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**Claiming Oral Heritage: The Significance of Oral Devices in
Chinua Achebe's *Anthills Of The Savannah* and Flora Nwapa's
Efuru
[Djiby ANNE]**

Résumé

Cette étude a pour objectif d'examiner l'importance des procédés oraux dans l'élaboration du roman africain. L'étude explique que la survie de la tradition orale dépend d'une certaine manière de l'utilisation des éléments de l'oralité dans les textes de la littérature africaine. L'incorporation de mythes, d'histoires ou de chants dans ces textes aide à comprendre leur rôle dans la vie de la communauté et leur utilité pour les auteurs dans leur volonté de donner un autre élan aux œuvres littéraires africaines. Ainsi, cela signifie que l'oralité n'est pas uniquement utilisée pour le décor, mais aussi et surtout pour donner du sens et de l'originalité à l'art africain. La société nigériane et son héritage oral constitueront la toile de fond de cet article. L'auteur de celui-ci s'efforce de démontrer, à travers l'étude de *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) de Chinua Achebe et *Efuru* (1966) de Flora Nwapa, la dimension particulière que l'héritage oral donne à la littérature africaine.

Mots-clés: héritage oral, tradition, mythe, histoire, littérature africaine

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the significance of oral devices in the shaping of African novel. The study indicates that the survival of oral tradition depends somehow on the use of oral features in African written texts. The incorporation of myths, embedded stories or songs in those texts helps to understand their role in the community life, and how useful they are for authors in their will to give another spring to African literary works. Thus, this means that oral devices are not only used for decorum, but also and mostly for giving sense and singularity to the African art. The context of Nigerian society, and its oral heritage will be the main focus of this paper. It argues, through the study of Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) and Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966), the particular dimension that oral heritage gives to African literature.

Key words: Oral heritage, tradition, myth, story, African literature

INTRODUCTION

The incorporation of oral devices in African written literature is of key importance in the sense that it allows African writers to be in contact with their cultures and their traditions; those oral devices also help to preserve African identity in the field of literature. It is worth noting that the survival of African oral tradition depends to some extent on the embedding of oral features in the African novel. Such devices not only have an aesthetic function, but they also play key roles in the transformation of a given society. Therefore, the survival of the African heritage in modern African novel will be guaranteed by “an imaginative deployment of symbols and techniques in a way that resonates the changing expectations and life styles of a society”.¹ In other words, what is the impact of oral tradition on the African written literature? It is obvious that the two have in common the use of language in various genres (narrative, lyric, epic, etc.); but what is most important is to point out the contribution that oral tradition may bring to African literature.

The purpose of this article is to identify features of oral tradition as the way forward for African written literature. The point is based on Chinua Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah* and Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru*. And the task is to display the continuity related to traditional oral discourse in written literature, and to examine the survival of the African traditional heritage in the context of modernization, and how the traditional discourse is spread through relevant features, in a way to maintain singularity of African literature, which is under the constant influence of western literature.

Several outstanding critics have already recognized the role of oral tradition in the development of African literature; and specific attention has been devoted to devices such as African languages, songs, myths, proverbs, and epics, related to orality as inspiration and, or background of many works in African literature.²

To better illustrate the significance of oral devices in the texts, it is necessary to clarify some literary approaches related to orality; and which lay the emphasis on the particular dimension of African literature inspired by traditional oral heritage. In this respect, the work of Chinweizu and al, *Toward the Decolonization of African*

¹ Isidore Okpewho, "African Poetry. The Modern Writer and the Oral Tradition", *Oral and Written Poetry in African Literature Today*. London: James Currey, AWP, 1983, p.24

² Phaniel, Egejuru: "Traditional Oral Aesthetics in the Modern African Novel: Obinkaram Ochewa’s *The Land’s Lord*". In *The Growth of African Literature*. Trenton and New Jersey: AWP, 1998, p. 23. (eds, Edris Makward , Telma Ravell Punto , and Aliko Songolo) N°3.

