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*Eagle In Flight: The Writings of
Sam Ukala*

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**LITERATURE AS HISTORY: ORAL
HISTORICAL TRADITIONS IN
SAM UKALA'S *THE SLAVE WIFE***

BY

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So ends this folktale ... Don't start asking whether it is all-true. What is true in oral tradition is what a child is told by his parents.

Praise Singer
The Slave Wife.

This paper examines the place of literature in the quest for the concept of history and evidence of historical consciousness in traditional African society. It explores the relevance of *The Slave Wife*, as a play based on African oral literature, to the historian who seeks to employ oral tradition in the reconstruction of pre-colonial African history. This theme has long been the subject of debate among Africanist scholars. The debate has centred on whether we can indeed talk of a consciousness of history within the context of pre-colonial and pre-literate African societies. Pre-literate Africa, it is suggested, did not evolve the practice of systematically codifying past events with reference to a coherent chronological base, which demonstrates a consciousness of history. Another variant of this argument is that pre-colonial Africa did not develop such western style concepts and notions because it was "pre-capitalist, pre-industrialist, decentralized and characterized by communal forms of social organisations"¹. The absence of writing and other "documentary evidence", it is

further held, makes the talk of historical consciousness within the context of pre-literate African society rather anachronistic. A P Newton holds that "*history began when men began to write*". The German historian, Von Ranke, put it more categorically when he opined, "No document, no history". The argument by extension is that even though we may, by means of anthropological research, study the history of pre-colonial African societies, Africans, before Arab and European incursions and literary influences, did not themselves evolve a demonstrable consciousness of history. The most that can be said of traditional or pre-literate African historical consciousness were, in fact, no more than "fragmented, incoherent recapitulations of past events for the purpose of entertainment". This has been described as "story telling" or "oral narration" as distinct from "history".

II

These arguments, quite pervasive in historical circles at the beginning of the century, have long become moribund and untenable. It is hardly now a matter of debate that pre-colonial Africa not only exhibited a strong consciousness of history but also in fact evolved clearly defined institutions for historical preservation and transmission. In fact, the importance of various sources like oral tradition, ethnography, archaeology and linguistics for the reconstruction of the African past have been adequately demonstrated. Our object here is quite simply to highlight the relevance of oral literature as a part of the historical tradition in Africa.

Oral traditions as expressed in the moon-light story telling sessions in many traditional African communities were not profound consciousness of history. Folktales, poems, proverbs

and idioms were used to keep the past alive in the present by their transmission from one generation to another. Thus, beyond entertainment and recreation, these oral traditions served an essentially historical-cum- didactic function in the society.

Oral tradition, especially folktales constitute the bedrock of traditional African conception of history. It is within these traditions that the historian must seek a pre-colonial African consciousness of history. Alagoa defines oral tradition as "oral information passed down to us through a number of informants from a long time in the past, so that the person who tells the tradition was not himself an eye witness" (94). Oral tradition by its time depth and the compelling force of tradition which it commands is distinct from mere memory information which are often relatively recent accounts rendered by participants or eye witnesses of particular events.(1)

The moon light story telling sessions, idioms and proverbs were more than mere recounts of popular myths and fables, for within these "myths" and "fables" lies the people's conception of history. The conception of history focuses on spirits, ancestors, goblins, grandfathers and time past, not on their specific names and dates but on the social norms and values which the society sought to protect and promote. These folklores were, more appropriately, codifications of the collective culture. Dike and Ajayi have argued that "these traditions did not attempt historical explanation in the modern European sense of variable texts and chronology; rather, they prompted understanding or a respect for the institutions and practices of the community" (397). Emphasis was on the morals and social norms accumulated and accepted by society over the years and the lessons learnt from time past. As such,

these traditions were not only historical but philosophical, literary and didactic.

Sam Ukala's *The Slave Wife* provides a classic example of this marriage of history, philosophy and literature in African oral tradition.

III

The major difference between history and literature is that while history is preoccupied with facts and objectivity, literature is not so burdened by these constraints. The historian is concerned with the "truth" and "accuracy" of his accounts. Did the event actually occur? When did it occur? Where did it occur and who were the personalities involved? The historian must consciously avoid the temptation of colouring the events about which he writes with his imagination and impressions. He must strive towards objectivity, which we are reminded in every historiography class, is the "condiment of historical scholarship".

For the literary writer, "accuracy" and "objectivity" are of much less significance. His imagination and creativity are, perhaps, the most potent tools of his trade. All is grist that comes to his mill. Indeed as the praise singer enjoins his audience at the end of *The Slave Wife*,

Don't start asking whether it is all true.
What is true... is what a child is
told by his parents. (53)

Interestingly, this question of "truth" and "accuracy" lies at the centre of the debate over how indeed historical traditional African oral literature is.

