Oral Traditions as Embodiments of Knowledge: The Case of the Kasena of North Eastern Ghana

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Abstract

Before the advent of the European, every existing African community had its own means of education. Like the Kasena, the worldview of most communities is inextricably woven into the fibre of their oral traditions. Kasena oral traditions express beliefs, values, ideas and other socio-cultural negotiations that depict their philosophy of life. Quite apart from the novelty of technique of Kasena oral traditions, they serve as road guides to their endeavours and offer a better understanding of the spiritual and mundane worlds. Oral traditions embody the sense of time, place and identity of the Kasena in this multicultural world. The ways and manner to practice good hygiene and conserve the environment are embodied in proverbs, whereas the code of conduct and several other social negotiations are carried in folktales and puzzles. However, in the wake of globalization and its attendants such as Christianity, formal education and rural-urban migration amongst a host of other factors, the role and purpose of Kasena oral traditions have taken a down turn. This article therefore seeks to bring to the fore the significant role of Kasena oral traditions in transmitting and maintaining indigenous knowledge. It further examines the negative toll globalization has on Kasena oral traditions.

Keywords: worldview, tradition, Kasena, oral traditions, knowledge
Introduction

Oral traditions have served as bedrocks for great literary expressions. In recent times however, many oral traditions are dying or perhaps dead entirely as little effort or no effort is made to document them. Though oral traditions have received some attention in the few decades past, the perception of most literates and semi literates of oral traditions lives much to be desired. With the advent of formal education, many elders had thought and well that those who enrolled into it will emerge enlightened only to be taken aback by the undesirable concomitants of globalization and its antecedent, formal education. How some educated persons frown upon their traditions remains a shock to unlettered elders. Many have asked: “What at all do they teach in the schools?”

Before the advent of writing, informal education, through oral traditions had been the best form of transmitting knowledge or wisdom. Consciously or unconsciously, everyone growing up in a community gets to understand these oral traditions, even if not fully: unlike the recent literate movement that holds codes of conduct amongst a host of other such related codes in books that a few can ever purchase, let alone read the information sought to be conveyed. A case in point is the Constitution. Amongst the growing literate population in Ghana for example, only a few ever own the constitution, let alone read its contents. Hence, very few people get to know their rights as citizens of the country.

It is not just the matter of knowing or perhaps understanding the vocabulary and structure of a language; which is often barely known, but significantly the cultural assumptions implicit in its usage. Nketia (1955:1) reiterates this assertion when he makes it known that, “[t]he study of verbal expressions… is important not only for a clearer understanding of problems of meaning in a language, but also for a deeper understanding of a people’s life from which their meaning is ultimately derived.”

That oral traditions represent the history, beliefs and practices of a people is well acknowledged in Sociology and Cultural Anthropological studies and other such related fields. According to Leif Lorentzo (2007: 9)

African orature has a long tradition, and one germane reason for attaining its quotability is that it is also informational: in its logic and thematic finalization it asserts facts about myth and history, about the environment in etiological tales and riddles. It may also be directive, as in proverbs and riddles, but particularly in fables told by the elders to children.

In The Context and Poetics of Kasena Dirges and War Songs, (2010: 22). I stated quite succinctly that “Kasena orature does not only reflect the truths of their experiences, but also portrays the literary and creative artistry of the people. It is also imbued with profound philosophical reflections, promotes morality and also reflects reality in their lives” It is mainly
for the didactic role of Kasena oral traditions and oral traditions in general that makes them worth preserving generations over. What is most crucial is that art must be didactic. Art for art sake is alien to the Kasena. Art must necessarily convey a message. Hence, Kasena oral traditions are delightful as well as they are insightful. The aesthetics of Kasena oral traditions may be important. Yet, the genius actually lies in the message sought to be conveyed and how that message relates to the beliefs and practices of the Kasena as a whole. A series of questions posed by Roy Matthews and Dewitt Platt and well answered is worth quoting: “What makes a work ‘great’? Why do some works of art have relevance long beyond their time, while others are forgotten soon after they are designated ‘fifteen minutes of fame’? … One answer is that great art reflects some truth of human experience that speaks to us across the centuries.” (The Western Humanities xxxi)

Scholarship on Kasena oral traditions is scanty, yet the functional role that Kasena oral traditions play cannot be overemphasized. In An Introduction to Kasena Society and Culture Awedoba undertakes a detailed investigation of Kasena proverbs. He provides the context in which each particular proverb is realised, thus elaborating the belief systems and practices that shape the proverbs. In a similar approach to Kasena riddles in “Social Roles of Riddles”, Awedoba explains in detail the functions riddles play in Kasena social life. Awedoba argues that riddles, like diverse oral traditions in general are not a “mere recollection of responses” but function to enhance the intellect. Riddles also express Kasena beliefs and practices and explore the people’s social and cultural environment.

