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ON THE DEMISE OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL ORAL LITERATURE. SUR L'EXTINCTION DE LA LITTÉRATURE ORALE TRADITIONNELLE AFRICAINE

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Abstract

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This article aims at analysing the true causes of the demise of African oral traditional literature in general, and that of Zarma oral literature in particular. This article contends that contrary to the allegations of some scholars—according to which Islam is the cause of the death of oral literature in Africa—Islam does not condemn or prohibit oral literature across the board; it is, indeed, good to note that in its early history, Islam was conspicuously a religion built upon orality. The Holy Book of Islam—The Qur'an—itself was revealed orally before being written down. How, then, can anyone contend that Islam indiscriminately condemns oral literature? Is Islam, then, the true cause of the demise of African literature, or more specifically, is it the cause of the obsolescence of the Songhay-Zarma oral literature? What then are the real causes of this demise? To answer these questions, we adopt a hermeneutic approach as a theoretical framework. The article concludes that the causes of the demise of African oral literature are manifold—Islam playing but a very marginal role in this.

Keywords: African, Literature, Islam, Demise, Literature.

Introduction

Rightly or wrongly the religion of Islam is held to be the main cause of the demise of Songhay-Zarma oral literature. But broadly speaking, orality has an incredibly special place in this religion. The revelation of the Qur'an to Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) orally by Allah (God), before being written down by mankind, is a real proof of that place. The Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) himself had poets—with Hassan Ibn Thabit, Ka'ab Ibn Malik, and Abd-Allah Ibn Rawaahah being the most famous therefrom. The prophet once said regarding these men: "Neither the poetry of Hassan bin Thabit nor [that of] Ka'ab bin Malik nor [that of] Abdulla bin Abi Rawaha is poetry, but it is wisdom" (Hawatmeh, 2017).

Literature Review

On the Demise of Songhay-Zarma Oral literature

Among the scholars who hold that Islam is the root cause of the demise of Songhay-Zarma oral literature, Sandra Bornand is the first whose statements the authors of this article came across (to be more precise, that co-author Karim M.K. came across). Bornand contends that: Suite à l'influence grandissante de l'islam et à l'arrivée du mouvement *izala* venant du Nord Nigeria, des imams et marabouts ont commencé à disqualifier certains genres littéraires en se basant sur des critères dits « religieux », cherchant par ce biais à en interdire la pratique. Ainsi des genres comme le conte ou le proverbe de pileuse peuvent être caractérisés comme relevant du péché du fait de sa nature mensongère pour le premier, de sa nature conflictuelle pour le second. *Il est intéressant de relever que la plupart des discours bannis relèvent de la littérature orale féminine.* Or les arguments des *izala* sont de plus en plus repris dans la société et les femmes zarma renoncent toujours plus, par exemple, à énoncer des proverbes en pilant de peur d'aller en enfer. On se rapproche donc d'une dichotomie ou tout ce qui n'est pas agréé par la religion, ou plus

exactement les marabouts présents dans le village ou dans le canton, *est banni.* (Bornand, 2020, p. 7). In an RFI broadcast titled "Grand Reportage: Dialba et Sandra, ou la Parole Zarma Sauvée" (Sadou & Tulet, 2013), Bornand makes similar remarks. The following are the implications of her combined statements (made in both the foregoing quote and the RFI broadcast): (I) Islam was weak aforetime, but now it is growing stronger and it is due to this that oral literature comes under threat therefrom; (II) traditional or puritan Islam (*izala*) also poses real danger to oral literature; (III) Islam abhors oral literature sub-genres such as the proverbs of the she-grinders because they lead to conflicts among women, for they insult and lampoon one another through these special types of proverbs; (IV) this religion also abhors tales because they are made up, and hence are lies; (V) since women excel in these genres, banishing them is tantamount to oppressing women; (VI) since people are adhering to the arguments of the *izala*, and are circulating these arguments through the society, women are more and more influenced by these and they willingly abandon those oral literature sub-genres, fearing that they might go to hell; and (VII) this leads to a situation where whatever the religion abhors is not practiced by the people and, contrarywise, whatever it condones is upheld by all the people so much so that this leads to the demise of oral literature in the Songhay-Zarma culture. Before proceeding, it is good to give some information about the proverbs of the she-grinders; such proverbs are called *Duru-ka-yaasay* in Songhay-Zarma, which literally means, "grind-and-utter-proverbs." These are proverbs that women narrate while they grind or crush cereals in mortars when they do not have access to mills, or when they prefer to do such a work manually. Amadou Saïbou Adamou has this to say about these proverbs: The poetry of grinders is a type of outlet through which women expose the

