths become hopeless. There are hardly significant reforms especially in their education system that will create better opportunities after acquiring certificates. The performer looks at his certificate with a lot of regrets because after wasting resources and time in school, he graduated with degrees that are irrelevant in the job market.

These aspirational songs which are grounded in gritty reality challenge in order to change the society for prosperity. This form of oral poetry performed by traders in Nkoulouloun market is spontaneous. Though it does not have a highly standardized and restricted form, it serves the urban community as it flourishes in a new literary space with new performers. The messages in the song illustrate the fact that literature arises from society and reflects that society accurately. Though this form of performance crops up as flattery of customers, it is sensitive to the political climate of the country. One can easily read through the songs that oral literature and urban oral poetry in particular is a dynamic phenomenon and therefore a relevant voice in interpreting contemporary realities.

When the trader sings that when Yaoundé is breathing, Cameroon as a nation is fine, one senses a savage mockery of the unpatriotic leadership which is achieved in the song through irony. This ironical statement on the selfish and passive attitude of leaders towards the entire nation is becoming on the masses to stand up for justice. The song seeks to create awareness as it interprets the actions of those who rule and the consequences on the ruled. The image of nausea is a metaphor for the common man's protest against the irrelevant presence of some Cameroonians in positions of power because their job is to drag the image of the one-time envied nation in mud.

The reactions of the customers who are the audience in this context illustrate that they find their voices and stories in the songs. The songs by traders in Nkoulouloun market read into the depths of the nation and reveal high levels of mismanagement. Niyi Osundare (1983), the flag bearer of third generation African poets in his collection, defines African poetry in the first poem of this collection titled "poetry is". He begins by telling the audience and the listener what poetry is not as he sings poetry is:

not the esoteric whisper
of an excluding tongue
not a clap trap
for a wondering audience
not a learned quiz
entombed in GrecoRoman lore
Poetry is
the hawker's ditty
the eloquence of the gong
the lyrics of the marketplace. (5)

What is understood from Osundare's preceding lines is that poetry is the property of the common man. This definition ties with the messages in the songs by these traders, whose performances take place in the market. What is seen in the performances

in Nkoulouloun marketplace is not only the aesthetic virility of the songs but the correctness and social, political and economic relevance of their contents. The performers benefit from the oral cultures of their respective traditional rural lives in their villages to perform in the complex social context of the urban centre where there is a resultant specific oral culture that brings performers and audience to a distinct communal experience. These performances are therefore the extension of the rural life which acquires a different look in the urban spaces.

4. Conclusion

The study contends that though oral performance springs out in the Nkoulouloun market primarily as a means to flatter customers to buy, it is not passive to both local and global concerns. We found out that oral literature in its dynamic character is concerned with the realities and complexities of human existence. Through the performance centred approach and the ethnopoetic theory the analysis of the orally performed poems clearly portray the differences between oral and written literature as the performance revealed that in oral poetry, meaning is communicated effectively through the nonverbal resources of language such as facial expressions, bodily movements, changes in voice and dramatic actions. From our analysis in this study, we observe that much more could be said about the many other means which the oral performers employ to project their songs in the urban literary marketplace. These include the use of dramatized dialogue and the manipulation of audience's sense of humour. This discloses the fact that oral literature has different potentialities from written literature, and additional resources which the oral artists in the context of the Nkoulouloun market develop for the purpose of their desire to sell. The nonverbal aspects such as dancing, waving of hands and general bodily movements and facial expressions are of primary significance for the appreciation of these selected Nkoulouloun market lyrics as a mode of aesthetic expression.

The distinctiveness of the songs performed by traders of Nkoulouloun market as a literary product worth classifying as urban oral poetry is viewed from the aspect of language, place of performance, audience and the occasion. The complex urban society is read in the selected songs from words and expressions such as "les weys forts, ma noh, noh, and tear tear money". These words and phrases define a new linguistic environment, ways of human interaction and manner of perception. The analysis further revealed that, these performances help to break identity boundaries and enhance interculturality. African oral poetry that survives in the urban centers through live performance as illustrated by the four songs collected from the mouths of traders in Nkoulouloun market in Douala, Cameroon is richly embedded in African oral culture. These performances furnish the audience with verse productions, embellished with aesthetic and utilitarian beauty, which instruct and entertain as well. The study also found out that the uniqueness of urban oral performance collected as performed by traders, lies in the fact that it is composed in performance and not for performance. The relevance of this spontaneous performance in front of the live audience is in its ability to reveal and reflect on events in post-independence Cameroon in particular and Africa in general.

From the preceding analysis, we assume that these performances are committed to the plight of Cameroonians because the dispossessed find their voices in the songs, which regrettably disclose that bad leadership, corruption, injustice and poor education system characterize the nation after independence. The songs have through the messages they carry revealed that oral poetry in the urban area is sensitive to the social, political, economic and cultural life of Cameroon in particular and that of Africa in general. African urban oral poetry, read from the analysis in this study is therefore a significant instrument in interpreting contemporary realities.

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