From the foregoing, it becomes clear that oral traditions reflect the socio-cultural patterns of the community that observes them. And they are shaped by the beliefs and attitudes that bind people in a community. Most significantly, oral traditions are a medium of instruction. This study therefore attempts a functional analysis of Kasena oral traditions, drawing parallels with recent code of ethics and laws. “[A]ccording to Malinowski’s functionalist approach, oral tradition has real, pragmatic work to do for a people: it upholders their view of the world, their sense of reality; it gives them a sense of security in an insecure world” (Zumwalt, 1998: 81).

It must be stated however that, though the oral traditions and interpretations presented herein are of Kasena origin, similar sentiments, if not the same are shared by most ethnic groups in Ghana, especially those from the West African sub region in general.

The Kasena

The Kasena speak Kasem and inhabit an area in the Upper East Region of Ghana and southern Burkina Faso. Some neighbouring ethnic groups also refer to them as the Awuna,Gurunsi and Yulsi. According to Ethnologue, Kasena number a total of two hundred and fifty thousand (250,000), with one hundred and thirty thousand (130,000) and one hundred and twenty thousand (120,000) Kasena in Ghana and Burkina Faso respectively. The Kasena are mainly peasant farmers and number roughly about ninety (90) percent of the population. They
practice subsistence farming, with the main cultivated crops being groundnuts, millet and sorghum. Animal rearing is also commonly practiced by every Kasena household. “In recent times, droughts and floods, combined with other climatic factors, often lead the youth and women to seek greener pastures in the southern sectors of the country. Some end up as farm hands in cocoa plantations while others are engaged either as maids, servants in chop bars or as other such menial labourers.” (Taluah, The Context and Poetics 9). The map below shows a highlight of the Kasena in Ghana and Burkina Faso respectively.

Figure 1 Highlight of the Kasena in Ghana and Burkina Faso – Adapted from the Joshua Project

Kasena Literary Heritage

Kasena oral traditions reveal the supremacy of community over the individual. They are communally owned and hardly can you trace any to a single personality. Generally speaking, Kasena literary traditions can be categorized under the big umbrella of Oral Literature. The Kasena refer to their oral traditions as “Kasena nabara kekea” which literary means “the ways of Kasena ancestors.” Amongst a host of these oral traditions include They include sons Cle – stories, sinserie - proverbs or sayings, dindin - riddles and dindi junjua - puzzles and diverse kinds of songs which is known in Kasem as lei. What is worth noting about Kasena oral
traditions like many oral traditions is that they have no known originators: they are communally owned. The elders maintain that Kasena oral traditions have transcended ages mainly because they express the beliefs practical wisdom of the people and serve perform the functions for which they were meant to serve. Find below a literary tree depicting Kasena oral traditions.

Figure 2 A literary Tree depicting Kasena Oral Traditions
Scope of the Research

The research was mainly focused on the Kasena of Navrongo, Paga and Chiana, which serve as the main principal and administrative towns among the Kasena communities and their environs. It must be noted however, that though the Kasena inhabit parts of Ghana and Burkina Faso, the findings in this research were ascertained from the Kasena in Ghana. Yet what is undeniably true is that much of the oral traditions discussed in this study are common to the Kasena in Burkina Faso and hence the analyses represented herein are likewise held by the Kasena of Burkina Faso.

Objectives of the Study

This study principally aims to ascertain the inherent meaning and significance of Kasena oral traditions by raising pertinent questions and making cross checks and verifications. Other objectives include:

1. To establish a link between the inception of ideas, beliefs or doctrines through their various developmental stages in relation to the contemporary opinions and attitudes toward oral traditions.
2. To preserve and promote the integrity of Kasena oral traditions as a true reflection of intellectual prowess.
3. To stimulate further interest and research in oral traditions.