misfortunes as well as the good fortunes that they go through in their households and in their lives. (2008, p. 376; our translation). Going back to Bornand's submission that Islam causes the death of oral literature, it is our contention that nothing is further from the truth; indeed, Bornand depicts the people as angels who always obey the religious injunctions. We shall come back to this later. But, for the time being, the question arises, is Islam the only cause, or the most important cause, of the destruction of oral literature among the Africans in general, and the Songhay-Zarma in particular? Before trying to answer these questions, we need to have some knowledge about the craft of griots in Niger, and about the functions that they fulfil (or fulfilled) in their communities: [...] the *jesere* [Songhay-Zarma bards, griots, historians, genealogists, etc.] memorize the genealogies of important families, recite the stories of the Songhai, and tell the exploits of famous ancestors through epic poetry [...] Their chief function [...] is praise-singing, chanting the praises of free-born people and exhorting them to bravery and good deeds [...] In this role, they enhance the reputation and exalt the values of the *burcin* [...] They also perform at weddings, naming ceremonies, and festivals, sometimes acting as masters of ceremony on these occasions (DeValve, 2018, p. 172-175). These are statements from John R. DeValve, an American scholar who has lived in Niger for more than 20 years, and who has written a doctoral dissertation on Songhay-Zarma musicology. In a similar vein, Oumarou & Abdou Moumouni clarify that: In the Songhay-Zarma culture [...] the griot class constitutes the memory of the people through the preservation and perpetuation of the traditions and cultures of the region. The griots are both historiographers and genealogists of the community's socio-cultural practices. But in this great court of traditionalists and holders of ancestral knowledge, there is a group that stands out

from the rest, with poetry as its anchor and rhetorical foundation. In this category, Gawlo stands out, as a bard from the noble class of society. (Oumarou & Abdou Moumouni, 2023, pp. 239-240)

Exploration of Other Causes of the Demise of Oral Literature

Frank Ikeji, an author who is more honest and impartial than Bornand, says that the reasons for the "near obsolescence" of African oral literature "are varied and quite intimidating." (s. d., p. 4) What, then, are these reasons?

Colonialism (and Christianity)

Ikeji goes on to show that it is the "coming of the Whiteman to Africa as a missionary and colonial master" that is the main cause of the demise of African traditional oral literature, for it led to 'one thing', which is 'the uprooting of our culture' (s. d., p. 4). This is so because the early colonial masters and missionaries abhorred everything African, including the culture and the oral literature. This led to a colonial mentality that Ikeji sums up as: "cherish everything western and condemn everything African." (s. d., p. 4) For Ngugi, one "of the most important aspects of our pre-colonial literature was the oral tradition"; indeed, in a context where the overwhelming majority of African languages were not 'reduced to writing', it goes without saying that this oral tradition was utterly significant, so much so that it was the most utilized medium "by the anti-colonial forces to make statements of resistance." (1993b, p. 106) One of the best examples of the involvement of colonial masters in the destruction of the cultural heritage of Africa is given below by Ngugi: Among the Agikuyu of Kenya there used to be a Gikuyu poetry festival, or shall I say, competition, which drew large crowds. The best poets of the various regions would meet in the arena, like in a battle, and compete with words and instant compositions. These poets had even developed a form of hieroglyphics which they kept to themselves.

This kind of festival was killed by the British for they did not want crowds of people meeting and practicing things that they, in the colonial administration, could not understand. (1993a, p. 37).

