

Trip in African Oral Literature as Quest for Human Essence: Kaidara and The Choice of Ori

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Abstract

The way towards self and communal achievement is generally viewed as a wilderness path paved away in African oral literature through legendary figures moving across complex realities. Appearing first as a response to an internal imbalance or spiritual need, the desire for completeness extends into a physical world where its impatient imperialism is subjugated by time and hindered by antinomic forces¹. From this antinomy springs the quest which is valued concerning difficulties characters are expected to come across. There lies the terrible battleground, the theatre of merciless internal and external confrontation, marked by sacrifices and formulas that empower the tragic self. This severe hardship experience stands as a non-stop initiation process that moves progressively until the whole discovery and achievement of the quest are preceded by self-annihilation. Beyond the abstract speculation about education and society, it becomes praxis practical action for metamorphosis. This step corresponds to an enlightenment situation that engenders a remapping of the environment around us, which is very often gifted by triumph over inimical forces. Soyinka presents this process in Yoruba mythology through what he terms “the passage-rites of hero-gods, a projection of man’s conflict with forces which challenge his efforts to harmonize with his environment, physical, social and psychic².” From this achievement occurs in traditional African society the canonization of heroes, as the embodiment of core values shaped and assessed in oral genres through the travelling protagonist, on the road of deadly obstacles, often under the appearance of strange forms, including supernatural and fantastic manifestations.

Accordingly, the value of the trip stands in the significance of self-achievement as an existential experience set within and between cosmic powers painted through a world of symbols out of the ordinary and yet highly vivid. The trip becomes the human essence moving through cosmic forces that stand as a way for self-accomplishment, which is the major meaning of life. Both Kaidara and The Choice of an Ori are stories of African oral heritage presenting heroes who are expected to explore humanity through the gates of the physical and metaphysic arena. They respectively belong to Peulh and Yoruba cultures, stand as some oral art material transmitted through generations and are told by literary figures. Centered on this varied material, this paper aims at examining the similarities and differences of trip resonances in these stories, through characterization, time and space, in a perspective of reviewing the rich parallelism of art forms from different cultures. A major task of this work is to locate the accomplishment of human beings, society and Africa in general within the symbolism of trip as a quest in oral art’s creative impulse.

Keywords: Ori, Kaidara, trip, self-accomplishment, creative impulse.

¹ The expression belongs to Wole Soyinka.

² Wole Soyinka « Morality and aesthetics in the ritual archetype », *Myth Literature and the African World*, Cambridge, Cambridge university Press, 1976, p.1.

Introduction

The major characteristic of oral art is its vital and analogical link with life, spirit and soul, through the flow of emotion. There is a wide symbolism in the aesthetic of legends, tales and myths related to human essence in continuous interaction with cosmic forces. This interaction is an expression of deficiency that calls for satisfaction. Thus, trip in African oral heritage expresses the movement and the effort towards fulfillment in the cauldron of existence under pressure of a specific need or dream. Arguing in this perspective and specifically in the art of storytelling, Denise Paulme points out a significant structure of several African stories which basically are narratives developing from an initial situation of incompleteness or suffering towards a better world³. Though there are other structures or possibilities of combination, the causality in the example above fits better the different plots of *Kaidara* and *The Choice of Ori*. Heroes in these stories express a thirst which will lead them to a quest marked of unaccustomed realities. They undergo various tests that challenge the different components of human being including the body, the spirit and the soul. Similarities between them are of paramount importance. Furthermore, they are all constituted of three main protagonists who will face quit similar obstacles they must overcome through abidance and sacrifice. At the denouement of the two stories, only one in each will be triumphant and experience the satisfaction of the thirst which however is everlasting. Though specific to different cultures, they belong to the common thread of African oral literature, our subject matter.

