

The Other Side of the Story: Audience as Hero in Sudanese Story Telling

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Abstract: Traditional story telling in Northern Sudan takes many forms. Stories can be told in prose, or in verse, with or without music accompaniment. However, audience participation remains crucial, and is inseparable from the “performance” of storytelling. In this paper, we look at the various forms which audience participation takes, and what this participation adds to the performance. Audience participation can be indirect, as when stories are tailored to the tastes of the audience or to deliver a particular message. But often it takes a more positive form, as when answering quizzes, repeating habitual or ritual phrases, or taking part in the performance by dancing or singing refrains. Ultimately, the audience becomes, the hero, the central “actor” in this performance.

Key words: Sudan; Storytelling; Performance; Audience; Folktales

But when it was midnight Shahrazad awoke and signalled to her sister Dunyazad who sat up and said, “Allah upon thee, O my sister, recite to us some new story, delightsome and delectable, wherewith to while away the waking hours of our latter night.” “With joy and goodly gree,” answered Shahrazad, “if this pious and auspicious king permit me.” “Tell on,” quoth King who chanced to be sleepless and restless, and therefore was pleased with the prospect of hearing her story. So Shahrazad rejoiced; and thus, on the first night of the thousand nights and a night, she began her recitations.

The Arabian Nights: Tales from the A Thousand and one Nights

And so the King kept Scheherazade alive day by day, as he eagerly anticipated the finishing of last night's story. At the end of one thousand and one nights, and one thousand stories, Scheherazade told the King that she had no more tales to tell him. During these one thousand and one nights, the King had fallen in love with Scheherazade, and had three sons with her. So, having been made a wiser and kinder man by Scheherazade and her tales, he spared her life, and made her his Queen.

John Miles Foley, “The Performance of Homeric Epic, Homer and South Slavic Epic”.

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Oral literature is always theatre, because the way the subject matter is performed is an essential aspect of the art (Schipper, 1982:10)

In the history of story telling, no narrator had ever known the need to please their audience more than Scheherazade. For the queen of narration, story telling transcended entertainment to become a survival mechanism. But giving a thrilling performance is the aspiration of all storytellers. In particular, such performances are integral to oral storytelling traditions.

Oral African literature does not exist without dramatic expression. The performance, the presentation is a total event in which all those present take part, whether by narrating or making music, by clapping in rhythm or by dancing or singing refrains (Shipper, 1982:12)

Performances are influenced by the individual style adopted by the narrator.

The narrator of a story is likely to introduce his own favourite tricks of verbal style and presentation and to be influenced in his wording by the audience and occasion; thus he will produce linguistic variations on the basic theme different from those of his fellows or even from his own on a different occasion. (Finnegan, 1970: 376)

This is no less the case in Northern Sudan, where story telling is one of most cherished practices, especially in rural areas. This genre, which used to be, apart from social visits, the main form of entertainment available, is eminently interactive.

The folktale is determined to a great extent by the interaction between the narrator and his audience within a social context. In certain genres of folktales such as the *huja*, the interaction and audience participation starts with the traditional formula at the beginning of the tale which consists of a statement by the narrator and response by the audience. Whenever the stories contain songs, members of the audience may act as a chorus. They also play some minor parts when required. For instance when the hero arrives at a certain place and greets the other characters, the audience may return his greeting. They also laugh, interject, ask questions, and sometimes correct the narrator (Hurreiz, 1970:32)

After a long working day the villagers gather in the *diwan* of one of their homes, outside under a tree, or on the sandy banks of the Nile. Slowly the crowd builds up, and so does the anticipation of an evening of fascinating stories.

The performance usually takes place in the evening, as telling stories during day time is not a common practice except for people who spend long portions of their day working together, like fishermen or shepherds.

1. NOT A SILENT PARTNER.

If storytelling is theatre, as Schipper argues, then it is apt that the storyteller, aware of his power as the king of this stage, strives to hold the crowd's attention and interest. Craftily he/she spins his/her tale, manipulating his voice, focusing on the crowd to guess their mood and sense their needs.