Western-Style African Education & Western Culture

As per A.O. Dasylva, "the intervention of the imperialist West and the subsequent *imposition of its rather alien educational system and policies* were largely responsible for cultural disorientation" (2007, p. 329), current and subsequent emphases added). For Al-Amine Mazrui, "*Under the initial impact of the English language and its detribalizing effect, African nationalism therefore turned away from tribal songs.*" (1968, p. 296) Sikiru Adeyemi Ogundokun, for his part, argues that it is the "*emphasis on written documents and Western education* [that] marked the beginning of the gradual erosion and disappearance of the use of oral literature in most African communities, if not all." (2015, p. 3). As for Ikeji, he holds that thanks to formal education, literacy, and printed books, it is possible to preserve historical events as well as all other forms of cultural heritage, through writing, and this makes oral literature, insofar as it is about preserving and transmitting heritage, completely obsolete in the minds of the Africans; on this showing, it is only natural that oral literature falls into irrelevance (s. d., p. 4). Moreover, given the fact that modern forms of education are systematized, the acquisition of knowledge "take[s] away the young ... from home" and, consequently, "they are no longer available at home to participate in many of the traditional activities" involving oral literature in one way or another (s. d., p. 4). Yet another thing to be kept in mind is that, due to a paradigm shift from the traditional African worldview to the Western one, "The communal spirit of traditional attitudes which hitherto permeated the African culture is fast eroding", for it is clear for anybody who has eyes to see, that nowadays "the African is

more individualistic"; likewise, "materialism has become the order of the day"; consequentially, the pursuit of "money and other material things has forced people to abandon traditional activities and profession[s] which are not materially rewarding, thus nobody takes time off to tell stories or sing ... traditional songs" (s. d., p. 5). Another factor which has certain impact on African traditional oral literature, is the fact that traditional oral artists "were once attached to noble patrons from whom they derived their sustenance"; since colonial masters abolished the class system and introduced "formal education, their patrons have lost much of their wealth and influence" (DeValve, 2018, p. 230–231); as a result, they could no longer sustain those oral artists and griots. Griots, then, had to gradually abandon their verbal artistry to work just like the other members of the community to feed themselves and their families. According to Mazrui, in the mentality of the Westerner, "song and dance are domains of leisure"; therefore, when they established educational systems in Africa, those institutions of learning "have treated African song and dance as if they were similarly divorced from work and productivity" (1975, p. 197). Mazrui remarks that in Western countries, people care more about recession, and inflation than they do about oral literature, which is only natural given the fact that for them literature is for leisure. Contrariwise, in the African realm, what people care about are droughts and floods, and when famine strikes, "there is always the danger of bitter jealousies and acrimony as families compete for meager resources." (1975, p. 197) Owing to this situation, Africans need oral literature, as "Songs foster economic solidarity when the need to share what is available is compelling." (1975, p. 197) Songs also help them preserve their shared identity. Apart from such functions, oral literature through songs and proverbs, enables young people "to memorize lessons

of social commitment and service and to remember with awe the hazards of disloyalty to kinsmen and ancestors." (1975, p. 197).

Urbanization

According to Enongene Mirabeau Sone, it is the important cultural and social disruption that Africa has gone through and continues to go through, that led to the gradual demise of African culture and oral literature (2018, p. 16). He goes on to declare, in no uncertain terms, that "One of the consequences of this change is the rapid Westernization of the population, which is seriously affecting the situation of oral literature." (2018, p. 16) This manifests itself in the fact that gradual numbers of rural Africans are migrating from their homogenous areas that favor the development of oral literature to more urbanized towns that are not only heterogeneous but also pose serious threats to oral literature. Having been removed from their natural settings, these people can no longer participate in the creation and sharing of oral literature and, in consequence, oral literature dies out in these rural villages and fails to blossom in the urbanized towns wherein all these people congregate (Ikeji, s. d., p. 4).

