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**Oral Tradition as the Literary Skeleton of African Novels: A
Study of Nkem Nwankwo's *Danda***

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Abstract

Literary writers and works find their roots and expression in the culture that breeds them. This assertion is true because literary works do not exist in isolation of the people's way of life, often expressed in what they do (social functions and roles); what they think (their philosophy of life about birth, death, God, heaven, hell, health, ancestors, wealth, poverty etc) and what they have (the material aspects of culture such as houses, war materials, masquerades, dances etc. it is from these various aspects of culture that literary artists borrow the raw materials which they embellish to produce written works in art such as plays, novels and poems. A notable critic of

African literature, O.R Darthorne, shares the above view when he said, "African literature in its written form relies heavily on oral literature." In line with the above views, this paper traces the literary skeleton of Nkem Nwankwo's novel – Danda - as a work that profoundly borrowed from African oral traditions.

Introduction

Literature is a product of culture and every extant society possesses its own culture. And so, oral literatures are based on people in a geographical setting in which their cultures are identified in *what they do, what they have and what they think*. What they *do* comprises their activities with regards to marriage, birth, death, burial rites, occupations and other daily activities. What they *have* includes: their building patterns, their transport and communication gadgets, their security materials such as guns, matchets, bows and arrows, foods, animals, rivers, hills, hoes, medicinal herbs etc. Again what they *think* simply involves their philosophy of life, their religion and belief system with regards to the position and role of God/gods in their society, their belief about life and death, re-incarnation, heaven and hell, poverty and riches, good and evil, success and failure, masquerading, writing and dancing.

Therefore, a every literary work is a product of a unique society where people act, interact, react, marry, give birth, celebrate, mourn, fall sick, recover from illness, die, bury, initiate and excommunicate in unique ways. It is the totality of the people's way of life that the artist, novelist, the playwright and the poet – captures and writes about. The artist borrows his ideas from his people's educational system, economy, history, politics, social values and social problems such as; armed robbery, slavery, land disputes, intentional killing through talisman (Ogwu) or poison, inter personal/community disputes, intrigues between rival individuals etc. Put succinctly, oral literature provides the raw materials with which the fictional modern African writers base their novels and the story-line and sometimes the style of story-telling. For instance. Chinua Achebe, in his novels such as *Things Fall Apart (1958)* *Arrow of God (1964)*, made tremendous use of oral tradition in the aspects of use of idioms, proverbs, legends, myths, folktales, historical antecedents, and a lot of cultural references. Again, Amos Tutuola, a Yoruba, borrowed much from the Yoruba tradition to write his stories in his book: *The Palm-Wine Drinkards*. He simply clothed, exaggerated and embellished already existing

Yoruba traditional tales or stories and came out with the first Nigerian and perhaps African Novel in 1952.

Furthermore, Wole Soyinka's reliance on the Yoruba mythology, religion, beliefs, and historical perspectives in most of his works, where the Yoruba gods such as Ogun, Obatala, Olodumare, and other gods feature prominently, supplies sufficient evidence for the theory on ground.

Similarly, Okigo borrowed tremendously from the oral tradition in the writing of his popular poems and derived great inspiration from a goddess called "Idoto" a female deity in Ojoto, Anambra State.

Again, a Nigerian popular novelist, Cyprian Ekwensi was accused by Eurocentric critics of basing his novel: *Burning Grass*: entirely on folktales. Also J.P. Clark and Gabriel Okara reflected the culture of the riverine people of Nigeria in their literary works and borrowed a lot from their traditional oral tales.

In this paper effort is made to prove beyond doubts that Nkem Nwankwo borrowed the greater percentage of the content of his novel – *Danda* – from oral literature/ oral tradition. In doing this, the novel is thoroughly read and all the aspects of oral tradition embedded in it extracted and critically commented upon. The essence is to establish the fact that Nkem Nwankwo's *Danda* got its backbone and thematic essence and literary flavour from Igbo oral tradition.

***Danda*: The Story-Line**

In the novel, *Danda*, Nkem Nwankwo presents a young man from Aniocha town and from the Uwadiegwu kindred, who is easy-going, hilarious, unabashed, indifferent and unrestricted by tradition and creed.

