

FOLKLORE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A NEW SOCIETY

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Introduction

The construction of a new society just like any development achieved or to be achieved in any one society will depend upon many factors. These can be historical, social, economic, political or even geographic and others. These factors in most cases depend on each other and this dependence results from aspects which are found in almost all of these factors. Folklore can be taken as one of the aspects which is present in all the factors that lead to the development of mankind. Within folklore there is an expression of all the activities of mankind within a particular society and the development of that society goes hand in hand with its folklore. The role of folklore in the construction of a new society can therefore be studied in relation to a particular society in terms of its functions and content and in relation to the changes in a society. Since it is part of what makes a society complete it has been a subject worth studying in relation to the society. Tanzania and Africa in general has been exposed to a situation whereby the subject has not been deeply studied. The little studies made and the collections found in libraries have been made by foreigners in most cases, and these could have left a lot to be questioned, for as Bernth Lindfors correctly argues "bearers of a culture are better equipped to interpret that culture than aliens who have experienced its realities only vicariously"¹. If

¹ Bernth Lindfors, *Folklore in Nigerian Literature*, Africana Publishing Company, N.Y., 1973, p. 2.

colonialism in one way or the other affected the understanding of the importance and the development of such a study, time has come that developing countries should look at their treasures on a wider scope and utilise folklore not only as a literary genre, but in application to the factors of development. This paper will look at folklore in the Tanzanian society, a country trying to build a new society based on the *Ujamaa* ideology.

Folklore embraces all aspects of traditional culture, the oral genres, dance, music and all social forms of the folk and material culture. Within any given society it cannot be dismissed simply as a form of amusement as its aspects show superficially, for it has been a great impliment in binding up man within a society and in holding together the society. These have largely been due to the functions and content – that folklore is about people in function. It should therefore be considered for what it does for the people who tell and listen to it, since like a mirror of a culture which portrays the activities and thoughts of the people, it incorporates descriptions of the details of different aspects of life and technology, as well as the people's attitudes. Despite the "social approval and disapproval, praise for those who conform to accepted social conventions and criticism or ridicule of those who deviate"² folklore includes the history and geography of a society, economic positions and science, not to mention the political aspect which the present paper focuses on.

Functions of Folklore and the Society

The functions of folklore in a society starts from the individual. The society has its own set forms of life which the individual is supposed to follow. In most of the African societies an individual is taken as a component of the society and every action of the individual is consored by the society. The sum total of all these, the individual, his actions and the individual as a component of the society can be the basis for the intergration of a society and maintainance of social cohesion in the sense that every member is answerable to the society. Yet the functions of folklore cannot play a significant role in the construction of a new society if change into a new society does not take into account folklore. This is mainly because any change in the society will affect not only the people's ideas and activities, their environment and things around them, but also their understanding of all these things together and their expectations of life after the change. This will be as a result of changes in their feelings and

² William R. Bascom, "Four Functions of Folklore," *The Study of Folklore* by Alan Dundes, Prentice-Hall inc, 1965, p. 295.

emotions and hence their ideological attitudes. It is at this juncture that folklore is called upon to answer the question: To what extent has folklore enriched and equipped the internal feelings of the people? To answer this question does not only take into account the fact that folklore widens the people's experience about life or regulates their characters and knowledge, but also, and perhaps most importantly, that it plays quite a big role as a strong defence to the society's ideology. Folklore should mould the people, through physical portrayal or expression, on patriotism and hard work and at the same time show the beauty and truth about the new life expected from the changes made or being made.

The above mentioned can be achieved when folklore is taken not only as a culture of the past, but as an unexchangeable part of the culture that enters into the inner life of society involving the daily facts and happenings. Since its significance should be looked in the light of contemporary and future situations, the data collected about the past should be approached to intergrate the traditional society, contemporary and the future society under construction.

Scholars have looked at the functions of folklore and its genres with an understanding of the past and the contemporary, but hardly has folklore been focussed on the future of the society. It is usually believed for example that, a genre of folklore like the proverb can be used in "conveying of a people's experience and expectations and can be performed in a particular effective way"³ and that the content of riddles (which is also another genre of folklore) "changes to incorporate new concrete objects as well as allowing new interpretations on accordance with new knowledge and new moral principles and values".⁴ Taking these two genres of folklore as discussed by these two scholars, we can see that there is no continuity and interdependence of the three stages.

Folklore should function in the construction of the future expectations of the people depending, largely on the past experience, the changes being made and the interpretations of the changes in relation to the past so as to glance the future. This in turn can control, influence or even direct the activities of the people. In this manner, folklore and its genres can adjust the individual and the society at large, to the newly constituted world, to the changes made, bearing in mind that the dynamics and aesthetics of folklore include modification by introducing new elements accepted by the society. Although "to fully understand folklore

and its role in man's life we must have more knowledge of the specific functions of each of these forms in various societies, literate and non literate",⁵ this paper, rather than looking at the general functions of folklore limits itself to two main functions (the educative and recreational) using songs in Tanzania within three ideological changes – from colonialism to independence and the building of a new society – *Ujamaa*.