Modern Technology & Entertainment

Ogundokun agrees with Ikeji when he indicated that printed books contribute to the destruction of oral literature; Ogundokun, hence, sustains that "the print technology, the new media, and the internet have adversely affected African culture." (2015, p. 3) Other scholars have made similar claims; for instance, Lawali maintains that "the rapid technological development and globalization ... constitute a real menace to the traditional oral songs." (2021, p. 240) For Sone, "other forms of media entertainment ... not only compete with oral literature but dominate it. ... it follows logically that oral literature as a popular form of entertainment is gradually falling into decline." (2018, p. 16) In a similar vein, Okoh poses the following issues: Can oral literature, which generally

consists of materials that are not only several generations old but are also transmitted by word of mouth, have any relevance in a modern age that is everywhere visibly assaulted by enormous scientific and technological forces? Do such forms as myths, tales, legends, proverbs, riddles, and oral songs fit into such an age? Do such forms have a message, relevance, or significance for a modern, highly technologized age? (Sone, 2015, p. 9). Ikeji answers Okoh by stating that computers are the greatest threats that oral literature faces; due to computers, people, especially the young among them, no longer care for traditional forms of entertainment such as oral literature and its sub-genres; rather, they prefer to browse the web or to stream videos and movies over the internet; they can do so "even all day and all night." (s. d., p. 5). Another threat that oral literature faces is video games, according to Isidore Okpewho: "Video games entertain a far larger portion of the population than would care to go and watch oral performances" (2007b, p. 10). In the ensuing quote, Okpewho suggests that, apart from the modern forms of entertainment, the impoverishment of Africans made them turn away from traditional culture and, quite naturally, from oral literature also: For one thing, the invasion of more modern forms of communication and entertainment—the FM radio, TV, the internet, and the many portable forms of telecommunications that can sustain conversation for extended periods of leisure time—have considerably reduced the appeal of performances that brought families and communities together in open-air and community-hall interactions. For another thing—and perhaps more seriously—the steady decline (or should I say collapse?) of the social, political, and economic welfare in many an African nation has somewhat diminished our people's commitment to traditions that once fitted so well into their scale of values. (2009, p. 110).

Modern Economy and Job Market

Traditional activities such as agriculture, and Ikeji sustains, did not require people to travel long distances, or to move to remote locations; contrarywise, modern job markets force people to leave their hometowns, in pursuit of a living. Since they did not have to travel long distances, in traditional African settings, people had enough spare time to participate in oral literature performances (s. d., p. 5).

Arrogance & Negative Stereotypes

DeValve is right to the point when he indicates that one of the reasons why oral literature is on the decline, is the fact that descendants of griots and other oral artists refuse to take up the traditional lines of activity of their fathers because they contend that such activities are no longer respected, as they are associated "with the lower classes, former slaves, and 'animists'" (2018, p. 141). In a TV5-Monde news report titled "Le Niger Pleure Le Grand Griot Zarma Djibo Badjé", the son of Djibo Badjé, the last Songhay-Zarma master-griot (who passed away in 2018) makes similar remarks unto the ones reported by DeValve: You know, it is not easy, especially with this generation, whenever you are seen doing this [that is, practicing the craft of a griot], you are seen as, I do not know, as a slave, or as ... People insult you ... Aforetime, when you are a griot, at the very least, great respect was shown to you (TV5MONDE, 2018, our translation). We contend that only arrogance leads such people to adopt such lines of reasoning. First, griots in the Songhay-Zarma culture are not slaves, they are in a position that is between the nobles and the slaves; second all, if one's father is not a noble, and one takes up his line of work, and people qualify one as a descendant of a slave, have they lied? Refusing to inherit the line of activity of one's father, does it change one's status? All the descendants of griots, who were schooled, abandoned the traditional activities of their forefathers to pursue Western-style careers.