Methodology

The study is principally based on the native intuition of the researcher. Mindful observations of the situational contexts in which Kasena oral traditions are employed were documented and a purposive sampling of Kasena indigenes done to illicit the information based on the objectives of the study. Through structured interviews of traditional elders and opinion leaders amongst a host of other knowledgeable people, an in-depth knowledge of the Kasena and the significant roles oral traditions play in Kasena society were ascertained. With regard to the oral traditions included herein, a random sampling was made based on the discretion of the researcher and the objectives of the study, as a study of this nature cannot do justice to the relatively large corpus of Kasena oral traditions.

Overview of Kasena Oral Traditions

It is an undeniable fact that many a people frown upon oral traditions without taking the pains to understand the internal logic that they entail. Nevertheless, this is not to imply that everything about oral traditions per se has ultimate truth; undisputed in all ways. Yet what should be worthy of note is contextualism which relates to where, when, and by whom a work was created and for what purpose. For instance, with respect to the first question as in why was the
work or the oral tradition created? Some common responses will be in response to an artistic, social, cultural, historical or political need or events. In response to the question: who is the creator or artist and what is the intent or motif in creating the said oral traditions? Due cognizance should be paid to conditions for which such oral traditions arose.

Matthews and Platt have confirmed that: “We often evaluate the theme of a work in terms of how well it speaks to the human condition, how accurate its truth is, how valuable its message or observation is. We usually make these judgments by exploring the extent to which theme confirms or denies our own experience.” (The Western Humanities xxv) Hence, the following analyses are appreciated on these grounds.

We begin with a saying that pertains in most Ghanaian cultures that it is a taboo for “a pregnant woman to eat eggs.” The consequence, they say is that the child she bares will grow up to be a thief. And since every known society abhors stealing, women strictly abide by it; at least in the traditional communities. Many thought enlightened people have in several platforms condemned this saying, and the least said about some self acclaimed feminists the better. The blame has been put on patriarchy of greedy ancestral men who wanted the best nutrition for themselves.

Indeed, contrary to this adage, modern science will explain that a pregnant woman actually needs eggs to boost her level of protein which will further facilitate the development of the fetus. Yet, the elderly maintain that this saying was purposeful at least at the time of its inception. The fact is that tradition restricted pregnant women from taking foods with high protein as there is a high propensity of the fetus weighing more than the expected weight. Generations back, caesarian operations were not carried out by traditional birth attendants as is the case in modern science today. Hence, to prevent consequent complications the elders thought it wise to maintain this saying and its consequence as this will deter pregnant women from this complication. It is therefore of little doubt or no doubt at all that caesarian operations are on the increase in recent times as many people and health professionals have paid no heed to this saying. By all means, this stringent measure therefore, attests to the widely held adage that “prevention is better than cure”.

Kasena have answers to many questions or mysteries, unless these questions or mysteries do not pertain to their environment or culture as a whole. And most of these are found in their folktales Let us examine the story of “The Dog and the Tortoise” that tells the origin of death. The story is told that a long time ago the dog and the tortoise were sent by God to deliver very vital messages. The dog was to deliver the message that, “When man dies, he should come back to life, whereas when the moon dies it should not come back to life.” The tortoise was sent with a contrasting message to that of the dog: “When man dies, he should not come back to life, whereas when the moon dies it should come back to life.” The first message to be delivered, God said, would take effect.
Dog and tortoise left on their respective errands only for dog to stop upon seeing a pot on fire tended by an old lady. Believing that what was cooking was meat, dog decided to wait and feast on some bones before continuing his journey. He was certain that under no condition could tortoise reach the destination before him. But after a considerable time, dog realised, to his chagrin, that the lady was apparently boiling dawadawa husks (Bre na), to plaster her walls. Disappointed, dog dashed off to the destination only to be told that tortoise had delivered the counter message. This is the reason why the moon dies at the close of every month and rises again and man dies and never returns – at least, not in the same form.

The assertion that the race is not for the swift is one of the explicit morals of this myth. Determination may be all that matters. It also implies that in life people are given different options ranging from the good to the bad. The final decisions arrived at usually depend on man’s own actions.

