

Documenting Waarali Orature¹: Some Insights

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Abstract

Oral tradition is quite rich and varied in Waarali community. For centuries together pre-literate Waarali people have transmitted ritual texts, songs, riddles, myths, legends from one generation to the next successfully. Though the present generation of Waaralis is acquainted with writing and print, the older generation of Waarlis retains much of 'primary orality'- which in Walter J. Ong's words is "the orality of a culture totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print ...by contrast with the 'secondary orality' of present day high technology culture, in which a new orality is sustained by telephone, radio, television and other electronic devices that depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print."² However, there remains a lingering danger of rapid socioeconomic changes exerting a pressure on this small community of Waaralis to assimilate to a more dominant way of life thereby eroding their expressive uniqueness. In the light of these facts, the present paper endeavours to study the theoretical implications for the textualization and documentation of Waarali orature.

Key Words:

1. Orature :

At the outset, it must be noted that literature and orature differ in certain respects. That is why the Ugandan scholar Pio Zirimu preferred the term 'orature' to 'oral literature' which seemed to be a contradiction in terms to him. The scripted material or text is literature (from the Latin root *Littera* meaning 'letter'- both an alphabetical character and an epistle) but orature is a verbal artefact placed in a social context or a live setting and is mostly performance-based.

Renowned scholar Ruth Finnegan³ propounds that the difference between literature and orature is more of degree. In her view, Aristotle, in *Poetics* extolled the tragedy over the epic as it incorporated spectacle and music and was more performance-based. Finnegan also states further that the words *wortkunst* (German term meaning word

arts) and *slovesnost* (Russian term derived from *slovo* -i.e. word) -used by Wellek and Warren in their ' Theory of Literature'- with their emphasis on 'word' rather than 'letter', approximate the notion of orature.

However, the fact remains that in orature auditory and sometimes visual components supplement verbal elements against a social backdrop. Oral texts follow local cultural conventions and are normally occasion-driven. Some of the distinguishing characteristics of such oral-aural texts are as follows:

^{1.1} **Holistic:** The primary and distinctive feature of orality is that it is holistic. In it various elements such as song, discourse, story, drama performance. etc. intermingle seamlessly. In Pitika Ntuli's words: "Orature is more than the fusion of all art forms. It is the conception and reality of a total view of life. It is the

capsule of feeling, thinking, imagination, taste and hearing. It is the flow of a creative spirit”⁴

1.2 Performance-driven: Another important feature of orature is that it is performance-driven. Its transmission and actual delivery or presentation contribute richly to its aesthetic experience. It has a theatrical element as it is mostly complemented by action. Apart from verbal component other elements such as gestures, mime, dance, musical accompaniment, costumes, audience participation are inseparably linked with orature.

1.3. Performer-centric: Moreover, the performer’s role is of pivotal and central importance in orature. He needs to maintain equilibrium between the inherited tradition and imaginative creativity. The dexterity or lack of expertise of the performer greatly impacts the quality and the texture of the composition. It also influences audience reception, response and reaction. In orature, thus, the performer is an integral part of the presentation.

1.4 Embedded in a social context: Orature is generally functional and occasional - i.e. it serves a particular function on a particular occasion. Most of the oral texts are linked with a particular ceremony, festival or social occasion. They are directed at a particular audience and deploy local imagery and flora and fauna.

1.5 Fluid, variable and extempore: If fixity is a hallmark of written literature, orature is characterised by fluidity, variability and extemporaneousness. Oral texts are perpetually subject to modification. They vary from

artist to artist and occasion to occasion. Plot and theme are regularly tailored and adapted according to the need of the prevailing circumstances. Sometimes there are improvisations triggered by forgetfulness or modifications as a response to a topical situation. No wonder, there are numerous versions of Ramayana and variant ‘*pathbhedas*’ of Sanskrit *subhashitas*

1.6 Transient: Orature tends to be evanescent and ephemeral and has a short life-span.

1.7. Simple: Oral texts need to be memory-friendly and generally incorporate mono or bisyllabic lexical items and simple syntactic structures. Although there are many complex and elaborate oral texts they are an exception and not a rule.

