Cultural Demarcation of Hausa Song and Poetry Tradition*

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to discuss the ethnic criteria for the classification of the Hausa literary genres of song and poetry. In terms of texts, no remarkable difference is noticed between song and poetry. In fact, Hausa has a single term, wak’a (plural wak’ok’i) for both types of literary expression. All wak’ok’i share certain things in common such as sung oral presentation (not spoken recitation) and strict metrical (or rhythmic) patterns. Nevertheless, one can draw a distinction between these two types of traditions: song is orally composed, whereas poetry is composed in written form, then sung or performed on the basis of a written text. In addition to these differences in modes of composition, one can discern other differences in types of meters, verse structure, performance style, rhyme pattern, themes and origin.

This article will discuss these features and arrange them into three main categories: cognitive features, expressive features and social features. The primary emphasis of the discussion will be placed on how song and poetry can be culturally conceived as distinct literary entities. An analytical model proposed by Dan Ben-Amos in his study ‘Folklore in African society’ will be the methodological framework of this article, which arguably suggests that some theories developed in the field of folklore studies may also be efficiently employed in the field of literature studies.

Key words: Hausa, Song and poetry, Cultural demarcation of genres, African literature, Oral literature, Nigeria

I . Introduction

Hausa belongs to the west branch of the Chadic, one of the five main divisions of the Afro-asiatic phylum, and, unlike other Afro-asiatic members, is a tonal language together with some Cushitic languages. It is the largest member of the Chadic spoken in northern Nigeria, southern Niger, northern Cameroon, and

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western and central Chad. It is a mother tongue of over thirty million people and also serves as an important lingua franca for hundreds of ethnic groups found in these regions. Hausa culture is concentrated in what is now Northern Nigeria and Southern Niger, though the Hausa cultural diaspora stretches from Senegal to Sudan. Hausa has always been the language of the masses, while Arabic and Fulfulde were the regions’ written languages until the nineteenth century. When Hausa began to be written, and until the end of the nineteenth century, it too was expressed in Ajami. In the 1920s British colonial rule in Nigeria brought about the national promotion of literacy and book culture. A Hausa publishing company was established in Northern Nigeria, and literacy in Hausa and English, both written in roman script, was promoted through writing contests held throughout the region. Many works of Hausa literature have been published in English and French as well as in Hausa since the mid nineteenth century.

Hausa has rich literary tradition. The richness of Hausa literature is revealed by the existence of various forms of literary genres transmitted through oral or written medium, with each genre displaying its own features in style and contents. Among these genres are oral narratives, poetry, praise singing (song), riddles, clichés, proverbs, and dramatic performance. Song and poetry are the most professional forms of Hausa literature and differ from others in that they are characterized by greater degree of creativity and originality.

II. Song and poetry in traditional and modern Hausa context

One of the most socially significant Hausa literary forms is singing. In traditional Hausa societies, songs, the most prominent form of which is praise songs, play an important role; oral praise singers as agents of public opinion reflect in their songs current social and cultural issues of their communities, and participate in the process of socialization of young Hausa by incorporating essential social ideas in their works. According to the study of M.G. Smith, Hausa praise singers contribute to maintaining the social structure by declaiming the social values of the ruling class such as their patrons’ noble status and lineage, wealth, power, generosity, and political and economic influence. The formal occasions for which both male and female singers perform include political rallies or annual Muslim celebrations following the month of Ramadan fasting, as well as