Literature”, deserves further scrutiny for the sake of relevance. They come up with a perspective of decolonizing African literature, and observe:

African orature is important to the enterprise of decolonizing African literature, for the important reason that it is the incontestable reservoir of the values, sensibilities, aesthetics, and achievements of traditional African thought and imagination outside the plastic arts. Thus, it must serve as the ultimate foundation, guidepost, and point of departure for a modern liberated African literature. It is the root which modern African literature must draw sustenance.³

It is also important to have recourse to other theories such as Irele Abiola’s “Criticism of Modern African Literature”, which also addresses the African experience through a modern genre. Of course the medium of expression of African literary works is a foreign language, but Abiola suggests an African baseline. He provides a clear-cut explanation of this aspect, when he writes:

Despite the fact that our writers use the European language to express themselves, the most original among them do so with the conscious purpose of presenting an African experience, and the best among them reflect in their works a specific mode of the imagination which derives from their African background. Our writers are recognizably African only in the sense in which they give an African character to their works.⁴

Such approach will ultimately guide the conclusions that will be drawn from this close reading of Achebe and Nwapa’s novels. As a structure, the article hinges on three points, which revolve around a claiming of oral heritage: a representation of traditional myths, stories as a sense of awareness, and the use of songs for cultural stability.

Representing traditional Myths

African mythology inspires and feeds many African texts. Myth can be defined as a traditional, typically ancient story dealing with supernatural beings, ancestors, or heroes that serve as fundamental types in the worldview of a people, as it covers the

³ Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa, Jemie, Ihechukwu, Madubuike. In the introduction of *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*. Vol 1. African Fiction and Poetry and their Critics. Howard: HUP, 1983, p. 2.

⁴ Irele Abiola, “The Criticism of Modern African Literature”, In *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: IUP, 1981, 1990, p 33.

aspects of the natural world or delineates the psychology, customs, or ideals of society. Myth can also represent a person or thing whose existence is fictional or unproven.⁵

What draws the attention in the novels, when it comes to myths is that the most important two mythical figures are related to female characters. Idemili in *Anthills*⁶ and Uhamiri in *Efuru* are two figures that symbolize the mythical world of African tradition. Presented as the “Daughter of the Almighty” (*Anthills*, p. 102), Idemili is sent down to bear witness to the situation of a country dominated by a despotic military regime, and to ensure the “moral nature of the authority” (*Anthills*, p. 101). In other words, it represents a kind of social salvation. In *Efuru*, Uhamiri the goddess of the Lake is depicted by Nwapa as a powerful female mythical figure who chooses her worshippers from the people, especially the women. She is, as Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo says, “the central and controlling image and represents the feminine principle in the novel”.⁷ It is important to notice then that this female deity is almost present in many Nwapa’s novels, epitomizing the strength of woman. Such choice can be therefore considered as an illustration of the author’s stress put on the making of strong female characters. So it is through features related to oral tradition that Flora Nwapa reveals her attachment to the power of womanhood.

The version of the myth of Idemili that is told in *Anthills* is a way for Achebe to depict the essence of the roles of women in politics. This version of the myth assigned to Idemili can be seen as the important female role of civilizing men. For, Idemili’s function, as Achebe defines it, is not to empower women, but to moderate male power. Thus, the concern is the running of the political affairs. In the chapter entitled “Daughters”, the mythical Idemili is sent in a context of power misuse. In other words, there was a total disorder brought about by the dictatorial regime of His Excellency. That is why “the Almighty” decided to send his daughter, Idemili, to restore stability and regulate the country’s politics; the aim is to set the balance

⁵ Definition taken from *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language*, Fourth Edition by Houghton Mifflin Company. Updated in 2009. Published by Houghton Mifflin Company. All rights reserved.

⁶ Well be used in the text for the title of the book *Anthills of the Savannah*

⁷ Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo, talking about Nwapa’s Mythic Imagination, in an article entitled “Myth, Culture, and Igbo Womanhood in Flora Nwapa’s Novels”, in *Emerging Perspectives in Flora Nwapa. Critical and Theoretical Essays*. Ed by Marie Umeh, Eritrea: AWP, 1998, p 54.

between power and morality. The myth then, allows Achebe to emphasize female characters that he associates with the political hope of Africa.