Waarali Orature:

All the foregoing characteristics of orature are also applicable to Waarali oral texts. Waarali songs too are performance-based, performer-centric and occasion-driven. They comprise an integral and inseparable feature of some important Waarali rituals connected with agriculture, marriage and funeral ceremonies. In Waaralis a *dhavaleri* is a wedding-singer who recites various songs during the marriage while a *kaamadi* sings songs pertaining to a death anniversary. The ritual songs at the time of Naaran Dev ceremony are usually sung by a *Bhagat*. Apart from the *Bhagat*, Waarali young men and women spend the night dancing and singing, as a part of the Naaran Dev ceremony. The songs of these young men and women, do not necessarily pertain to the occasion and may not extol the virtues of Naarandev. These songs at times involve mythological stories and fancifully embody Waarali

ideas and beliefs. Since Waaralis are animistic nature-worshippers, their songs allude to various nature Gods like *Naarandev* (Sun God), *Kansari maata* (Goddess of corn), *Vaaghyaa* (Tiger God) among others. For instance,

Ee sabhaa konhaachi ra?
Divaa laavlaa lonyaachaa ra
Sabha basil sonyaachi ra
Ee sabhaa konhaachi ra?
Hirobaa devaachi ra.
Maanze Himaayu devichi ra
Baai Chedobaa devaachi ra
Maazyaa Barambhu devaachi ra
*Bai Naraanu devaachi ra*⁵
(Translation⁶:

Whose assembly is this?
A lamp of butter is lit
This gilded assembly
Whose assembly is this?
God Hirobaa's assembly is this
My Goddess Himaai's assembly is this
God Chedobaa's assembly is this
God Barambha's assembly is this
God Naaran's assembly is this)

The abovementioned Waarali song is quite short and simple. Apart from the internal half-rhyme of “ lonyaachaa”(of butter) and “sonyaachi” (of gold/gilded) there is not much poetic embellishment. The last five lines have a mechanically repetitive and parallel syntactic pattern.

A majority of the Waarali songs, like the aforementioned song are not ornate. They are simple in construction and contain four to five words in a line. Words are either elided, truncated or lengthened to maintain the rhythm.

In Waarali marriage songs *dhavaleri* , the chief singer, is accompanied by two other women who either repeat the same line or make an elongated ‘O’ sound. The ritual

songs sung by *dhavaleri* are accorded more value and respect by the Waaralis than the ones sung by women in general. Most of these marriage songs aim at propitiation of various Waarali Gods. For instance, in the following marriage song some of the Waarali deities are invoked to bless the occasion :

Jaa bolaav konyaa devaa
Jaa bolaav Kanasari Maataa
Kanasari Maataa baskaai ghodaa
Tumhi yaave mandapa daaraa
Lagnaachyaa zaalyaa velaa
Lagin ghatakaa chadhaayaa zaalyaa
Jaa bolaav Dharatari Maataa
Tumhi yaave mandapa daaraa
Lagnaachyaa zaalyaa velaa
Jaa bolaaav Kansari baal
Tumhi basaave jaambe ghodaa
Tumhi yaave mandapa daaraa
Lagnaachyaa zaalyaa velaa
Jaa bolaav Baramha devaa
Baramha devaa baskaai ghodaa
Tumhi yaave mandapa daaraa
Baamhan basalaa jaambe ghodaa
Tyaane ghetalaa pothyaachaa bhaaraa
Tyaane ghetalaa kalasa taambyaa
Baamhan aalaa maandavaa khaali
Ghodaa baandhalaa maandavaa khaali
Baamhan basalaa mandapa daaraa
Tyaane ughadala pothyaachaa bhaaraa
Bahman vaachi pothyaachaa bhaaraa
Malya maasaa kolambi kosaa
Kaali gaanthi paandhari vaati
Bamhan bola saavdhaan

(Translation:

Go and call one of the gods
Go and call Mother Kanasari
Mother Kanasari is seated on a steed
Kindly come to the canopied wedding door
It is time for the wedding
The wedding hour is approaching