Folklore before Independence

Tanzania is a country with over 130 ethnic groups. Before colonialism each of these groups carried their activities freely and peacefully and the folklore of a society meant the education and recreation of the members of that particular society.

Special times and seasons were put for different genres of folklore. Recreations was usually after a working day was over, especially in the evenings when songs were sung and dances performed. In this communal recreation, a group's feeling of solidarity was promoted and the people's efforts synchronized, while they were made to relax for the next day's work. People sung together about their harvests, history, about their deeds and even about their future generation. They praised their heroes and chiefs, laughed at cowards and accused those who had wronged the society. All this was done in the evening songs, near the fire place or at a particular meeting place of the village. Competitions were made and song masters were awarded and even given posts in the Chieftdom. Songs concerning all the people's activities and those talking about the society at large were made available to the people for entertainment, during ceremonies. Also there were special songs sung on special occasions like initiation songs, wedding songs etc. The educative function of the songs was fulfilled in two methods – formal and through an informal method. General songs gave general knowledge to the people. People were educated about their culture, history, their relations with neighbouring tribes; social status within a society was portrayed in the songs. This was the informal type of education which was open to all members of the society. The formal type of education was for restricted groups and sexes. People of a certain age could attend a particular ceremony and there sing

³ Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa*, Clarendon Press, 1970, p. 413.

⁴ Mbughuni P., "Riddles, food for thought", *KISWAHILI* Vol. 50/1, IKR, Dar es Salaam, 1983.

⁵ William R. Bascom, "Four Functions of Folklore", *The Study of Folklore* by Alan Dundes, Prentice - Hall Inc, 1965, p. 296.

or participate in singing particular songs. For example, boys of the same age, who attended the initiation ceremony together, were taught particular songs which educated them on certain issues that would have made them different not only from women and children, but also even those older, but who did not attend this 'course'.

The colonial administration which aimed at controlling the people's way of thinking and life, tried all their best to deprive them of their rights to participate in their traditional lores. On the one hand they used the colonial education which paid more attention to the metropolitan culture, while on the other religion was against the development of this ethnic treasure. The fear of this colonial administration made the people's folklore fail to express their feelings and opinions. It was thus left to talk of the traditional ways of life and educate the young generation within the scope of their tribe. Folklore could not portray a national feeling and there was almost no change as compared to the pre-colonial times. The themes and manners of treatment were typical of a tribe.

Changes after Independence

Within the Africa Continent and more specifically in Tanzania, cultural interaction has been taking place for years. Although cultural subjugation by the metropolitan culture has always tried to penetrate and undermine the more traditional cultures, in most of the African Countries that has been waged alongside with political and even economic independence. Declarations policies on culture have been made since cultural diffusion was taking place at a faster speed. The need to defend a people's culture arose in many independent countries despite the fact that even during colonialism the traditional lores were taken care of on tribal basis.

After independence, folklore in Tanzania started taking the national form. This was caused by the air of freedom in an independent country which did not face serious tribal feelings. The use of Kiswahili language as a national language was another factor that helped folklore move faster to a national level.

Viewed in the light of ideological and cultural aspects, as far as folklore is concerned, attaining independence resulted into changes into

the ways of life and thinking of the people. In an independent atmosphere, different aspects of folklore portrayed the effects of colonialism and the future independent life, struggle towards the maintenance of independence and even the call for unity. While tribal performance was still alive even after independence, national participation started growing, where by these different groups joined in reflecting the national responses to social, political and even economic challenges, portraying the sum total of the Tanzanians' activities, memories, hopes and plans. Kiswahili language made a national language and the ministry of culture shows the participation of the government in giving folklore more air to flourish.

Kiswahili language

The role of Kiswahili language in the history of Tanzania has been observed not only during the struggle for independence when it "placed itself as a unifying force"⁶ in liberating the people from colonial domination, but also after independence, 1961, when it was declared a national language. In this case, the widely spoken language by the over 130 ethnic groups of Tanzania could transmit not only national motives to the peasants and workers, but at the same time penetrate and bring communication of ideas between people of different tribes. This communication through a people's language enabled the people to move towards a national folklore by communicating and uniting the tribal folklore. On the other hand, through one language the people could express their views and the message passed to members of the other tribe faster and easily. Songs were sung in Swahili and other genres of folklore were given Swahili translation. In schools different aspects of folklore were taught in Kiswahili to pupils of different ethnic groups, while through the radio, songs were given out in Kiswahili also. While English was losing touch with the peasants, Kiswahili was carrying with it the national ideology to the peasants through other aspects of folklore and to be more specific, through the oral genres. The success of Kiswahili language to the Tanzanian culture has been concluded by the Minister of State in the

6 Mhina G., "The Tanzania Experience in the Use of Kiswahili in Education", KISWAHILI Vol. 47/2, IKR, DSM, 1977.

Presidents Office recently, Ndugu Amir Jamal who states that "In the coming half a century, the language Kiswahili will be seen to have been the most decisive and dominant factor in the process of what one would call the fruiting of culture. In form and content, as well as in its continuing growth, Kiswahili has already demonstrated its capacity for adaptation and absorption as well as a source of induction into different sub-cultures and culture of different origins. For Tanzanians culture has as much social as it has political value, each reinforcing the other"⁷.