Although there are some professional narrators, most story tellers in Sudan are not. They are usually middle aged or old women (or, sometimes, men) of the village, possessing the skill of relating stories to people, who enjoy and appreciate their art. Female narrators only narrate stories to women and children inside the private quarters of the household. They are usually the grandmothers, known for their wisdom and sound advice. They often insert messages, especially for children, which include preferred moral codes and values of the community as part of the narrative.

The stories themselves tend to be gender-specific. Religious stories, saint legends, and tales of the good deeds and bravery of well known figures in the Islamic or local history, are usually related to male audiences by male narrators. Social stories and folk tales are the specialty of women. Both male and female narrators are aware of the importance of their audience for the event to be successful and the goal of ultimate entertainment to be achieved. They use all the tricks of their trade to keep the customer happy

and satisfied. They use voice modulations for dramatic effect, changing its pitch, whispering, shouting, singing, when needed, or observing a calculated silence to sharpen suspense and anticipation. These techniques are widely employed by storytellers in other contexts.

The actual delivery and treatment of the words themselves is also relevant. Even when he does not choose to elaborate any extremes of dramatization, the narrator can and does create vivid effects by variations and exaggerations of speed, volume, and tone. He can use abrupt breaks, pregnant pauses, parentheses, rhetorical questions as he watches the audience's reactions and exploits his freedom to choose his words as well as his mode of delivery. (Finnegan, 1970:385)

Often during the process of the story telling, audience participation is part of the process. Narrators tend to choose these types of stories to inject some new energy into the crowd especially when he/she senses a lapse in the listener's concentration. They know that the audience is their instant critic.

In all this the participation of the audience is essential. It is common for members of it to be expected to make verbal contributions –spontaneous exclamations, actual questions, echoing of the speaker's words, emotional reaction to the development of et another parallel and repetitious episode. Further, the audience contributes the choruses of the songs so often introduced into the narration, and without which, in many cases, the stories would be only a bare framework of words (Fennigan, 1970: 385)

In the case of an exclusively male audience the language employed by traditional Sudanese storytellers tended to be more forceful and direct, while dramatic gestures which indicate bravery, violence or anger are vigorously emphasised. Stories about the life of the fourth Muslim caliph Ali ibn Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of prophet Mohamed, are known in the Sudan as *Sirat Ali al-Karrar* (*karrar* in Arabic is the fighter never retreats in battles. Op: *farrar*) were favorites among the crowds. The mere mention of the title would stir religious enthusiasm among the listeners, who would habitually collectively intone: *radia Allahu 'anhu* (may Allah be pleased with him), and with even more vigor *salla Allahu 'alaihi wa salam* (peace be upon him) when the Prophet Muhammad's name is mentioned or when he is referred to. The mention of Iblis (Satan) would incur a flood of curses, or prayers for divine protection from evil. The listeners often ask questions or make comments, thus becoming an integral part of the story telling process, a phenomenon noted by students of similar traditions elsewhere on the continent.

In most cases the public is not just watching, the public is active, it interacts with the teller and the teller provokes his interaction by asking questions, welcoming exclamations and turning to a song sung by all at appropriate points of the action. The teller and public are creating the tale together. (Vansina, 1985: 34)

Another favourite of Sudanese audiences are the *Hambata* stories about infamous highway robbers in the deserts of Northern and Western Sudan. The *Hambata* narratives are related in verse to an enchanted audience, where the listeners would be nodding their heads in approval, as they admire the unparalleled bravery of the daring men, in spite of their questionable moral conduct. The audience would learn the verse by heart, and listeners would recite these on different occasions. The *Hambata* stories received a new and wider audience when dramatized versions of the tales were serialised on national Radio in the 1980s.

2. STORIES IN VERSE

Dobait or *dobaai* is primarily an oral poetic form, employed for public entertainment and at times as a vehicle for story telling where audience participation is essential. It is a folkloric genre in which the narrator would recite quartets in a specific manner of poetic recitation, involving swaying from side to side, and covering one ear with the palm of the hand and constant changing of voice pitch to correspond to the theme narrated. The attentive crowd would join in as a chorus without words, using a technique known as *jar al namm* (stretching the voice in a melodious white noise, making the sound *hmmm*).