The Slave Wife makes no pretensions to being a work of history. It neither locates the drama chronologically within a time perspective nor within an identifiable geographical context. It is essentially a folktale. The historical personalities - Ogiso, Iyase, Obaseki, Ologboshere and Ezomo-which it employs are not exactly located from the historical context of pre-colonial Benin, to which the historian is accustomed. At face value, *The Slave Wife* represents, to the average historian, little more than an interesting play based on oral literature, its use of historical imagery notwithstanding.

However, to the Africanist historian who has little more than oral tradition at his disposal in his efforts at reconstructing pre-colonial African history, *The Slave Wife*, like other literary works based on oral tradition, becomes a veritable historical document, a reflection of traditional African cosmology. In many traditional African societies, there was no concept of universal history extending beyond the immediate community. The making and transmission of traditions was not the preserve of historians in the modern sense of the word but of priests, elders and parents during the moon-light story-telling sessions of the community and in every day communication. In this way, the traditions of the people were recounted publicly and in the daily life of the individual and the community, traditions were thereby evoked, challenged, modified and created (9).

The Slave Wife provides an interesting study in African oral tradition which holds much relevance for the Africanist historian. The events of the drama are set in the era of the "Ogiso". In Benin cosmology, this represents that earliest period beyond human memory² a period of witches and spirits, ancestors and gods. For the historian who employs *The Slave Wife* for historical reconstruction, however, this seemingly

mythical Ogiso period offers some chronological significance. Unlike western notions of time, which were specific and absolute, much of traditional African time conceptualization is centred on the notions of indefinite time³. In Benin traditions, this is expressed variously as *eghe Ogiso* - time of the Ogisos; *eghe ne de* - earliest times; *eghe ni* - that time, *eghe hia* - every time. These are verbal expressions that give a broad or general idea of the periods being referred to in oral tradition. Traditions were not concerned with the specifics of dates and time. This type of time compartmentalization is significant because it constitutes the basis of traditional African concept of chronology⁴. Seen from this perspective, it becomes apparent that *The Slave Wife* even, without specific reference to dates, is situated within a functional chronological context which makes it relevant as a work of historical literature. This is particularly significant when it is realized that history is concerned with the study of change over time. Time and chronology are, therefore, of primary importance to the historian.

The Slave Wife is a drama of the triumph of good and justice over evil; of moral right over power and influence; the ultimate rise of a downtrodden and oppressed slave wife over her oppressors. These are universal themes with which the historian is sufficiently familiar. But *The Slave Wife* is also a story of spirits, oracles and witches; of women giving birth to millipedes, banana stems and snails, of a child who emerges from a pot and is boiled in charms by a spirit. What does the historian make of all these?

IV

The challenge for the historians who seek to employ these "myths" and "fables" in historical reconstruction is how to put *The Slave Wife* in proper historical perspective. To do this, the historian must explore the essence of the drama rather than take it at face value. The focus must be on the theme of the text and the social context in which it is located. The theme of *The Slave Wife* - the triumph of virtue and right over evil and illwill-recurs in all forms of African oral tradition. In *The Slave Wife*, the symbolism is even more strident. On the one hand, the all-powerful Ogiiso desperate for an heir, his chiefs and favoured wives; on the other, an indigent slaves wife, Igbon and a benevolent spirit.

These contrasting characters serve largely symbolic functions in the continuous process of transforming social norms and values through oral tradition. As demonstrated in *The Slave Wife*, the conflict between good and evil and the inevitable rise of the former over the latter stands at the centre of traditional African cosmology. In *The Slave Wife*, the imagery and symbolism employed to convey this theme are apt and profound. Alahin, the Ogiiso's first wife and the other wives of the Ogiiso attempt to use their influence and favoured status to deny Igbon, a lowly slave wife, what is rightly hers. But providence as always is on the side of truth and justice and at the end, Igbon's innocence and virtue are rewarded while Alahin's wickedness is punished. This in itself constitutes the conception of history in traditional Africa - a system of imparting societal norms and values on each generation thereby

maintaining social balance as well as the collective understanding and appreciation of the cultural essence of the society. If we are to perceive history basically as the recollection of men and society which makes it possible for individuals and societies to orientate themselves amidst the "bewildering currents of human diversity", then a consciousness of the past as manifested in the placid and symbolic recollection of past events cannot but constitute a consciousness of history.