He is a free thinker, a non-conformist and dangerously free and independent. He is the first son of a rich proud and a no nonsense traditionalist called Araba. For Araba and for many members of the Uwadiegwu kindered, *Danda* is an Akaloghi, a useless, shameless and aimless young man, who spoils the name and the image of the Uwadiegwus through his actions. But to others in Aniocha and other neighbouring communities, *Danda* is a flutist, an entertainer, a mobilizer and a source of smiles and happiness to many people.

Significantly, Danda, the chief character tried to change himself from the free, odd and almost eccentric individual he is, in other to *do, think and have* what the society wanted him to do, think and have but failed in all of these. For instance, his venture and entry into Christianity was a total failure and a source of embarrassment to Aniocha in general and the Uwadiegwu kindred in particular. Again his forcible entry into the marriage institution was a disaster.

Araba's attempts to initiate him into the prestigious Ozo title met with a great hitch with great opposition from Otankpa, who observed lately that Danda had run away from initiation "ichi" ceremony because of fear of knife cuts and blood.

The final attempt to initiate Danda into the 'ichi' ceremony, to enable him join the Ozo title holders ended in a disaster, as Araba died of broken heart, when Danda did not prove himself a worthy man. In spite of the fact that Araba married wives and had many children, when he died, for one full year, he did not receive any burial ceremonies. This is to the extent that his spirit was not given full reception in the spirit-world. It would appear that Araba had "UMU" without any "NWA" That is, he had children without substance.

Nevertheless, Danda came back after Araba's death, according to him, "I have come to take possession of my Obi and nothing will crumble." That was his reply when Nwokeke asked him sarcastically:

Son of our fathers, where did you spring up from? Did they tell you, your father's house is crumbling? (154)

In summary, in spite of Danda's rugged show of individualism, his seeming foolishness, his non-challenge and indifference, he raises the hope of his kindred and the empathic reader in his final words of optimism and manliness when he says:

"I have come to take the possession of my Obi. Nothing will crumble (154)"

Having presented the story-line, the rest of this paper concentrates on proving that Nkem Nwankwo relied heavily on oral tradition in creating the skeleton of the stories in *Danda*.

Elements of Traditional/Oral Life of the Igbo in the Novel: *Danda*

In the novel, *Danda* Nkem Nwankwo borrowed a lot from oral tradition and employed many vernacular terms in presenting his story.

The use of words such as “Ogbu” tree (1) Ekwe (151), chi (15) Ozo (2) Oja, Ogbu, Nsi, Amusu, Ogene (15) and akalogoli (151) goes a long way to show the setting of the novel. It is a rural traditional setting peopled by villagers, the young, the old men and women. For instance, when Danda was admiring a new car bought by a man of his kindred, somebody satirically said:

If every akalogoli is to ride a Land boat, there will be nothing left for the world to do but turn upside down (15).

The concept of akagholi or an efulefu is purely a traditional coinage referring to a man who is hopeless, aimless and useless. And that is how Danda is seen in Aniocha and Uwadiegwu kindred.

Again the saying on P7 that “what belongs to one belongs to his kindred hoha” is a purely traditional philosophy and “Hoha” is an Igbo word to show the setting of the novel.

Again, the reader is introduced to the nature of traditional prayer that follows the presentation of kolanut. “Spirits of the dead come and eat oji.”⁽¹¹⁾ Traditionally, spirits of the dead ancestors are always around and they hover around the living. And the dead are not dead in the real sense. The above is neither English nor an American belief system. The dropping of some quantity of palm-wine to the bare floor for the ancestors is borrowed from the traditional practice.

The kolanut prayer is quoted in full to reveal the traditional instinct and colouring in the novel:

Chineke Olisaebuluwa who made all things, Come down from the sky and eat oji. Spirits of the dead come and eat oji... let this oji cleanse the world. Let it make us friends. May each man have what is due to him. The hawk shall perch and the eagle shall perch. Whichever bird says to the other don't perch, let its wings break (11).

The above prayer is an exemplification of Igbo world view, Igbo philosophy and Igbo idea of justice and fair play.

The story about the origin and source of masquerades in *Danda* is purely based on oral tradition about the mystery of masquerades.