Another form of popular and highly revered oral narrative is the recital of the *madih* (poetry in praise of the Prophet Muhammad), the most popular and familiar form of religious entertainment, which incorporates story telling in verse, accompanied by drumming and other forms of music. *Madih* themes include, in addition to a retelling of the biography of the prophet, which is the main theme, references to Islamic history saint legends *karamat* (miracles) of local *Sufi* saints and various other religious and moral themes. The traditional musical instrument used is called the *tar*. The performers (*maddahin*) are usually a group of three to five men, dressed in the traditional garb who used to travel around villages, and towns, performing to local audiences and receiving hospitality and appreciation. People know most of the songs performed by heart, and join in the recitation while performing a unique form of religious dance. A few get so intensely engaged that they are observed to go into trance, or even speak in tongues.

Madih performances come into their own at the famous festival of *mawlid*, the celebration of the Prophet's birthday. This festival takes place in every town and many villages in Northern Sudan, and goes on for 11 nights, culminating on the night of the Prophet's birthday. Performances go on until late in the night, and become very competitive as various *Sufi* sects conduct their distinct performances and try to attract maximum audiences. This quintessentially Sudanese-African festival acquires a mythical character in its own right, conforming to Soyink's characterization of the festival as "a suspension of ordinary time"

The festival brings about a suspension of ordinary time, a transformation of ordinary space. A formalizer of ordinary behaviour. It is as if a community becomes a stage set and its people actors with a battery of seldom-seen props and costumes. Meals become feasts, and greetings, normally simple, become ceremonies. Although dependent upon life-sustaining rituals, the festival is an elaborated and stylised phenomenon which far surpasses ritual necessity. It often becomes the social, ritual political apotheosis of community life in a year. At festival time one level of reality-the common and everyday-gives way to another, a more intense, symbolic and expressive level of reality. (Soyinka, 1988:195)

The popularity of this form has recently been transformed into a "modern" art form. The *tar* has been replaced by the keyboard, the traditional dress received a make-over, the rhythm became faster and more boisterous, and the dance acquired more frenzy. The stories are the same and the feelings they generate are comparable, but the audience is much younger and more energetic and most definitely have a different interpretation to the story. It is now part of an emerging "youth culture". The *madih* in this modern style is a happier occasion but not without a slight loss of the actual feeling of awe and reverence. As in similar contexts, the radical change in both performer and audience does have a significant impact.

The same tale handled by different talents and for different audiences becomes something quite different, even if the plot, setting and personalities and the sequence of episodes remains the same. (Vansina, 1985:35)

In this genre the listeners are not just listening or even sitting and participating. They are equal partners in the performance. They transfer the story into a dramatic production, they become a story within the story to the point that at certain moments, the actual reciters become almost redundant.

3. FOLKTALES FOR ALL

al ahaji (folk fairy tales) is the genre which automatically comes to mind whenever story telling is mentioned. It used to be the prevalent genre in most parts of northern Sudan as the major form of entertainment especially for women and children. Grandmothers are the experts at this form. The sessions are usually evening family occasions which mark the end of the day and set the mood for a sound sleep. The listeners, usually children, eagerly await this magical journey to fairy land. As grandmothers are the usual carers for their grandchildren, they often have a hidden message which they intend to convey through the events and actions in the tale, usually using the hero to mould the moral or religious value as the children are expected to admire and aspire to emulate him/her. Incidents of the day,

like an argument, an act of bullying or a fib, would mean that that evening story telling session has its background set. So the children are indirectly dictating the trajectory of the narrative.