The Rise of Fake Jesere

DeValve reports that these days, economic hardship and the craving for riches, have pushed several free-born Songhay people into taking on the role of griots, especially in urbanized towns; DeValve calls them 'fake *jesere*', and goes on to state that, since they did not inherit the craft from their fathers, they sometimes do not know the genealogies of the Songhay people and their stories. In consequence, these 'fake *jesere*' give "a bad name" to the real griots and they "are often confused with them" (2018, p. 172-175). The population sees them "as parasites, beggars, public entertainers, liars, flatterers, and sycophants"; quite to the contrary, the true *desire* is a historian, a genealogist, and an entertainer, who is "still highly valued for his contributions to society", but such a griot "has largely disappeared [and] ... has been supplanted by a lazy, free-spirited, disrespectful, persistent 'panhandler' without shame or inhibitions"; and, unfortunately, owing to the proliferation of these fake griots, "the true profession gets belittled and driven underground." (2018, p. 172-175)

Discussion

Countering Bornand's Arguments

Oral Literature is Used in Islamic Sermons

Thomas Hale reports an anecdote recounted by Ibn Battuta, which goes as follows: in festival days, griots and poets gather in the palace of the king and stand before him, while reciting poetry, which is a form of Islamic sermon through which they admonish the king to do good deeds; Ibn Battuta concludes by saying: "I was informed that this performance is old amongst them; they continued it from before Islam." (Quoted in Hale, 1990, p. 37) Likewise, Fatoumata Mounkaïla enlightens that when the Tilwâti, the anthem of the Zarma, the most ritualized form of *The Epic of Zabarkane*—which is only narrated on particularly solemn occasions—is performed, "elders or *marabouts* sometimes contribute additional information or correct

details in the various episodes, but they always do so in the form of a chronicle; only the djassarés sing or declaim the epic itself." (1993, p. 9) With the strength of these arguments, we pose the following question: how can anyone pretend that Islam destroys oral literature in Niger when we see oral literature being used for the benefit of Islam or when we see Islamic clerics contributing to the performance of the Tilwâti?

Islam Does not Outrightly Condemn Oral Literature.

Speaking of poets, Allah says, in the Glorious Qur'an:

As for the poets, [only] the erring follow them

See you not that they speak about every subject (praising people—right or wrong) in their poetry?

And that they say what they do not do.

Except those who believe (in the Oneness of Allah—Islamic Monotheism)

And do righteous deeds,

And remember Allah much,

And vindicate themselves after they have been wronged.

[by replying in poetry to the unjust poetry which the pagan poets utter against the Muslims].

And those who do wrong will come to know by what overturning they will be overturned.

(Qur'an, 26: 224-227; *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur'ân in the English Language*, 2007, p. 503)

The Qur'an has its specific ways of dealing with issues, presenting facts, disproving false claims, and enlightening the reader. In the case at hand, the Qur'an first condemns, outrightly so, all poets, by stating that 'As for the poets, [only] the erring follow them', it is only those people who are themselves deviants that follow poets, that listen to them, that admire their compositions, and that are thereby influenced by their rumblings. Then the Qur'an goes on to substantiate its claims

by indicating that poets 'speak about every subject in their poetry', and that 'they say what they do not do'. We hereby learn that it is not appropriate for a poet to speak about every subject, without any restraint, any bashfulness, and any regard for the sacredness of some subjects, or for the feelings of decent people who might hear their compositions. We also learn that they pretend to do such good that they never do; hence they are arrogant, they project a false image of themselves, and they urge people to do that which they, themselves, do not do. The tradition tells us that when the first set of verses, discussed above, were revealed, the poets of the prophet were anxious; they felt that Allah had prohibited any form of poetry; besides, they wondered whether they had been indulging in a sinful activity for all this time (before the revelation of the verses) and whether they acquired sins, and incurred the wrath of Allah. The poets were in such a state of confusion when Allah the Highest, to ease their pain, clarified the matter for them, and approve of their craft, revealed the verses: "Except those who believe, and do righteous deeds, and remember Allah much, and reply to the unjust poetry." With this verse, we learn that any form of poetry, or oral literature, wherein the rules of Islam are upheld, becomes *halal*, that is, authorized. First and foremost, the verse shows Muslims that, whether one is a poet or not, the most important thing is to hold to the tenets of Islam (because even the forms of literature that are prohibited in Islam *only* constitute *minor sins* in this religion). The second thing in order of importance is that the person ought to do good deeds—for, good deeds erase bad deeds, as per this verse of the Qur'an: 'And establish prayer at the two ends of the day and the approach of the night. Indeed, good deeds do away with misdeeds. That is a reminder for those who remember.' (Qur'an 11:114; Al-Mehri, 2010, p. 189)—so, even if the person engages in sinful versions of oral literature, by