In addition, myth in African literature is something that reflects the writers' ideological implications and the identity of the society and its history. That is the reason why Florence Stratton states that "through the myth Nwapa articulates a feminist ideology and celebrates a matriarchal heritage".⁸ A close reading of *Anthills of the Savannah* helps to grasp the ideological impact of the use of myths. Because it is through it that Achebe reveals his desire to "praise" women. As Grace J. Malgwi points out: "In *Anthills*, the myth of Idemili reinforces the primacy of women in spiritual and moral matters."⁹

Within the scope of everyday life, there is a line that links the myths to the characters, hence the relationship between them and women they embody. Mythical figures are the alter ego of the main female characters of the relevant works. Idemili in *Anthills* is linked to Beatrice in the sense that it is sent to bear witness to what is going on and regulate the country. It is the same role Beatrice plays in the real story. So Idemili is the prototype of Beatrice in the novel, just as Uhamiri is for Efuru in the novel of the same name. Uhamiri is portrayed in *Efuru* as a symbol of beauty, economic success, independence, and woman's intellect, though the flaw which is assigned to her is her infertility. The same qualities are found again within the character of Efuru, who is favored with wealth and beauty thanks to her belonging to the crew of the worshippers of the mythical Uhamiri.

Of course, they are of key importance in the African traditional society, myths also play an important role in religion. They symbolize deities in their respective contexts. The number of worshippers illustrates the devotion. While Uhamiri, in *Efuru*, is worshipped by many people especially women in Ugwuta, Idemili on the other hand, in *Anthills*, has many worshippers, in the country of Kangan: "her devotees increased in all the country between Omambala and Iguedo" (*Anthills*, p.103). It is then noticeable that beyond the cultural role they play in the novels, such

⁸ Florence Stratton: *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 90.

⁹ Grace J. Malgwi: "The Changing Faces of the African Woman: A Look at Achebe's Novels". In *Emerging Perspectives on Chinua Achebe. INSAKA, the Artist Purpose: Chinua Achebe and the Theory of African Literature*, Vol II, Ed by Ernest N. Emenyonu and Iniobong I. Uko. AWP, p. 366.

myths encompass religious dimension, for, they are deities which are given “gods’ stature”.

Let us explore another dimension of the mythical figure. In *Efuru*, the central myth is related to the issue of women within their cultural sphere. In the traditional Igbo society which is portrayed in the aforesaid novel, a woman is rejected if she is barren, and this is somehow the case of Efuru though she has already had a baby. It is this fact that Nwapa aimed to deconstruct through the Uhamiri myth by providing her with wealth and beauty, to sum up all that a woman would needs, except the joy of motherhood.

This reveals another side of the myths. Although Efuru has never thought that Uhamiri prevents women from having children, or even kills their children, her dream of the myth seems to prevent her from being a mother. To be a real worshipper of the lake goddess she has to “abstain from sexual relation every fourth day”, a practice that reduces her chance to have children. This may appear as a strange thing when we notice that it is only the women who do not have children that worship the Uhamiri water deity, as it is pointed out by Omirima in the novel.

The incorporation of these mythical figures in both novels reveals thus, more about the devotion of Africans to their divine guides that such myths embody. It is also through them that Achebe and Nwapa strengthen and uplift the characters with whom those myths are associated; and who are endowed with extraordinary powers and virtues. It is in the same perspective that Isidore Okpewho argues that

myth is that quality fancy that informs the symbolistic or configurative powers of the human mind at varying degrees of intensity, its principal virtue is that it tends to resist all constraint to time and experience to the end that it satisfies the deepest urges of a people or of mankind¹⁰.