I. Commonalities in *Kaidara* and *The Choice of Ori*:

In *Kaidara* and the *Choice of Ori*⁴, one can find a network of similarities in the intrigues and the role played by characters. They are all stories that tell about two groups of three protagonists respectively coming from the same cultural background and almost sharing the same values and opportunities, facing the same hindrances. They also belong to that continuum of oral art flowing through the genius of artists into the ears of a participative audience which create a response for live performance. Though not in that specific occasion we will try to point out the center where converge both stories and the different trails leading to it.

1.1 At the genesis of the quest:

Kaidara unfolds a scene of initiation belonging to traditional Peulh societies of the Ferlo that extends over the Senegal River coast and Macina, a Malian region.⁵ Its characters are involved in an adventure to discover inner knowledge that highlights cosmic realities and lead to wisdom. In that perspective an author observes:

³ Jacques Chevrier, *Littératures nègre*, Paris: Armand Colin, 1984, p. 193.

⁴ The intrinsic meaning and value of ori (head) among the Yoruba people have been unlocked. Its position as man's personality soul, his guardian angel and personal deity, which ranks it to the level of divinity, has also been revealed. Traditions also present ori as the spiritual accomplice of a man who kneels to Choose the man's ayanmo (destiny), which it is equally entrusted to protect and to help fulfil. Babasehinde Ademuleya .The Concept of Ori in the Traditional Yoruba Visual Representation of Human Figures. Nigeria: Obafemi Awolowo University, *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 16(2): 212–220 P.6. (2007)

⁵ *Kaidara : récit initiatique peul*, Texte présenté par une S Réunion du CDK du Samedi 26 mai, 2007, P. Our own translation.

Traditional African artists, as prominent members of their communities interpret their people's thoughts and conventions through their expressive forms: hence their interpretations of nature rather than its imitation in their works.⁶ The major characteristic of African aesthetics of verbal art comes out of its multi-level didactic, hilarious, spiritual and mundane nature. Through the questing heroes of these stories appear these dimensions, as Hampaté Ba develops at the very beginning of *Kaidara*.⁷

The deepness of the precious thing they long for will lead them to under streams, channeling a variety of settings that contribute to the richness of the symbolism along the quest. In this story the protagonists are undoubtedly attracted by *Kaidara* which refers etymologically to a god of the Peulh pantheon ruled by Gueno.

At the starting point of *Kaidara* and the *Choice of Ori* exists a spiritual power or voice that paves the way towards adventure. One can find determination in the move of the different characters, as that spiritual power echoes in their being and appears to stimulate the conquering will. It emerges explicitly after the enchantment of Dembourou, Hamtoudo and Hammadi which figures preparation to a deeper level of existence apprehension in *Kaidara* and in *The choice of Ori* as well. This mysterious presence is pictured through the voice of elders and through the divination that is performed for Afuwapé, Oriseeku and Orilemere. Such a spiritual performance finds its corollary in sacrifice, in the same perspective, as characters in *Kaidara* are invited to offer the first game in the first village, an ant-eater. Though in the first case of *Kaidara*, the ground of the trip is not accurately identified, contrarily to *The Choice of Ori* where happiness and profit on earth are the targets, there is no doubt that this trio is picturing a strong desire of knowledge and wisdom. In leaving the restraint and shady world of their homes to face the sunlight, while dawn is breaking, they embark on peregrination, leaving the portion for the whole. The imagery of the multicolored clouds operates in an aesthetic perception of the fascinating, rich, metaphysical and yet out of touch nature of existence at that very moment, while the big crossroads offers suggestively a picture of interacting differences, whether physical or metaphysical. The sum of all these dimensions is set as a prefiguration of what Soyinka calls a cosmic totality. That totality is the synthesis of man existence and the picture of his physical home he must build through activity within his environment. This validates the sereer proverb: "gu rokna no mbin tafil a xatu" which literally means all that is in a house comes from the outside. As time rings for our protagonists to pursue the task of building effectively their "houses", let us follow their steps towards those challenging territories of selection and witness their battle as conflicts may burst out.