the good deeds that the person accomplishes, those sins would be erased by the good deeds. Most of all, the verses show that poetry could even be used to defend Islam, God, and His messengers and prophets. Let us not forget that, back then, poetry was the media through which information was spread, memorized, and preserved. The traditional history as well as the daily history of any people circulated through oral poetry, and ultimately, through the various oral traditions. On this showing, enemies of Islam composed poems through which they vilified Allah, His messenger, and the Muslim community; it was, hence, the role of Muslim poets, to respond in kind, to disgrace those enemies by exposing the shameful deeds of their ancestors, by attacking the paternal line of descent of any enemy who is known to be an illegitimate person born out of wedlock, etc. Allah, then, shows that poets who are so inclined, to defend the honor of Islam, of the prophet, of the Muslims, are good poets, whose activity carries His stamp of approval, and who will be requitted with the best possible requital, in this life, and in the hereafter. In this connection, Tafsir ibn Kathir reports that in ***Sahih al-Bukhary***: The Messenger of Allah said to Hassan: Ridicule them in verse. Or he said: «Ridicule them in verse, and [angel] Jibril is with you [inspiring you, and protecting you by the permission of Allah]. Imam Ahmad recorded that Ka'b bin Malik said to the Prophet: «Allah has revealed what He revealed about the poets [hence I should quit poetry]. » The Messenger of Allah said: «The believer wages Jihad with his sword and with his tongue, By the One in Whose Hand is my soul, it is as if you are attacking them with arrows [when you attack them in your poetry; so, do not quit]. » (Ibn Kathir, 2000). Subsequently, Hassan disgraced the disbelievers so much so, and praised the Messenger and the Muslims so much so, that the prophet made a supplication for him in these terms: "May Allah protect you against

Hell, Hassan" (Hawatmeh, 2017); and, on another occasion, he even gave him glad tidings of the paradise: "Allah will reward you with Paradise, Hassan" (Hawatmeh, 2017). Within the specific Songhay-Zarma culture, several celebrated oral poets were known to be pious Muslims and knowledgeable scholars. (Oumarou & Abdou Moumouni, 2023, p. 240) ***Colonization and the Destruction of Songhay-Zarma Society***

Sandra Bornand says: Indeed, with the evolution of Zarma society, the training of the jacare has gradually declined so that today there is barely one left who knows the story of the ancestors: Jibo Baje, alias "Jeliba." Aware that he is the last depository of the oral literature of the jacare and that none of his sons would replace him, he has entrusted the author with the mission of preserving and passing on his repertory to other cultures. (2007, p. 149). Thus, do we see that it is the 'evolution of the Zarma society' that led to the abandonment of oral literature, so much so that none of the sons of 'Jeliba' accepts to take on the family craft? If Muslim clerics are responsible for the destruction of oral literature, why is it that Jeliba continued to practice his craft up to his death at over 80 years old? Indeed, other causes must be sought for the demise of oral literature in Niger; it is way too easy to accuse Islam of being the culprit. *It is understandable that those people who are as poorly disposed toward religion as was Nietzsche toward morality—such as Sandra Bornand—see anything religious with a suspicious eye, but these so-called Western intellectuals boast of being impartial and objective; let them, then, show their impartiality and objectivity even in analyzing such things that they abhor, as the religion of Islam for instance. The following quote from the same Bornand is, on this showing, edifying: [...] in former times—before colonization—jacare accompanied chiefs in all their activities and, especially, on the battlefield they incited them to acts of*

bravery. ... they played the role of arbiter in cases of conflict among nobles, as well as a witness among warriors, and they counseled chiefs in their decision-making. *Jasare thus occupied a strategic place in precolonial Zarma society. ... With the arrival of colonists* ... the role of the jacare was lessened along with the political and warrior power of the chiefs, relegated only to the domain of traditional ceremonies: marriages, baptisms, enthronements, and funerals of chiefs. ... *colonization also contributed to the breakdown of the structure of the pre-colonial society as well as its ancestral knowledge.* The *jasare*, formerly under the protection of a chief, was most often then abandoned by that chief, who no longer contributed to his support. Whereas *before colonization the chief was supposed to clothe and feed his jasare, as well as house him and arrange for his marriage*, the *jasare*, for his part, was at the service of nobles that he praised and advised.