Embedded stories as a sense of awareness

In addition to myths, other oral devices from African oral heritage are found in both *Anthills* and *Efuru*. The phenomenon of story-within-the story is also another aspect of orality which is recurrent in the African novel. It is worth noting that beyond the

¹⁰ Isidore Okpewho, “Myth and Modern Fiction: Armah’s *Two Thousand Seasons*”, in *African Literature Today: Recent Trends in the Novel*. Heinemann: London. Ed by Eldred Durosimi Jones and Eustace Palmer, London: Heinemann, 1983, p 1.

traditional aspect, and its aesthetic form, this kind of story has a didactic function in African modern literature. In *Efuru* for instance the most significant one seems to be Eneke's story about the girl who disobeyed her mother and who has married a spirit (*Efuru*, p. 105). This kind of story can be said of having an impact on the audience mainly composed of women. Eneke's story can be considered then as the parable of Efuru's first marriage in the aforesaid novel. Because the marriage was not celebrated in the traditional norms; in other words it was against her father's will. Efuru herself had chosen the man as the one she loved. So what can be learnt from that story is that obedience is something of paramount importance in African society, for if a person fails to obey his or her elder, he/she will be punished in one way or another by an unknown force.

Achebe also insists on that didactic dimension of embedded stories in his literary works because he gives much consideration to the importance of African orality. This is illustrated through Denise Coussy's words:

L'intention didactique d'Achebe est encore plus flagrante lorsqu'il intègre les contes dans son récit, car leur tonalité moralisatrice s'associe en général subtilement aux structures visibles ou cachées de l'intrigue. Beaucoup (...) ne sont que de simples mises en scène des défauts et des qualités humaines des protagonistes.¹¹

[Achebe's didactic intention is even more clear when he integrates stories in his narrative, for their moralizing tonality is subtly combined to the visible or hidden structures of the plot. Many of them (...) are nothing but mere representation of the flaws and virtues of the protagonists.] [Our translation].

In *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe advocates the will to change what was going on in contemporary Nigerian society through such oral device. Ikem's lecture at the University is a kind of performance which aims at awakening people on what was prevailing in the country (*Anthills*, p. 122).

In speaking in parables before the University audience, Ikem is performing a kind of story-telling in order to show how things appear very clear to everybody's eyes: "the cock that crows in the morning belongs to one household, but his voice is the property of the neighborhood" (*Anthills*, p. 122). Through this saying and through the story of the Tortoise and the Leopard, the author pinpoints the very role of oral heritage in the changing of a society. Even Ikem himself is telling the importance of

¹¹ Quotation taken from Denise Coussy's *L'œuvre de Chinua Achebe*, Collection Adire : Présence Africaine, 1985.

story-telling and its component to the audience; admitting all the same that it is not easy to tell story:

Because it is only the story that continue beyond the war and the warrior. It is the story that outlives the sounds of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story, not the others that save our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it, we are blind. Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we the story; rather it is the story that owns us and directs us. It is the thing that makes us different from cattle; it is the mark on the face that sets one people apart from their neighbours. (*Anthills*, p. 124)

This aspect of African orality is also present in Achebe's other novels. In *Things Fall Apart*¹² and *Arrow of God*¹³ he employs homodiegetic-heterodiegetic narrators who recount events in the manner of the traditional story-tellers¹⁴; hence the fable of the Tortoise and the Leopard which stands for "a political meditation on the imperative of struggle" (*Anthills*, p. 153). Even the structure of the novel is somehow inspired from African oral tradition with the three witnesses that perform in the course of the book a telling of the story of the fictional Kangan Republic, where they used to live. Those three witnesses, Chris, Ikem, and Beatrice have shared between them the narration of the story. For example, Chris and Ikem are even called first and second witness at the beginning of the chapters they narrate.

There are many embedded stories and/or folktales in both novels. Sometimes they are told by the elders of the villages, and usually at night time as it is the case in the traditional African society. In *Efuru* too, there are other kinds of story-telling, though the most visible is that of Eneke (*Efuru*, p. 105) about the obstinate girl. Just before this story there is another one told by Ogea (*Efuru*, p. 99), about a young boy of *about seven years old*. What the story aims to show is the children's many "tricks", especially African children, who are very close to their mothers. This kind of story is not exactly a real story-telling but is part of what is called the phenomenon of the story-within the story, which Obiechina qualifies as one aspect of the interplay of the oral and literary traditions in the African novel.¹⁵ These embedded stories, Obiechina goes on, are referred to as narrative proverbs because they perform

¹² Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, London: Heinmann, 1958.