Besides its moral and didactic value, the historical significance of *The Slave Wife* extends even to its more literary aspects. The use of proverbs and idioms in the play provides a whole spectrum of oral tradition from which the historian can draw. The point has been made that the historian who employs oral tradition for historical reconstruction can hardly afford to ignore idioms, proverbs and riddles as tools of his trade.(97-124). In many African cultures, there are particular occasions during which one is not expected to communicate in "the bluntness of everyday language". Proverbs being "the oil with which words are eaten" must be used. Such proverbs, besides their literary value also convey historical information. They provide the discerning historian with relevant oral data, which give insights into the dominant socio-political and economic conditions of the people. Some of such proverbs are employed in *The Slave Wife*.

ETERUMA: Pear roasted in haste ... gets burnt. (4)

EZOMO: A tooth that must pull, pulls even at a meal of pounded cocoyam.(5)

OGISO: Do you water your seed until it is harvest time?

OBASEKI: ... A good blacksmith stays by the bellows while his iron is black in the fire.

OGISO: It is not the day an infant breaks a gourd of oil that he is called to question.

For the Africanist historian, these proverbs provide a rich repository of data in the study and appreciation of prevalent pre-colonial African orientations and world views. From the sample of proverbs reproduced here, the historian can deduce for example, that the society in which *The Slave Wife* is set, was an agricultural one. The allusions to roasted pear, pounded cocoayam and oil in the proverbs give this indication. It may also be deduced, given the analogy of the blacksmith in one of the proverbs that it was also a society in which iron, brass or bronze mongery was a common economic activity. These are the bits of information, which the historian can piece together from proverbs as an aspect of African oral tradition. These bits of information can be collated and analysed to form the basis of broad reconstructions and interpretations of the pre-colonial African past.

The conclusions, which can be drawn from our discourse here, are clear. Oral literature is a significant part of the oral historical traditions which forms the basis of the historian's reconstruction of the African past. Sam Ukala's *The Slave Wife*, a play based on such traditions, provides an invaluable reference point for the Africanist historian who seeks to employ such traditions for historical reconstruction. With the

increasing emphasis on the interdisciplinary approach to historical scholarship, literature must continue to be explored by the historian to complement his sources and provide a socio-cultural reference point for his work.

Notes

1. This stereotype impression of traditional African Society has informed the arguments of several scholars who seek to explain the absence of Western style concepts and institutions within the traditional social setting. This theme is discussed quite extensively in Makau Wa Mutua, "The Banjul Charter and the African Cultural Fingerprint: An Evaluation of the Language of Duties," *Virginia Journal of International Law*, Vol. 32, No. 2, 1995, 335 - 337.
2. The word "Ogiso" literally translates to "ruler of the skies". In Benin traditions of origin, the period of the Ogiso represents that early period of creation when God, *Osalobua* created the world and placed the people of Benin at the centre. The lands and skies were vast and the king of Benin was destined to rule over these vast lands and skies hence the title of *Ogiso* (ruler of the skies), was reserved for the Kings of Benin. See R. E. Bradbury, "The Social Structure of Benin with special reference to the politico-social organisation: the village community", Ph.D thesis, University of London, 1956.
3. For a detailed discourse on the theme of chronology in

African oral tradition see David Henige, "Dating the Past from Oral Tradition", *Tarikh*, Vol. 8, 1987, 43 and H. D. Jones, "Problems of African Chronology", *Journal of African History*, Vol. Xi, No. 2, 1970, 61.

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SEEDS OF REVOLUTION IN SAM UKALA'S PLAYS:

*BREAK A BOIL,
THE SLAVE WIFE
AND AKPAKA LAND*

BY

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Ukala's plays display a polyvalency, which resists an easy choice of a critical approach. They are as comfortable in the folkist tradition as they are in the Brechtian Epic, so the aspiring critic is bound to wonder awhile which direction to go. It is, therefore, quite cheering for the critic to discover before long that the best that Ukala has to offer resides not in any of the traditions in which the works are located but rather in one important quality that he himself brings to the traditions: a remarkable faculty to express the idea in the image.

The three plays under discussion here, *Break a Boil*, *The Slave Wife* and *Akpakaland* dramatize a parable of our times, the reality of the abuse of power by the leadership. Ukala writes from a moral perspective artistically very sympathetic to the masses, while royalty is characterized as irresponsible, unjust and given to easy manipulation by the whims of the female sex. The downtrodden are shown, in spite of their bruises, as possessing a tough resilient moral faculty, which represents at least the promise of a future moral revolution.

In *Break a Boil*, royalty is severely ridiculed in the character of Gidi. His tendencies to be ruled always by his sexual indiscretion finally and justly cost him a kingdom. The