Other Authorities Do Not Support Bornand's Contention

As per Harold Scheub, as "Islam began its journey", namely in West Africa, "the inherent adaptability of the oral/literary tradition enabled it to adjust to the various cultures with which it came into contact" with a "disruption [that] was as minimal" as possible (1985, p. 26). He goes on to say that "Islam did not impose itself on the Indigenous forms so much as blend with them" and that "Islam early showed its artistic ability to adapt to African art." (1985, p. 26) Indeed, according to Lewis, Islam even contributed to the development of African art forms: "With the spread of the Arabic language and background among the masses, a vast semi-popular literature appeared, in which the history and legends of Arabia and Islam were worked into connected romances in interspersed prose and verse, suitable for public recitation" (Scheub, 1985, p. 26). Scheub agrees with Lewis and goes on to offer the following

insights: *In West Africa, it was during the rule of Sunjata of the Mali empire (1230-1255) that Islamic poetry flourished.* The tradition was further encouraged by Sunjata's successor, Musa (1312-1335), who founded Timbuktu as a center of Islamic learning. It would reach the peak of its influence in the sixteenth century; several notable Soninke, Fulani, and Berber poets were associated with it. Later, the jihad of Uthman dan Fodio (1754-1817) led to a spread of Islam in the Hausa states, and *Islamic verse forms joined with the indigenous court praise singing.* (1985, p. 27; **emphasis added**). If all these statements are not sufficient to give the lie to Sandra Bornand's accusations against Islam, then here is another one from Scheub: "Islamic literature did not long remain alien to the African artistic experience; it quickly became assimilated into existent poetic traditions, because of the presence in Africa of like forms"; and here goes another one: "Had there been a direct imposition of foreign written forms on African arts, an artificial hybrid would have been the result—short-lived, because it probably would have had no audience." (1985, p. 32)

The Demise of Old Art Forms is Inevitable

Isidore Okpewho says that when he thinks about the demise of African oral literature, he cannot help remembering a statement made by Amadou Hampaté-Bâ, wherein he showed that in Africa, an elderly person is akin to a library and that whenever s/he dies, it is as if the library is set ablaze in its entirety; then Okpewho remarks that: The conflagration has been going on for a long time, *sadly, and there seems little anyone can do about what is, after all, a natural order of things.* African governments, it is true, have taken measures to keep alive the traditions of the past through encouragement and even sponsorship of folk troupes as well as the promotion of periodic festivals where the best folk artists may show their skills. *But the passage of things can never really be arrested;* the best thing about tradition may be, indeed, that it "moves on,"

maintaining its essence even while changing its outer form. (2007a, p. 1). What Okpewho shows in this quote is a form of resignation: indeed, what can one do about a natural process which, in its unfolding, is inevitable? But the future is not as gloomy as it appears; undeniably, "survival, in one form or another, appears to be the welcome fate of various aspects of oral tradition as we know it today." (Okpewho, 2007a, p. 10) Oral literature will die, he continues, sometimes because the venues wherein it is performed, wherein it flourishes and blossoms, are no longer there, and the verbal artists have left those venues in pursuit of a living elsewhere—what is one to do about such a situation? (2007a, p. 11) "Maybe the genre in question is dying out because it was closely integrated into a set of socio-economic relations that have been revolutionized," contends Graham Furniss; and "what if the genre is the public expression of royalty where the monarchy has been overthrown, the performers living on royal patronage ... from a ruler who is no more?" (Okpewho, 2007a, p. 11). As we are closing this section, and before we get to the next one, *we would like to point out that our argument is not that Islam condones every sub-genre of oral literature; rather, we argue that even if Islam does condemn oral literature outrightly (and we do not mean that it does condemn every aspect of it), to what extent is Islam responsible for the demise of this traditional literature?*

Suppose Islam Condemns Oral Literature, to what Extent Do Muslims Obey their Religion?