¹³ Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God*, London: Heinmann, 1964.

¹⁴ Omar Sougou. Language, "Foregrounding and Intertextuality in *Anthills of the Savannah*". In *Critical Approaches to Anthills of the Savannah*. Ed by Holger G. Ehling. Matatu, p 40.

¹⁵ Emmanuel Obiechina, "Narrative Proverbs in the African Novel." In *Oral Tradition*, 7: 197-230, 1992, p 199.

organic and structural functions of proverbs in oral speech and in creative literature.¹⁶

These stories serve as vehicles of culture and tradition; they even convey the experiences of the African societies, related to their tradition. The role of these embedded stories is not only to entertain, or decorate, but also to deliver teaching on manners and behavior that African society would consider as good.

It is worth pointing out that Achebe and Nwapa are not the only African writers who use oral devices as a means to display their commitment to have change in the course of things, especially in politics. In *Devil on the Cross*¹⁷ and *Matigari*¹⁸, Ngugi wa Thiong'o insists on that dimension. The usage of the formula "Once upon a time" which is a convention of folktale narration appears at the very beginning of *Matigari*. The formula is also met in *Anthills* (p. 153) witnessing the attachment of African writers to their cultural heritage and their will to achieve a true African oral literature.

What is also interesting to note in the use of embedded stories, which often function as proverbs, is also their didactic, as it shows the craft of the author in reaching goals of educating people. The authors who do it are deeply rooted in their cultures and are skillful in the way they incorporate such devices, a task which is not easy at all. It is in this respect that Obiechina writes:

To be able to use the stories, especially those of them extrapolated from the oral traditional repertoire, requires that the novelists be well grounded in the tradition of oral storytelling. But it ought to be stated that knowledge of specific traditional stories is not an absolute precondition to the use of narrative proverbs. That absolute condition is an awareness of the technique of narrative embedding, since what matters here is not that the story be traditional but that it be well and adequately prepared for embedding in the function of a proverb.¹⁹

Such craft is what have been detected in Achebe and Nwapa, hence the relevance of the choice of their works. What needs to be stressed is that the meanings of those inserted stories and tales are related in one way or another to the general meanings of the novels in which they are found.

¹⁶ *Ibid*

¹⁷ Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, *Devil on the Cross*, London: Heinemann, 1982.

¹⁸ Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, *Matigari*, London: Heinemann, 1986.

¹⁹ Emmanuel Obiechina, *Op Cit*, p 203.

Interestingly, all the components of the African oral narration are actually present in the telling of the stories embedded in the novels. Among them the narrators who perform the narration before an audience, which is another component of the oral performance.

Thus, it can be retained that a storyteller can be associated with “a creator, teacher and a guide to the society²⁰”, according to Harold Scheub. The proof is that at the end of a story or a tale, there is always something that is useful and that makes members of the audience wiser. That is the moral lesson, what Scheub calls “the surface moral of the story”.²¹

The Use of Songs for cultural stability

Songs are other useful oral devices that participate in the claiming of oral tradition in African written literature, especially in the novel. Such devices are frequently used for different purposes in order to highlight traits of African cultural identity. They are incorporated in these texts and give vitality to African Literature. Their importance in Nigerian Igbo culture is especially revealed through their presence in *Anthills* and *Efuru*.

In *Efuru* the presence of songs emphasizes the importance of Ugwuta oral culture as the background of the book. Given the traditional basis of the novel, we can see that songs are of key importance in the society that Nwapa depicts in her text. They may play a stabilizing role in traditional marriage. A good illustration is undoubtedly the unit of songs performed by the protagonist, Efuru when she was asking for her husband’s forgiveness, because she came back home late. Efuru’s song is formulated as follow:

My dear husband, don’t sell me,
My dear husband, don’t kill me.
Listen to me first before
You pass your judgment.