Most oral traditions meant to check the mode of conduct or perhaps the cultural values and norms in society are in the form of taboos. Taboos are generally customs restricting or prohibiting a particular practice. For instance, there is a taboo restricting menstruating women from fetching water from the river/stream. The consequence being that they will be barren. Yet, it is actually meant to prevent such women from contaminating the water. Another similar taboo states that one who defecates by the river bank will be infertile. Yet it is actually meant that good water sanitation especially be adhered to. And since infertility is frowned upon by society, none will dare disobey this taboo. There is also the taboo banding noise making during farming seasons when crops are flowering. The consequence being that one will be stoned by dwarves. Yet it actually forbids noise since it is maintained traditionally that noise instigates the wind which will intend destroy the flowering crops and lead to poor crop yields.

With respect to riddles Awedoba maintains that they are not a “mere recollection of responses” but function to enhance the intellect. Riddles also express Kasena beliefs and practices and explore the people’s social and cultural environment. For example, there is a riddle that says: there are three chiefs who must always be together to rule. In the absent of any one of them ruling is impossible. Who are they? The answer rightly falls on the tripod stone used a traditional stove for cooking and found nearly in all Kasena households. The substance of this riddle dwells on unity. Hence, together the tripod stones will stand to perform a function, but divided they will be of no use. In a similar vein, there is a saying in Kasen thus: Vuro vu ye o bu to wo be mu? Literally, the soothsayer sooths, why then does his child die. What is implied by this riddle is the fact that death has no remedy or that it is not all things that are known to man.

Virtually all the beliefs and practices of the kasena: from the cradle to the grave are encapsulated in one dirge/war song or the other. A case in point is the dirge: M’laam tΣE soori
sem’ dule vio which states the nature and dynamics of Kasena Customary marriage. The dirge states in unambiguous terms the nature of pride prize emphasizing the norm that a man must necessarily settle the pride prize be it that the woman he marries is dead or alive. Below is a transcription and translation of the aforementioned dirge.

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\begin{align*}
M’laam tΣE soori sem’ dule vio & \quad \text{You glade the land to broadcast vio} \\
Buk□ tu ba nao gaE & \quad \text{He who has a daughter, is always assured of a cow} \\
O ze Nwi ba joN’ & \quad \text{If she is alive, they will take (the cow)} \\
O ze teg’ ba joN & \quad \text{If she is dead, they will take (the cow)} \\
Buk□ tu ba nao gaE & \quad \text{He who has a daughter is always assured of a cow}
\end{align*}
\]

Urbanization: A bane or a blessing?

Urbanization is a two-edged sword. We cannot simply deny the positive impacts of urbanization. However, with regards to oral traditions or the effects of urbanization on customs in general, its negative impacts outweigh the positive. The situation is most glaring in the Kasena community. In his preface to An Introduction to Kasena Society and Culture, Awedoba makes it clear that: “What the Kasena stand in danger of losing most is their literature, given the deleterious effects of the inroads that the electronic media (radio and TV) make into the society and its projection of non-Kasena-Nankani norms and outlooks.”

In search of greener pastures, many people, especially the young have drifted into urban centers. Hence, the elderly who remain at home die with their knowledge and wisdom since there is no one to pass the origin of their lineage to, let alone their oral traditions. The few who remain at home are also caught up with the cinema, such as the watching of movies on television. Hence, outdoor gatherings for cultural transmission such as “by the fire side” where story telling sessions were done are stories of the past.

With respect to formal education, many educated people as reiterated earlier frown upon their traditions and regard them as backward or uncivilized. The uneducated and sometimes the semi-literate see the educated as role models, and similarly shy away from their culture.

And by far, the greatest disservice, to say the least, to tradition is religion (Christianity and Islam). With the advent of Christianity in particular, naming systems and many other institutions have been deemed pagan or satanic and do not merit the attention of the Supreme God. The situation is same with oral traditions as many people will label them as backward.
Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear beyond all reasonable doubt that Kasena oral traditions like diverse other oral traditions are the treasure house of wisdom and knowledge. The texts mainly express beliefs, values, ideas and other social negotiations that depict Kasena philosophy of life. Through oral traditions, culture is preserved and extended and sometimes renewed when the need arises. When oral traditions are approached with an open mind, devoid of any bias and critically reflected upon, valuable ideas and insight are bound to be discovered. The analysis presented herein clearly testifies to this fact. Hence, an understanding of Kasena oral traditions therefore is an understanding of the people and their worldview. The elderly therefore serve as walking encyclopedias and the community a library of wisdom and knowledge that teach, delight and move people into actions worthy of the society.
References