Go and call Mother Dharatari
Kindly come to the canopied wedding door
It is time for the wedding
Go and call the child of Mother Kansari
Kindly ride the purple steed
Kindly come to the canopied wedding door
It is time for the wedding
Go and call God Brahma
God Brahma is seated on a steed
Kindly come to the canopied wedding door
The Brahman has sat on a purple steed
He carries a bundle of holy books
He carries a copper water-vessel
The Brahman has entered the canopy
He has tethered his horse near the canopy
The Brahman has sat inside the canopy
He has unbundled his holy books
The Brahman recites from his stock of books
The *malya* fish, the skin of the prawn
The black beads and the white bowl
The Brahman says- 'Be ready')

As in most of the Waarali songs, in the foregoing song too, some lines such as "Tumhi yaave mandapa daaraa(Kindly come to the canopied wedding door) act as refrains and are repeated and sung in chorus. The second half of the song has a narrative element. Even though the song refers to a 'lugin ghataka' and 'baamhan', they do not appear in a typical Waarali marriage. Thus the song seems to be influenced more by Hindu customs.

Like most of the Waarali songs, the above song too is simple, prosaic and repetitive in nature without much poetic skill. However, in some Waarali

songs one does come across flights of poetic imagination. For instance the following Waarali couplet is highly metaphorical :

Maanzaa ge jaanvaay, punavechaa chaandu

Maanzi ge sunas, daarichi tulas

(Translation:

My son-in-law is the moon of the full-moon-day

My daughter in law is the holy basil in the yard)

Another poetic Waarali song runs as follows:

Dongaraachyaa kelaneela kunvar kaanda phulaya

Nagaraachyaa kelaneela kunvar kaanda phulaya

Ten ge phulaanche chaandanaa ge padaya

Ten ge chaandanaatu Kaanu deva khelaya

Ten ge chaandanaatu Naaran deva chaalaya.

(Translation:

On the edges of the hill the flowers have blossomed

On the edges of the town the flowers have blossomed

From the flowers comes the moonshine
In this moon-shine God Kaanu is playing

In this moon-shine God Naaran is walking.)

As on the outskirts of a village, the moon rises over the hill, a Waarali poet compares this waxing moon to a blossoming flower and imagines that out of the blossoming moon comes the moon-shine. The song does not directly employ the word 'moon' at all; it merely uses the word ' chaandana' (moonshine) and is highly poetic. Another

poetic yet philosophical song goes as follows:

Bolataa chaalataa gohaachaa marana
Bharela gaadi jaay ulathoona
Paathichaa bhaava jaabaana maaraavaa
Bolataa chaalataa bhaarjaayachaa marana
Bhaarajaay daadu ra mahana rahela
Eka vela yechi maranaachi yela
Goha daadu ra zaadaavar chadhalaa
Haata paanha yaacha jay nisataana
Laakhi chikayaa jaaya taavaana
Jiryaachi kaadi geli sukun
Velichaa vaansaa nelaa khuduna
Bhaajichaa maadaa gelaa komuna
Tashi ra kaayaa geli komuna
Punavechaa chaandu gelaa maavaluna
Kelichaa khaamba daadu gelaa dhaluna
Kaachaa ghadaa gela futuna
Kaachyaa ghadyaachaa kaanhi tari deesa
Kaayechaa daadu naahi kaanhi deesa.

(Translation:

While talking and walking a husband dies
A loaded cart turns turtle
One's younger brother is killed by one's harsh tongue
While talking and walking a wife dies
A woman conceives and undergoes labour pangs
It is the time of death
A man climbs up a tree
His hands and feet slip off
Lac-dye melts a way
The cumin-stick goes dry
A creeper is uprooted
A vegetable shrivels up
So does the body wither
The full moon sets
A plantain stalk dies
An unbaked pitcher breaks

An earthen pitcher at least lasts for a few days

The human body does not last those many days)

The foregoing song very poetically brings home the inevitability of death. The image of the earthen pot is apt and there is a play on words 'kaachyaa (unbaked) and 'kaayachaa' (body).

In Waaralis the *kaaj* i.e. death ceremony is conducted by the *Kaamadi* who sings death songs throughout the night to the accompaniment of musical instruments. The *Kaamadi* himself beats a handy drum while his assistants play on cymbals. At the end of each song the *Kaamadi* shouts the name of the deceased, whose anniversary is performed.