Folklore after the Arusha Declaration

In 1967 there was the Arusha Declaration and Tanzania was declared a country building *Ujamaa*. In this struggle of building socialism the national motive of *Ujamaa* combined all the aspects of life, including folklore, to a national level. National troupes rather than tribal started growing. Songs and dances were conducted within national organisations and institutions rather than villages, while competitions were organised among industries, ministries, regions and schools rather than among villages. The importance of folklore was not in the expansion and extent, but mainly in the change of content and the extent to which the functions of folklore were explored in a society. Content wise, folklore included national themes: *Ujamaa* villages, the future of the workers and peasants, solidarity and unity, the struggle towards socialism and anti capitalist ideas. Oral genres which used to be in tribal languages were now used with Kiswahili translations so as to cater to a wider mass. Folklore was thus evaluated on a national level turning to the indigenous sources of inspiration and trying to exploit the society's own cultural heritage by making use of the contemporary materials available. Folktales, songs and other forms of oral and material art started portraying the people's expectation. To date, a national art centre has been opened playing just this role. This new content in folklore makes the people think within the framework of the needs and aims of their society and while incorporating common situations from everyday life and maintaining conformity to the accepted patterns of behaviour, the people are brought together to one

⁷ Amir Jamal, "Culture: A Matter of Pride and Joy" *Daily News Printpak*, Dar es Salaam, 4/5/1984, p. 4 (A Speech at the Dag Hammarskjöld foundation Seminar, Arusha - Tanzania, 24/2/1984).

ideology. By using the past experience and relating it to the present ideological understanding, folklore serves as a vehicle of social control. Songs are one of the genres of folklore used and being used in the construction of *Ujamaa*.

Songs and the new Society

Songs as one of the genres of folklore have a great role to play in the construction of a new society since they "can be used to report and comment on current affairs, for political pressure, for propaganda and to reflect and mould public opinion"⁸. Through songs people can be educated towards the progressive understanding of the national policy and other national targets. While the educative role has been mentioned by scholars like Raum⁹, Malinowski¹⁰ and others, songs can play a vital role in educating the masses since they cover social problems from law and ethics to economics and history, are a representative of the society's ideas and wisdom. Looked into their philosophical content, they can reflect the peasant's or common man's attitude towards a particular calling. They educate the masses by going into their minds with the everexpanding content of culture, all the human-made contrivances, skills and customs while accounting for human action and motivation. This is on top of the recreative role which makes the songs go further and faster to the masses. While the content of songs based on ideological themes will educate the masses, the songs will be in the mouths of the people as a recreation. In this sense they command a larger audience than the speeches and slogans; and even mass media. The aims methods and expectations of the constructions of *Ujamaa* are found in songs sung in dancing halls, cultural troupes' performances, schools and even those sung by children at their playing grounds. This is both in the villages and towns, covering people of different ages and sexes, literate and non literate.

⁸ Ruth Finnegan, *Oral literature in Africa*, Clarendon Press, 1970, p. 272.

⁹ Raun O.F., *Chaga Childhood. A Description of Indigenous Education in an East African Tribe*, London, 1940.

¹⁰ Malinowski B., *A Scientific Theory of Culture and other Essays*, Chaped Hill, N.C., 1944.

Conclusion

Folklore can play a vital role in the construction of a new society if it is not taken only as a literary genre. Since it is a subject covering all spheres of a man's life and his inner feelings, it should be given adequate atmosphere to flourish, to reach the people. In changing the way of life of a people, the educative and recreative functions of folklore should be taken into account and widely used, while its contents made to fit in with the changes. Therefore, the governments in power should not only make the people understand but also facilitate the development of their society by making use of the songs, tales, riddles and other genres through the mass media, celebrations, in schools and even in public demonstrations and meetings. Changes in the society should go hand in hand with changes in folklore while using folklore to develop the changes. It should be encouraged in schools, industries and other working places – and passed through a people's language.

The changing of roles might have affected folklore especially after Independence to date. The evening discussions under the fireplace where children used to get their informal education under special masters reknown in the village, mainly old people, have been replaced by the radio. The face to face mouth-ear contact has been reduced to the sound-ear contact. This indirect method becomes less effective in the sense that physical appearance in the discussions calls for more attention rather than imaginery. While the sound-ear contact is less attractive, it is also not to the tastes of the young, since it is usually, as in the case of Tanzania, during the day time, as opposed to the evenings after meals where the songs and riddles sent the children to bed. The traditional formal education has been replaced by the schools where the village masters have been replaced by the teachers. Although this is also a direct contact, it is less effective in the sense that folklore is only taken as a subject and its genres done for the sake of passing the exams. It is suggested that, together with the school teachers and the radio, emphasis should also be put to the traditional way of passing folklore to the young generation while moving with the current changes, for it is the young generation that is to build and see the success of *ujamaa*.