While the folktale is performing its role as entertainment, it may simultaneously perform the latent function of education. The educational aspect is constantly stressed, not only in saints legends, meant to further religious education, but also in fictitious tales told to children. In the narration of *huja* to children, a moral twist and a didactic conclusion are always expected ((Hurreiz,1970: 24)

The *huja* sessions begin with a well known opening formula in the colloquial dialect:

hajaitkum ma bajaitkum (I am telling you a tale Lying to you I am not)

The children would then reply:

akheir Allah min hujak (Allah is more generous than your tales) .

or:

khairan jana we jakum (Bounty has come to you and us)

Akal 'Ashakum wa Masha khallakum (and it has eaten your supper, and has run away and left you).

The magic would then begin to the excitement and anticipation of the eager audience. Some narrators start by asking the listeners to solve some riddles to warm them up for the actual tale: *dakhal al gash ma gal kash* (something entered the corn field, but not made a sound) they would reply in unison: the shadow! The purpose of the exercise is successfully achieved, the crowd is totally alert.

The listeners to the *ahaji* have favourite stories which they want repeated. Most tales are told many a time with slight variations according to the preference of the teller the purpose of the session, and the mood of the audience. In this, they follow the example of the Grimm brothers, who

did not relate the fairy tales exactly as they heard them. On the contrary, they carefully edited them simplifying or embellishing them according to their poetic inclination and pedagogical intentions (Luthi, 1976:26)

The renowned Sudanese scholar, Abdalla El-Tayib, adopted the same approach when he shaped the written form of the *ahaji* to his religious taste. Whenever the word sultan is mentioned he would add (the only sultan is God, the master of the universe) (al-Tayib, 2003:114).

The story of *Fatma al Samha* (Fatima the Beautiful) is without contestation the favourite among all listeners, regardless of age or gender. It is the Sudanese version of Cinderella and sleeping beauty combined in one. The heroine is the celebrated beauty of the village who was the victim of the conspiracy of jealous friends. Being extremely clever as she was beautiful, she outwits witches and ogres and ends up marrying her prince. *Fatma al samha* is a case in point for the claim that relating familiar and loved tales insures a confident performance and a lively and satisfied crowd which is in every sense part of the performance.

The tale must be well known to the public if the performance is to be a success, for the audience must not be overly preoccupied with the task of trying to follow painstakingly what is being told in order to enjoy the tale. They must already know the tale so that they can enjoy the rendering of various episodes, appreciate the innovations and anticipate thrills still to come, but every performance presupposes some thing old: the tale itself. (Vansina, 1985:35)

The narrator acts out the parts which are sure to add to the excitement and interest of the listeners, and dramatize the situation. Singing songs as the story requires, imitating the sounds of different animals, ghouls, children and adapting her tone and dialect to suit the characters.

The narrator switches from one dialect to the other according to the sex of the character whose part he is playing . Although the feminine dialect should only be used by women, the storytelling situation and the desire to create the authentic atmosphere and achieve dramatic effects is sufficient. Also when the scene and background of the tale are set in a different

place such as Egypt and when the *dramatis personae* include some Egyptians, the narrator switches to the Egyptian dialect of Arabic.(Hurreiz,1970:36)

The audience is always highly amused by this technique, and they usually join in the singing or clapping. There is laughter, and tears but all of this is a desired effect by the narrator as the concrete proof of a successful session

The teller leads the event but responds really to the public and lead his or her public to experience the tale, he or she tries to frighten, delight, worry and put them on tenterhooks, in turn and skillfully builds on the passages which move the audience most, expanding the exciting parts and condensing or transforming the ones where the attention of the public lags. (Vansina, 1985:34)

When the evening draws to a close, the storytellers-performers, unlike Scheherazade, end their stories. There are at least two versions of the ending formula; the traditional one which is used in El-Tayib's anthology of folk tales is: *wa inhatarat wa inbatarat fi hijr al sighayir fina* (it (the story) flew in the air and fell in the lap of the smallest amongst us). The other, fairly modern one: *law baitna garib kunta jibta laik sahanain zabib*(had my home been close by, I would have brought you two plates of raisins)! Even this closure is determined by the "young" members of the audience, whose yawning faces would have indicated to the narrator that it was "curtains".

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