1.2 Conflicting powers of the road

An important task at this point will be to highlight the nature of what we call conflicting powers. It may be impossible to set a clear line of identification between their operation-systems, in consideration of the complex web they generate. Recalling the inseparable characteristic of the spiritual and material reign in oral tradition as a whole, Amadou Hampaté Bâ quoted by Oyèronké Oyèwùmi states:

⁶ Babasehinde. A. Ademuleya. Op.cit.P.09.

⁷ Op.cit., p.17.

Oral tradition is the great school of life, all aspects of which are covered and affected by it. It may seem chaos to those who do not penetrate its secret; it may baffle the Cartesian mind accustomed to dividing everything into clear-cut categories. In oral tradition, in fact, spiritual and material are not dissociated⁸.

However, one can at least say that the conflicting forces in question are more of spiritual concern than of material one. This is far from being fortuitous when attention is given to the terminology of *Kaidara* and *Ori*. *Kaidara* is a noun that designates the god of iron and knowledge in Peulh traditional society⁹ while *Ori* refers respectively to the physical and spiritual head (the center of knowledge), standing as the god of fate¹⁰ in Yoruba traditional society. Symmetry or correspondence between these two deities is striking. Iron and Knowledge in *Kaidara* converge with the targeted knowledge and welfare in *The choice of Ori*. And as the discovery of these riches cannot be a result of material dominion, by analogy to the accomplished horizon of humanity, the obstacles which are of a creative consciousness intended for that accomplishment cannot but follow that scheme.

Following the two stories, the conflicting powers start operating as testing means to certify the sense of obedience and patience through enigmas. The trio in *Kaidara* will first have to obey a solemn voice it cannot locate. In a quest of such a high value one may rationally need to have a clear view of everything. This is mainly what explains the question of Hamtoudou about the identity of that unknown Character who stands as the well of science and mountain of wisdom¹¹. But the promptness of reason is dominated by the need of confidence, obedience and patience, as no answer will be given to him except this maxim: "You will know when you will understand that you don't and will wait to¹²." The focus is in the act of waiting. Following that recommendation, the audience or the participating reader may be struck by the anguish of the aborting intellect before the forbidden birth of inner light at that particular span of time. But the significance of this statement is found in its centeredness within a vision or pedagogy of constructive deconstruction of the self that will go through the quest. There is no anachronism at this specific level in asking a questioner to first take awareness of his ignorance as one may conclude, considering the case of Hamtoudou. What should be noted is rather the unveiling of an arrogant imperialist intellect dispossessed of appropriateness before inner knowledge of high value compared to iron and belonging to *Kaidara*. Hamtoudou in so doing stands as the embodiment of the arrogant discursive reason that focuses on deduction rather than in participation as Senghor argues:

Discursive reason merely stops at the surface of things; it does not penetrate their hidden resorts, which escape the lucid consciousness. Intuitive reason is alone capable of an understanding that goes beyond appearances, of taking in total reality¹³.

Hamtoudou is then invited to a live performance in connivance and embrace that achieve essential enlightenment. His question is deprived of the enthusiasm of cosmic totality, hence his

⁸ P.H.Coetzee and A.P.J. Roux, *The African Philosophy Reader*, London, 1998, p.478.

⁹ Amadou Hampaté Ba, *Kaidara*, Op.cit., p.10.

¹⁰ Op.cit., p.216.

¹¹ *Kaidara*, p.22.

¹² Translated by us from french « Tu sauras quand tu sauras que tu ne sais pas et que tu attendras de savoir », *Kaidara* p.22

¹³ *African Philosophy Reader*, p.54.

disappointment. Among other obstacles, it can be noted thirst; poisonous reptiles guardians of the mysterious river and the vulnerability of the trio in front of these deadly barriers. Patience and moderation of the desire of piercing the mystery become then a necessary pedagogy for an effective and helpful initiation. Because knowledge is one thing and its practical use another. In the same perspective, one can identify a certain number of enigmas in the *Choice of Ori* that require hardship perseverance and sacrifice on the part of the travelling heroes as unveiled in the text below:

After working for some distance,
They got to He-Who-pounds-yams-with-a-needle.
They said "Father, we greet you."
The old man replied, "Thank you."
They pleaded, "Please, sir,
We are going to the house of Ajala."
He who pounds yam with a needle said that he must first finish pounding his yams
Before he showed them the way¹⁴

The chain of enigmas representing the symbolism of typical conflicting powers as in *Kaidara* will follow Afuape, Oriseeku and Orilemere all along their journey. This typology of impediments which target the spirit and the soul for purification will end its cycle with the entrance and sojourn in the realm of *Kaidara* and in the house of Ajala. It appears as the preparation step of the meeting between human and supernatural beings intended for the attainment of a paramount gift in the quest. After reception of it, the first trio in *kaidara* will mysteriously be led homeward, while the other in *The Choice of Ori* will pursue its objective of settling on earth for better profit. To this second stage of the trip corresponds another cycle of conflicting powers which are far more of destructive agency than the former. These powers are identified through rain¹⁵, storm, wind, and thunder in the two stories and more dramatically through the causality of their killing activity in the deadly attack the avenging wild animal gives to Dembourou in *Kaidara*¹⁶. In this specific context the conflict becomes a test that only the abiding hero will overcome triumphantly. An important thing is to remind that before any battle, there is always a series of maxims and instructions to be followed and some magic formula proportional to the level of the obstacles to the quest. The major solution to all these obstacles is continual sacrifice as painted through the examples of Afuape and Hammadi in the respective stories. However, these measures are absurd without docility and obedience to cosmic forces that participate in building a better world. The offenders to those forces namely Dembourou and Hamtoudo in the one hand and Orilemere and Oriseeku in the other will be fragmented before understanding how they must behave. Contrarily to them Afuape and Hammadi will overcome the inimical forces and experience the happiness that provides wisdom and knowledge. Concerned with it above all, these triumphant heroes will pay the cost and in so doing, recapture their expenses, achieving the totality of the material and the spiritual.

The temptation of iron: material and spiritual agencies

Iron is within the context of this analysis the supreme manifestation of knowledge in an abstract and concrete sense at the same time. The value of that precious metal that covers a world of

¹⁴ Wande Abimbola, "The Choice of Ori" Sixteen Great Poems of Ifa, p.8.

¹⁵ Idem, p.16.

¹⁶ *Kaidara*, pp.60-63.

symbols in the effort of the quest is quiet striking. In the different plots, it is painted as a divine property which humans can win through a particular devotion which includes hardship and vital nexus with *light*. Its dualism is highly demanding for concrete welfare, hence the methodic devotion. Iron is defined in this section not only through its material quality as the sum of riches but also and almost through its spiritual dimension as an ecstatic vision or wedding between being and *being* which is life in the very meaning of the term. As such, it is delivered by Kaidara in the first story and by Ajala in the second, conveniently from spiritual to material dominance. Accordingly, any practical discovery of its essential mode of operation cannot but spring from correspondence of vision and methods. The contrary is undoubtedly a negation of the self in the process of the quest.

Hamtoudo, Dembourou and Hammadi are on a move towards an esoteric figure considered as the embodiment of knowledge. In the world of our heroes, only Kaidara is the master, the light that shines over all kinds of enigmas. This features the exclusivity of the source no one else can behold without the inner light seen through battle and sealed by that god. Two notions are of particular interest in this point including the role of the deity and the duty of the individual on the way to success. The way that leads to that kingdom is marked by considerable ambiguous reality just like mining is difficult and risky. Consequently, only the enduring will succeed in that adventure which is however a necessity to self-accomplishment. At the early moment of day birth when the sun spread its empire, three characters meet. They are so fascinated by that rising charm that attention around them is devoted to contemplation. It might be said that the glittering attractiveness of the sun is the communicative expression of Kaidara it symbolizes through the disc it forms and the color it bears.