After quoting Bornand's statements at the beginning of this paper, we stated that we would go back to them later; herein we will deal with them. Bornand seems to believe that Islam simply must prohibit something, and people will obey systematically. Is it so? Islam is accused of having contributed to the demise of oral literature in Africa, but to what extent is Islam responsible for this situation? Is it not that people simply use Islam as a

scapegoat that offers justifications for events over which they do not have any power? Is it not that they so accuse Islam of hiding their failures? To what extent are people so pious that they always obey Islam? The events over which practitioners of oral literature have no power are the following: Western-style educational system, Western civilization; the Westernization of African civilization; modern technology; modern forms of entertainment such as movies, video games, and music; internet, along with printed books; and so forth. These, then, are the real threats to oral literature. Using Islam as a scapegoat for one's failure amounts, on the part of an oral artist, to pretend that he abandoned his craft because of religious considerations while this comes from his failure to draw an audience to his performances—the audience having abandoned him in favor of modern, Western-type, music. Granted, tales are contrived narratives, and Islam abhors and prohibits lies; but, have people abandoned tale-telling and tale-listening in obedience to Islam? If this is the case, why is it that growing numbers of Muslims, even pious students of Islamic studies, engage in movie watching? Granted, during oral performances, men and women freely mix, which is a practice opposed by Islam; but, have people abandoned such performances in obedience to Islam? If this is the case, then why is it that modern musicians draw a considerable audience during their concerts wherein men and women mix freely, and fornication and adultery take place? If people are so pious that they abandon oral literature to uphold the injunctions of Islam, why is it that the broad morality of the society continues to shrink, that fornication and adultery are spreading in the Nigérien society, that bars are opened every day, that most civil servants embezzle the wealth of the country, that almost every person seeks for ways to deceive and betray people to gain money to which they are not entitled rightfully? It follows that, even if Islam were to be held

responsible for the demise of oral literature in Niger, its injunctions cannot account for a tiny percentage of the broad phenomenon wherein oral literature fell into irrelevance. Although we cannot, at this stage, give a credible percentage, we believe that Islam cannot be responsible for more than 1% of the cases where oral literature disappeared or fell into obsolescence. With the strength of the foregoing arguments, we say that it is a bit dishonest to pretend that Puritan (*izala*) Islam condemns oral literature to the point that it leads to its demise; if such a claim, made by Bornand, were true, why is it that new forms of poetry, which Islam approves of, did not flourish and spread in the four corners of Songhayland/Zarmaland? If the people were so pious that they killed the forms of oral literature that Islam disproves, why is it that, in their extraordinary display of faith and religious zeal, they (who turned their backs on prohibited forms of oral literature) did not establish the forms of oral (and written) literature that Islam approves of? The reality is that all forms of oral literature are simply dying out in favor of new forms which, paradoxically so, are outrightly rejected by Islam: here we are speaking of modern music, which is full of curse words, promiscuous language, sexual suggestions, and which is performed to the background of musical instruments—*most of which are downrightly prohibited by Islam!*

Conclusion

Building on everything presented in this article as counter-arguments to Sandra Bornand's contention that Islam led to the demise of oral literature in the Songhay-Zarma culture, we hereby conclude that Islam is not the only cause, nor is it the real or most important cause, of the obsolescence of that literature; rather, some of the true reasons of this demise are colonialism (and Christianity); Western-style African education and Western culture; urbanization, modern technology and entertainment; modern economy and job

market; arrogance and negative stereotypes; the rise of fake Jesere; and the failure of African governments to protect their cultural heritages. Despite all these menaces that oral literature is facing, it still resists and manages to survive somehow. The good news is that these days in Niger, graduate and post-graduate students in the humanities have taken it upon themselves to study oral literature in their master's thesis and doctoral dissertations—some of such students being the two authors of this article.

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