According to *Danda*:

Most of the spirits of ancestors had already emerged from ant-holes in the ground, rejoiced with the brothers and sunk back to the home of the dead. (14).

Therefore, traditionally, masquerades or spirits emerge from ant-holes and they normally rejoice with their brothers ONLY and not their sisters. In Igbo world view, women as non-initiates have no business with masquerades irrespective of their age. Masquerading during festivals is purely a traditional practice and the IJELE MASQUERADE, the most honourable and respected masquerade in Igbo land is a total symbol of rugged traditionalism. That is why it takes a lot for it to emerge from the land of the spirits during festivals. We capture the elevated position of the Ijele among other masquerades in these lines:

The Ijele danced. And at every step he took, at the impact of his ponderous feet on the ground, the earth groaned:

Jim... jim... jim. It was like the sounds of a giant pestle would make on a giant mortar. (17).

The above is a poetic description of the majesty and dignity of the Ijele masquerade in Igbo land. The ornaments and artistic impressions on Ijele masquerade stand for a complete world - each signifying something about creation. Some represent the beautiful world of men and women, lions, birds, dead heroes, warriors, world of mirrors which flash blindingly as the king swayed to the rhythm of the drums. Therefore, the whole concept of Ijele and what its costumes stand for, is a sufficient preserve of Igbo tradition. Nkem Nwankwo captures the departure of Ijele in these words: "But the Ijele reached his fence safely and sank down into the ant-hole to the world of the dead." (18).

Furthermore, the appearance of "Agbogho Mmanwu" after the departure of the Ijele and the spraying of ear corns as a symbol of fertility for the people has purely traditional implications and explanations. Also, the presence of the Izaga masquerade on a spindle and her use of Ogwu to suspend herself on the thin air has traditional undertone.

Again, the issue of title-taking in Ibgoland is taken very seriously. And titled men are highly revered by all. That is why it was considered an abomination for Danda, a non-titled man to carry the Ngwu Agelega, an instrument or staff meant only for the titled men. That is why Agali, condemning Danad's act says:

If a man who is not an Ozo handles the ngwu agelega, it is not a small thing. It is an alu, hoha! (22).

So the issue of title-taking is used clearly for social stratification. Also the concept of "Agwu", a kind of madness is an Igbo belief. That is why Araba, Danda's father says concerning some of Danda's eccentric acts:

I used to think it was agwu but I don't think so now. Danda does everything he does with open eyes (26).

So the issue of the god of madness (agwu) influencing one's behaviour is a clear concept in Igbo cosmology. And Araba, Danda's father laments:

"It is my misfortune. I have weak Ikenga (26)."

The idea of one's *Ikenga* or personal god influencing his life and fortune is a belief in Igbo tradition. However, Okelekwu, Araba's bosom friend does not believe that Araba has a weak Ikenga because he has all that it takes to be a wealthy man in Igbo land.

According to Okelekwu, Araba is

- A titled man, an Ozo man
- He has ten wives,
- He has many children.

All these are the indices or parameters to measure a man's standing in the traditional Igbo society (26).

Again, in traditional society, if a man does certain abominable things such as selling virgins into slavery, removing land boundaries, or sleeping with a widow, great misfortunes are brought to a man. This is Igbo morality. The idea of Umuokpu or Umuada going about and killing evil spirits with their blunt knives to enable the soul of the dead man have a smooth journey in the land of the dead is a traditional practice and social belief (32).

Furthermore, the use of Ogene – (metal gong) and the use of errand boys to communicate and deliver messages to people is borrowed from traditional belief system (38).

The use of Igbo proverbs by mature and experienced speakers such as Okelekwu in deciding the case between Araba and Nwokeke concerning the rightful holder of the Ozala Umu Uwudiegwu is a pure demonstration of Igbo sense in legal matters. (44).

Again, the vehemence by “Amusu” on the family of Nnatu after his ITE OGWU was taken to the church and his helplessness against the amusu explains the traditional belief in the protection of human life with the help of talisman.

A typical traditional man feels absolutely unprotected without Ogwu or talisman inside or on his body (55). Let us read the lines that explain this belief.