The extraordinary invisible character painted through a voice calling into the forest and requiring sacrifice will solemnly launch the quest by a bewitching appeal to the trio constituted of Hammadi, Hamtoudo and Dembourou. It is then the starting point of enigmas and battles toward the mysterious Kaidara. The trip will be made of three main parts which are the efforts to meet the god of knowledge, the live experience with him and the accession to knowledge, all of them colored of a series of difficulties that appear to be its symbolic price. In all those sequences, the world of symbols offers diverse courses full of knowledge but always hidden somewhere and not accessible at first sight or easily. Form and content constitute a whole of esthetic agency acting on soul and spirit at the same time. They cannot be separated. A dangerous approach would be to make confusion by paying attention only to the brightness of the sun which refers to iron. The beauty of the landscape at the beginning of the quest, the loads of iron and the glittering *oris* in the house of Ajala cannot be taken as an end. The aesthetic totality in African oral tradition is the consistent and logical blending of form and content. Unfortunately some, unwary will knock against the iron rock and be split in tragedy, confirming thus the vital nexus approach hypothesis. The reader as a character of the stories participating in the events they explore can be submitted to the same power of attraction located in emotive and intelligible aesthetic value.

However the most important aspect of the efforts which support the move of the three characters heading towards the mysterious kingdom of Kaidara is not the immediate enrichment or materialism, but rather the flux of light and delight proportional to the need of their growth. This is mainly the essence of oral art flowing through the genres of storytelling myth...and broadly shared by all traditional African societies. The richness of the oral traditions akin to ethnic groups of the African continent lays on that oral art relational nature, which is at the same time a dam and a

hyphen, a converging and diverging point that expresses the inner self, the dualism and interdependency in the movement for self-accomplishment between the biological and the spiritual, symbolic of all quest of the African personality.

In the legendary story of *The Choice Of Ori*, the three protagonists are of divine origin. They lived in the world of gods and yet did not meet the accomplishment of their dreams. The thirst for a better condition led them to take the decision of travelling to the earth where they would settle and experience a peaceful and happy life. The spiritual realm of gods needs through them the blending with earthly existence. Analogically apprehended, this blending is at the same time the confrontation between subject and matter as conscience, the intense union between rain and earth that purifies atmosphere. From that interaction sprouts the seeds of life, wealth and welfare which are the secret projects of humans. But as pointed out, it is all about confrontation between spiritual and material culture, between flesh and spirit, from the atomic referring element in *the proscenium* to the very manifestation of that productive and necessary battle. As in *Kaidara*, the life of the different characters is the center of plotting viewed in the axis of duality, the pure expression of the above mentioned confrontation. This duality is strengthened through time and space that shift from stillness to agitation.

The symbolism of that hardness is depicted in the story first through the advice of elders not to stop even if summoned at home, no matter what the duty might be. Warned of the required sacrifice, our three heroes Oriseeku, son of Ogun, Afuwape son of Orunmila and Orilemere son of Ija went for a conquest. One of the first obstacles on their way is the contradictory piece of advice forbidding the return to home that elders gave them, knowing that the voice of the elder is also in Africa the voice of wisdom and knowledge. However, the plot of the story at the end will show that a successful trip is grounded on a clear knowledge of the realities and circumstances around it.

Like the mysterious voice in *Kaidara*, each one of them will hear his father's tempting appeal that summons him. But the word of the elders will be the hindrance to answer it. While Oriseeku and Orilemere will be continuing their trip, Afuwape will choose to go back home and meet his father to know about the reasons of the call. There, divination will be performed for him and all the solutions to enigmas and obstacles to the choice of a good Ori highlighted. In Yoruba world view related to the context of this story, the choice of an ori is also the choice of destiny. If *Kaidara* is regarded as the god of knowledge, the unique source of inner light for accomplishment in the Peulh legend, Ifa is in the Yoruba world the god of divination that brings light in gloomy days of life projects and complex realities. In both stories, the key to success is kept by a divinity one should consult on behalf of a spiritual medium.