My dear husband, forgive me,
My dear husband, don’t kill me.

²⁰ Harold Scheub *The tongue is fire South African storytellers and apartheid*. Madison University of Wisconsin Press, 1996, p 149

²¹ Harold Scheub, “Introduction: Scene One: Image and Emotion”; in *Story*, Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1998, p. 4.

Let me tell you how we danced,
Let me tell you how we danced.

My dear husband, my love is true.
My dear husband, I am constant.
My dear husband, don't be angry.
I went to dance with my mates. (*Efuru*, p. 30).

Given that marriage is a serious practice in the Igbo society, it seems that partners, especially the wife, must do their best in order to live it harmoniously, and even try to save it when there is a problem. That is why as a traditional woman, Efuru performs this song in order to be forgiven by her husband. This shows the patriarchal nature of Nigerian Igbo society, which considers men as superior to their female counterparts. But actually, the song has done an effect because "Adizua was completely disarmed" (*Efuru*, p. 30).

Such incorporated songs are what highlight the particularity of African Literature, which was hitherto questioned by the Western culture, because beyond its entertaining role, African literature's other function is to educate its people through his traditional values.

Moreover, it is also important to stress that African literature needs to find more other ways of incorporating forms and devices taken from the African oral tradition. That is why embedded songs are also useful in celebrating the cultural roots of the African author in his way of challenging the prevailing colonial discourse.

In *Anthills*, Achebe portrays Ikem as one of those who epitomize this African pride. Unlike his friend Chris, Ikem shows an entire compassion to the Kangan working class, which is doomed to a dictatorial regime. The one verse hymn sung to the tune of "Lord Thy Word Abideth" he wrote at the end his editorial is an illustration of his compassion to that population segment:

The worst threat from men of hell
May not be their action cruel
Far worse that we learn their way
And behave more fierce than they. (*Anthills*, p. 43)

Furthermore, the significance of the presence of songs in these texts is not simply limited to the celebration of African pride or so on, but also in achieving the goal of upholding the African culture and tradition. Since the latter requires a certain devotion to the Gods and Goddesses, it is important for the worshippers of those Gods to perform sometimes a certain number of songs, in order to praise them. That is why the voice of the woman on the

Djiby ANNE

way to the stream is reminiscent of the worshippers' song to Uhamiri, "the goddess of the lake" in Nwapa's *Efuru*:

Uhamiri please
Uhamiri please
Uhamiri the goddess, please
Uhamiri the thunder, please
Uhamiri the kind, please
Uhamiri the beautiful, please. (*Efuru*, p. 147).

As the woman of the lake and the water deity of the Ugwuta traditional society, Uhamiri is praised through many songs by her worshippers mainly composed of women who want her to provide health, wealth, and beauty. So the role of the praise songs is to celebrate the African divinities; it may also be a way for the devotees to show their faithfulness to the Goddesses, as in the case of *Efuru*.

As a means to fit every situation, or to illustrate it, the authors also employ songs in order to link them to the present events. For example, Chris talks about childhood songs, in *Anthills* as a means to recall some past time events. The instance Chris uses "The one in front spots evil spirits, the one at the rear has twisted hands, the one in the middle is the child of luck" (*Anthills*, p. 66) in his witness is relevant in the sense that it allows him, while telling their story at Lord Lugard College, to describe their level stating that he was the child of luck because he was in the middle.

The expression of childhood songs is present in *Efuru*, rendering the richness of the tradition through the use of songs in children's playing, even if the meaning of the songs is ignored, or even the words they contain do not have particular meaning, children used to love the rhythms of the songs. Instead, Nwapa employs those songs in order to make her literary work more traditional and closer to the African tradition. The meaninglessness of the songs is expressed through the conversation of Efuru and her husband Gilbert, remembering their childhood: "No the words don't mean anything. It is one of these collections of meaningless words which children use for their play". (*Efuru*, p. 115)

Kpeturu Kpeturu fenato
Fenato na mgashi mee
Mgashi mee uwa bia ero
Uwa bi ero.
Tringo ringo, tongongo-iyoy!