The priest had blessed him. Then all the Ogwus that had been brought in that day had been piled before the church and burnt. But two days Nnatu had made this religious gesture, the enemy against whom he had made Ogwu had transformed himself into a fearful amusu bird, the drinker of blood, and had perched on Nnatu’s roof and cried kwololom! Kwololom! With impunity (55).

This situation leads Nnatu to regret his action of doing away with the protective Ogwu in the church premises

Nnatu had lain awake all through the night shivering and biting his finger-nails with regret. For if the Ogwu had been there to protect him, the amusu wouldn’t have dared come near his house (56).

The above is a clear expression of the traditional Igbo man’s belief in self-protection with Ogwu. The idea of allowing unseen God to protect him does not arise and does not make enough sense to him.

Therefore, the whole story about Ogwu, Amusu and protective effects of Ogwu is rooted in oral tradition of the Igbo.

Moreover, the folktale concerning the circumstances that led to the annual migration of kites is a traditional tale. The tale revolves around the act of

killing his mother in a dangerous rage because of the smallness of the pumpkin leaves he gave to his mother to cook. The kite in fury took the dead body of his mother and threw it into the flames of bush fire. That is why at the end of each scorch season, especially when he was hungry, he would remember his mother and would go looking for her in the flames, crying; Nnemuo, oku gbagbulu-u-u! Again, the use of masquerades as (judges, faceless and impartial), to settle cases between persons, towns and communities is a traditional practice (83). In the above case, a queer stubborn woman who had gone to live isolated life in the forest was frightened back to the society with dreadful looking masquerade. Nwankwo tells us: "After a year, the Aniocha men had frightened her back to the society with terrible – looking masquerades (83). So, masquerades are used to restore law, order, sanity and justice in Igbo society. That is tradition.

Again, the concept of (MBE) Tortoise in Igbo cosmology as a very tricky and deceptive animal is re-emphasized in the novel. Mbe is commonly a phenomenon in most Igbo tales and is known for mischievous acts. According to the novelist:

Just as the tortoise (Mbe) was always the centre of all fables, so Okoli Mbe knew all alus (abominable acts) that were perpetrated in Aniocha (84).

This shows that oral tradition is the backbone of the novel – *Danda*.

The idea that some towns act as cannibals who enjoy eating human beings is a regular allegation in traditional society. It is reported that the people of UBILI eat human flesh. Okelekwu agrees with the view but quickly adds that "it was hundred of years ago that they ate human beings." "In the days of my great grand fathers, the Ubilis used skulls as drinking cups." At this point, Nwafor told the traditional story relating to how the Ubili people nearly killed and ate a friendly visitor to their community. According to him:

A traveller from a land far away came to see his friend at Ubili. The friend welcomed him and on his behalf called many to come and drink...

The feast went on all day. And then as night was coming down, the friend gathered a few ruffians, set on the traveller and knocked him about. That was some welcome.

This morning the traveller appeared at the police station at Mbamili. His head was broken and his body full of wounds...

The Ubili murderers after beating him senseless, had taken him for dead. Then they went to fetch straws with which to roast his body. But he was not dead. His chi helped him over the wall (100).

The idea that some Igbo communities are cannibals is vehemently believed by some Yorubas, Hausas and other ethnic groups in Nigeria. It is this belief that Nwankwo captures in the story told above.

The traditional Igbo belief in getting protection from Ogwu against enemies was re-echoed by Araba to his son, Onuma.

Araba addresses Onuma thus:

I don't feel at ease about you. You haven't got any Ogwu to protect you... You should have taken that Ogwu I made some years ago. So far, it has kept the whole compound. But you tell me the church forbids it. Many church men now use Ogwu. You cannot church more than the fada (104).

The above is a reaffirmation of the traditional belief in the efficacy of Ogwu to protect a man, his clan, his kindred, his village or a whole community. The novelist captures this idea very well and re-emphasized it.

Furthermore, when Diochi's palm trees could no longer produce palm wine, he suspected that an evil man must have cast a spell on his palms. Little did he know that it was Danda who used to climb the palm trees in the night to remove the palm wine. He concluded that a Dibia must be consulted. According to him:

It is a thing for 'afa', perhaps some evil man has cast a spell on the palms... Why should somebody want to prosecute me? Nobody can take sand from my foot prints. But he would see the dibia (110).