What's more, there is a proper set of values the individual must have to successfully cope with obstacles including, patience, humbleness, consideration and endurance. This means that destiny is not only a divine program but also a collaborative network or enterprise that involves human participation. It is worth mentioning that this participation is carried on the basis of knowledge and accomplishment quest rather than in cornering and absence of discernment. Both Oriseeku and Orilemere did wrong in not consulting Ifa and being out of patience in the one hand and in forgetting that their quest is not only material but also spiritual in the other. The consequence is that they arrive first in Ajala's house where Oris are made and stored, but unfortunately their choices

will not be good. Consequently, their settlement on earth will be the rhythm of deception and cries of sorrow.

Beyond success, Continuity:

The significance of hindrances on the way of the questing protagonists lays on the metamorphosis of the inner self which is the first and basic condition to success. Afuwape will experience a very good fate by combining the solutions given through divination and the use of his own qualities. He will overcome all the obstacles by appropriate behavior and sacrifice. Thus, he arrives on earth with a good ori which will lead him to happiness and welfare, whereas his two friends will be plagued by misfortune. At the end of the story Afuwape will not only be overwhelmed with joy because of his wives and his richness, but also because he will be awarded a particular status. "He had many wives and he had many children as well after some time and in due course, he was honored with the title of Orisanmi¹⁷." Comparing Hammadi and Afuwape, one can say that both figures embody success and wisdom which go together. They stand as heroes and examples of human achievement. To this extent, they become honorable ancestors whose deeds are sealed for generation to come for the cultural identity and realization of the communal vision of societies they belong to. Because each society has a prototype of its vision of humanity, these two heroes can be considered as the rising human essence of their societies.

The importance of trip viewed analogically with destiny or life comes from the fact that it knows a departure point and has a particular horizon. Even if in the beginning everything is not clear as no one knows what might be met, there is for those two African societies a unique vision of what that end is likely to become. It is with reference to this vision and to the character in action that the road is drawn and the obstacle settled to wash away the unfitted features and components of the individual for better life. However, that severance is so difficult and often violent that only very few persons can bear it. That is why Oriseeku and Orelemere in the *Choice of Ori* as well as Hamtoudo and Dembourou in *Kaidara* failed in their quest. That failure is in oral tradition as useful as success, to the extent that it serves as a warning against misbehavior, intended for successful heroes and for everybody. One might believe that after triumph heroes don't need any further teaching and orientation. Indeed they are in a constant need of teaching and of renewal to manage their richness and keep their honor. That is why in both stories the fundamental vision of the triumphant heroes is not material. It is rather a continuum of the quest which is basically spiritual leading step by step to different areas of happiness. This is symbolic of the endless nature of wisdom and knowledge, following the vast unknown aspects life covers. Oral art depicts an ambivalence of heroism located between heroes and anti-heroes. That seeming contradiction is the expression of dualism proper to the individual no one can tame, a dualism in which both sides are important and inextricably linked, though different.

The way human condition in perpetual quest is pictured through the metaphor of the trip in these stories puts into evidence the dual and contradictory nature of being. The battle of the spirit is located in that continual confrontation that requires sacrifice for the achievement of the self. Of the two stories, it can be said that only the consciousness of the need for sacrifice and the joint efforts fashion a typical individual that fits a social vision of humanity.

¹⁷ Wande Abimbola, "Ajala and the Choice of Ori" *Sixteen great poems of Ifa*, UNESCO, Julliard, p.28.1975.

Conclusion

Oral art in Africa is in its imaginative form an aesthetic rewriting of social ideas, feelings, values and beliefs, the work of the author consisting of making it more attractive in a different perspective that calls for insight. The metaphor of trip in the stories of *Kaidara* and the *Choice of Ori* puts into evidence the different sequences of life, to lift up the standards which are pillars of cultural identity and socio-economic development as well. Human destiny pictured through the interaction between natural and supernatural forces, human and divine essence in life expresses the complexity of human being and the different elements it is linked with in the quest. Yet, the possibility to come through is always offered through a method the individual is expected to perform. A methodic openness towards unknown spheres and horizons is therefore not only profitable but also necessary to discovery and reunion.

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