
African Poetry and Proverbs

Once obscure or ignored because of African reliance on the oral tradition, upon which early African civilizations depended predominantly for the preservation of their tradition, African poetry and proverbs recently have become a source of great interest. Despite Africa's oral tradition, despite the diversity of languages within the continent, and later, the disruptive effects of colonialism, a sense of African literary continuity has been retained throughout the continent. As one would expect within the traditional African framework, African poetry and proverbs treat such topics as religion, happiness in the family and community, and life, death, love, and trust. Each tribe had a religious system of its own, and Africans were monotheistic in that they believed that a single Supreme Being was responsible for creation. Additionally, this omnipotent deity reigned supreme over lesser deities, spirits, and departed souls. African family life was based on a tribal society, the major subdivisions of which were clans. Families, a part of tribes and clans, included all ancestors, both living and dead. They also included all husbands, wives, children, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins: all those who had common ancestors. In this social organization, the individual did not exist apart from the community.

Poetic expressions related to the life occurrences of this community were often recited by a griot. Rhythms and intonations were used dramatically to present poetic pieces which treated birth, joy, war, and death. Sometimes these recitations were intended for recreation and amusement. Valuing realism and resilience of spirit, some communities utilized professional verse makers who were responsible for songs of celebration or praise. These artists were classified as *nolodoto* (literally, "good-memory-say-person") and *ayisumo* ("heart-much-understand"). Though laments or prayers for a lifting of one's life burdens served as an acknowledgment of the acceptance of work, they revealed an appreciation of the cathartic quality of song. While the African poet did write about love, there is a tendency to diminish explicitness. Poetic protocol excludes sexual implications as an affront to good taste. Women also created poetic works. Many of their songs are lullabies, work songs, praise songs, dirges (or laments), and chants to gods and goddesses. In general, early oral traditional poetry examines the relationship between man and nature.

Ancient African literary tradition centered around oral communication, and ancient folktales, the basis for the proverbs, were recited by a tribal griot. This storyteller related the tales to educate, amuse, and entertain. These oral narratives also provided the basis for the history of the tribe, the prevailing value system, and the rituals that were practiced. Furthermore, explanations in the form of parables and tales justified events, such as death, sickness, and birth. Stories or tales also explained the reasons for and existence of natural occurrences, such as thunder, rain, famine, and drought. African poetry and proverbs in their written format are the results of an ancient oratory practice. This oral communication served as a vehicle to enrich, educate, and enable the African to be in harmony with self, family, community, and the Creator.

Selected Bibliography

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