The consultation of AFA or the occult powers is typically a traditional potent belief that has withstood the long presence of Christianity.

In addition, the appeasement move that Nwamma, Araba's first wife made after nearly killing him with a pestle is significantly based on traditional ways of settling disputes between husbands and wives. There is usually no formal court session for the settlement. After the ugly incident, Nkem Nwankwo reports thus:

Early the next day, Nwamma kelt before Araba. She carried in her hand a calabash on which was a cock, its legs tied together, two fresh... eggs, and three cola seeds (113).

This is a traditional ritual which every woman performs to appease her husband in case of any serious misunderstanding or quarrels.

At the presentation of these items of symbolic magnitude, Nwankwo tells us:

Araba took the cock, cut its throat with a small knife, and poured the blood on the Ikenga. Then the couple began to talk of many domestic matters. It was then agreed that Danda should return (113).

This propitiation and appeasement have restored peace between husband and wife and between father and son.

Again, when Araba suddenly fell sick, some people speculated that the hands of gods must be in his illness. They argued that:

That was no fever. Perhaps Araba had sworn false by the ALUSI and the god was claiming his life as a penalty for the alu. Many people refused to believe this. Araba was an honest... man. He didn't speak with two mouths (114).

The idea of a man being punished with strange illnesses such as sudden crippling, madness, leprosy, blindness and dumbness after offending the earth goddess, having sexual affairs with a widow, bearing false witness and giving partial judgement is a popular belief among the traditional Igbo society. But in Araba's case, he was an honest man that might be the reason why he survived the attack. There was also some speculations that Araba's illness could have been caused by someone who had eaten the Amusu Ogwu by changing himself into drinker of blood and was now every night sucking him dry. Or an enemy must have taken sand from his foot prints and mixed with poison and left it beside the tree of evil in deep night when worst spirits walked (114 – 115).

The message here is that traditionally, the Igbo man does not naturally fall sick; he does not naturally die no matter his age. There are always the hands of evil man or wicked gods or goddesses in the negative affairs of men.

By this, it is a clear fact that Nkem Nwankwo borrowed much of the thematic content of the novel – *Danda*–from Igbo culture and philosophy of life.

The invitation of an old DIBIA with white beard, a shiny bald head, eyes ringed with blue and white clay, a smoky goat skin bag, an Ofo, tough and bloody squatter, a tortoise shell, pieces of white clay (Nzu) and two cam wood coloured chains made up of cowries strapped together to come and divine the cause of Araba's sudden illness and to help him recover, goes a long way to show the magnitude of traditional trappings and colouring in the novel (115).

We are told that the dibia, after receiving sixpence to wash the faces of the divining spirits, intoned prayers to the god of the sky, then to Araba's ancestors and finally to evil spirits whom he asked to keep away. This is a traditional ritualistic approach to healing. Let us listen to the divination.

Where is the source of the evil? Where is it? Tell us strong one who has brought fire into this compound? Man or spirit? Dry meat that fills the mouth, strong one, tell us. Akweke, the egg of the holy snake which one breaks at his perils (116).

The traditional belief in the consultation of dibia afa in times of trouble, the efficacy of divination and the idea that every misfortune is caused by either evil men or malevolent gods is vividly expressed above. Furthermore, the belief in the effectiveness or potency of Ogwu for the protection of man from the evil men and wicked gods is clearly shown, when Araba eventually survived and recovered from his illness. For instance, at the departure of the dibia, Araba fortified himself and his entire household against evil men and amusu. Nwankwo tells us:

Araba's pre-occupation after that illness was how to make sure that Nwokeke would not be in the position to harm him again... So Araba took protective measures. He sent for five famous dibias. They stayed with him for one

market week and kneaded him in Ogwu, and assured him that he was indestructible (119).

Here, Nkem Nwankwo captures the idea of a traditional Igbo man depending so much on and believing heavily in the ability of Ogwu to offer a kind of unlimited protection to him. To reiterate this view, the author tells us that:

Nwokeke like Araba, took steps to protect himself. His own dibias came and for days the smoke of burnt offering billowed from his obi (12).

So no man takes chances as far as using Ogwu for self-protection is concerned. This is a people's traditional way of life and living being captured by the artist.