Apart from songs related to rituals of marriage, death and Naaran Dev ceremony, another oral text embedded in Waarali rituals is the story of *Kansari Maata* (Mother Corn). As agriculturists, Waaralis value and respect corn which is deified as *Kansari Maata*. During the harvest, on a threshing floor, the story of corn is narrated at night. Any Waarali man is allowed to narrate the story to the people gathered. Before the commencement of the narration, red-lead is applied to the forehead of the narrator and a coconut is placed before him. The man on whose threshing floor, the story is to be narrated, waves a lamp to the narrator. The storyteller narrates the story while playing on *ghaangali*- a crude musical instrument made of two dried and hollowed gourds. The narrator places *ghaangali* on his thighs and plucks the wires to create a musical sound. He simultaneously plays *ghaangali* and narrates the story in prose. The narrator's musical tone and pauses

give a semblance of song to the narration which dwells at length on the genesis of the universe and the birth of corn. Thus music and narration intermingle in the story of corn. Similar fusion of songs and dance is noticeable during the ceremony of propitiation of Naaran Dev. A lamp is lit in the middle and a circle is formed round it. The youngsters dance in circle to the accompaniment of songs. The two chief-dancers sing a line of a song that is repeated in chorus by the rest. Thus the dancing and singing go together. Sometimes women actively participate in the dance and sometimes merely sit aside repeating the lines recited first by the male dancers. Unlike the Diwali and Shimgaa dances these dances are not accompanied by any musical instruments. The dancers merely clap with both hands bending down at each step as they move in a circle.

3. The Textualization and^{vi} Documentation of Waarali Orature:

3.1 Multi-media book⁷:

All the foregoing analysis of Waarali orature makes it amply clear that Waarali oral texts are holistic, performance-driven, performer-centric and mostly embedded in social occasions. As a result mere scripting of these texts tends to be reductive. Moreover, since Waarali orature is extemporaneous, variable and fluid there is an unavailability of a master-text. Therefore, these vibrant traditions of Waaralis should be video-shot to incorporate the performance aspect of the oral text. To counter the possibility of shy Waaralis not opening up in front of strangers, Waarali youth should be trained to wield a video camera and their assistance should be sought in collecting

oral texts. This video content garnered by Waarali youth themselves can then be edited in the form of a multimedia book.

3.2 Paremiography:

If a long-term project like the one above seems financially unfeasible a project of the collection of Waarali proverbs can be undertaken which can be published in a book form. Waarali proverbs such as following can be documented.

- i) *An tay paraan* (Food is life.)
- ii) *Kanaa bagar dhan naahi* (There is no wealth without corn.)
- iii) *Jethe dhani tethe raani* (Where the husband, there the wife.)
- iv) *Jinaali ta baal naahi ta kaal* (If the labour is safe, then a baby or else death.)
- v) *Chitaa naahi jaay ritaa* (A leopard will never go without a prey.)

Maar Maasali naa pe soor, paani aahe ghaanaa door (Catch fish and drink toddy as the rains are far away.)

Such Waarali proverbs are pithy and throw floods of light on Waarali life and world-view. Their collection is a worthwhile exercise.

3.3 Lexicography: Similarly, a project on Waarali lexicography can also be undertaken to facilitate the translation of Waarali oral texts in other languages.

To conclude it can be stated that Waarali orature is quite vibrant, fluid, holistic and performance-driven. However in the wake of rapid socio-economic changes it faces a danger of getting extinct and needs to be preserved in a form that keeps its performance aspect and holistic nature relatively intact.

Notes and References:

1. The term 'orature' is used throughout the paper as an alternative to 'oral literature'.
2. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge,2002), p.11
3. Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp 15-20
4. Pitika Ntuli, ' Orature: A Self Portrait' in Owusu Kwesi ed. *Storms of the Heart: An Anthology of Black Arts and Culture* (London: Camden Press, 1988), p.215
5. The Waarali songs and proverbs that appear in this paper are taken from a PDF copy of K.J Save's 'The Waralis' available at http://www.yashada.org/pdfs/Merg_Warli_1.pdf
6. All translations that appear in this paper are mine.
7. By multimedia book, I mean an audio-visual book.