Further in *Anthills of the Savannah*, precisely in the chapter where Beatrice takes the flow, there is also another unit of children's songs. The latter are related to rain; in other words this confirms the richness of African tradition in its ability to create oral

performance for almost all the situation of life. Even the units are presented in African language on the page reference:

ogwogwo mmili
takumei ayolo! (*Anthills*, pp. 95-96).

More traditionally, *Efuru* encompasses many kinds of songs that are proper to the African culture. Out of that previously mentioned, there are many others that are performed. Since traditional African societies encourage celebrations whether in joy or in sorrow, Nwapa illustrates it through the Igbo society she deals with in *Efuru*. In that tradition, whatever the result of the harvest, people celebrate the end of the year's work through singing and dancing. Very often it is the children who perform the songs going "from door to door" asking for some crops, and in this case the song goes like this:

If you give us yam,
Igbemgbele, Ocho-okwuoo, Igbemgbele, we
shall take.
Igbemgbele, Ocho-okwuoo, Igbemgbele
If you give us fish,
Igbemgbele, Ocho-okwuoo, Igbemgbele,
we shall take.
Igbemgbele, Ocho-okwuoo, Igbemgbele,
Let a male born live,
Igbemgbele, Ocho-okwuoo, Igbemgbele,
Let a female born live,
Igbemgbele, Ocho-okwuoo, Igbemgbele. (*Efuru*, p.102).

This kind of feast resembles that which is celebrated on *Tadjabone Day*²² in the Senegalese tradition. A feast during which people perform songs and dancing, in order to show their happiness of the coming of the New Year. It is then worth reminding that in almost all the African societies, people give a particular importance to the celebration of the special days and feasts that occur in the course of the year. The example of days of feast such as the "Owu festival" in *Efuru* is perfectly illustrative, seeing the scope that is given to it by the Igbo people. Here songs can be said to represent an expression of joy.

²² In Senegal, at the end of what is called the Muslim year, people organize a feast during the night of which they perform songs and dancing. Children are particularly the most prominent during the "*Tadjabone day*", because of the fact that boys wear girls' clothes and *vice versa*, going from door to door.

So as part of the African cultural reservoir, songs are indeed of paramount importance in the realization of an original African literature, which is actually the aim of the most Afrocentric committed writers, who do their best through the inspiration they take from the African oral tradition to achieve the goal to revitalize the African Art in the contemporary context.

CONCLUSION

The various oral devices that are used in these novels are means and ways for Achebe and Nwapa to show the vitality of African literature. African oral tradition gives the African writers the opportunity to be more pertinent in their commitment to achieve an independent literature. The examples of the novels of Achebe and Nwapa, used in this article, show that it is important for African writers to deal with African issues. The incorporation of oral devices has helped the authors to raise awareness on the importance of oral tradition, as the source of inspiration.

Anthills of the Savannah and *Efuru* are two works active in claiming the African heritage in African literature. Both novels offer the prototype of a true African literature by virtue of their structure. The incorporation of oral devices such as embedded stories, proverbs, and songs, have allowed Achebe and Nwapa to more Africanize their novels. They represent a source of inspiration for the authors in their enterprise of achieving a national literature. The themes and messages in the novels are conveyed through a language that reflects the authors' African origin; and in the same way set the difference between African literature and the other foreign literatures.

Through the two novels, we can see the reflection of the traditional role of women in African culture while depicting an Afrocentric and African womanist family-centered literary universe which mirrors the significance of the African values of community bounding and support.²³ In claiming African heritage, Achebe and Nwapa attempt to reconnect us to a past tradition,²⁴ which should be the first source of inspiration, and which tends to be lost in the context of modernity.

²³ Akoété AMOUZOU, "Reconceptualizing Gender in Nigerian Literature: The Dynamics of Womanist Ideology in Flora Nwapa's Fiction", p. 181.

²⁴ Simone Gikandi. "Nation, Narration, and Colonial Self", in *Reading Chinua Achebe: Language and Ideology in Fiction*. London: James Currey, 1991, p. 14.

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