Therefore, the Igbo man, traditionally, believes in "Ogwuas" (talismans) as satisfactory and certified means of self protection and fortification.

Again, the traditional belief in the superiority of male children over the female ones is demonstrated in the novel in the following words:

Araba had his consolation in the fact that Ani, the earth goddess was taking note of Nwokeke's ALUS:

For news came some days later that one of Nwokeke's wives had given birth to a baby girl. This was the eighth girl to be born to him. And one of his dearest wishes was to have a baby boy or son. He had to send away many of his wives who couldn't satisfy him in this direction. But the new ones with which he replaced them either didn't give birth to any children at all or had all girls (121).

Because of the open enmity between Araba and Nwokeke, Araba feels very sadistically happy about Nwokeke's "misfortune" in getting only female children. And the obvious implication is that Nwokeke's Obi, his chieftaincy titles and his long barn would pass over to another family with male children, when Nwokeke eventually passes on.

In the same traditional perspective, the proverb used by Araba in his surrender and bid to reconcile with his Umunna (kinsmen) - the Uwadiogwu and to hand over the OZALA to the rightful keeper is significant and relevant. In his surrender note Araba opines:

If a man cooks for the community, the community will eat it all. But if the community cooks for a single person, he cannot eat the cooking (123).

Here, Nkem Nwankwo re-echoes the traditional belief in the futility of a man challenging the entire community. It is foolishness. It is absurd.

Moreover, the process of looking for a wife for Danda, the prolonged haggling for the bride price and the eventual agreement between the two parties is a clear demonstration of traditional approach to the marriage institution (128ff).

Again, the use of masquerade to secure justice and fair play is once more reiterated by Nwankwo. When Danda's wife refused to feed him, the masquerade from the land of the spirit was invoked to instill discipline into the stubborn woman. It is also an abomination to associate the voice of masquerade with human voice. And that was the offence Danda's wife committed on (134). When she told Danda sarcastically,

You will tell me too that it was not the voice of Nnoli Nwego I heard last night (134).

And to this end, Araba and Okelekwu agreed that traditionally, "telling the secret of a masquerade is not a small thing."

On page 140, it is shown that it is the duty of the oldest man in the community to break the traditional kola nut. And on page 143ff, it was shown that a man who couldn't withstand the pains and rigours of "Igbu ichi" ceremony is not a true man and is not worthy to be initiated into the prestigious Ozo title holders. This situation robbed Danda of the opportunity to become an Ozo man.

Furthermore, the whole idea of taking an Ozo title as a mark of social distinction and achievement is entirely traditionally based.

This may be the reason why the Ichi ceremony precedes it According to Nkem Nwanwko, the ichi ceremony is a test of fortitude and manliness He describes this exercise that is blood chilling thus:

The Ogbu ichi rips off pelts of flesh in a traditional pattern that stretches from ear to ear. The operation is excruciating. But the victim is to bear the pains if not with a smile at least without visible show of sorrow (149).

So any man who cannot withstand the excruciating pains from the ichi ceremony is not a true man and is not worthy to be initiated into the Ozo fold.

And finally, the folktale concerning ESU and the dove is purely re-echoing the source of the contents of the Novel *Danda*. According to Nwankwo, ESU (Millipede) was approached by the dove to make ogwu for him to remove his timidity and shyness:

Esu agreed and made an Ogwu that was not effective and the dove remained his timorous self. Everyday, he would blame Esu for not making him a better Ogwu (153).

From this tale, we understand that there is always an explanation for every event, incident, happening or practices in traditional Igbo society. The above explains the reason why the DOVE is a fearful bird.

Conclusion

From the context and thematic contents of the novel-*Danda* – the reader is not left in doubt from the inception of the story to its end that Nkem Nwankwo unpretentiously borrowed the bulk of his ideas, stories and narrative from the Igbo oral tradition.

The storyline - is a compendium of Igbo World view, philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, practices and fears in all ramifications. From the numerous examples given in this paper, it is evident that if the story in the novel *Danda* is stripped of cultural trappings and embellishments, the story would be at least incomplete and at most incoherent and inconsistent. Therefore, one is at liberty to conclude that most African novelists, playwright and poets, borrowed immensely, from oral tradition in writing their novels, plays and poems.

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