

The Art, the Craft and the Changing Fortunes of the Praise Singer among the Akans of Ghana

¹P.B. Mireku-Gyimah, ²J. Aning and ³K. Opoku-Agyeman

¹Languages Section, University of Mines and Technology (UMaT), Tarkwa, Ghana

²Department of English, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science
and Technology (KNUST), Kumasi, Ghana

³Department of Modern Languages, Kwame Nkrumah University
of Science and Technology (KNUST), Kumasi, Ghana

Abstract: In this paper we aim at exploring the various phases of praise-singing with the view to estimating its status and usefulness in modern day technological society. Knowledge of the present status helps us anticipate what the future holds in store for the noble art. We study the fortunes of praise-singers from ancient to modern times and the factors responsible for the changes in their fortunes. We also analyse the various literary techniques employed by praise-singers to achieve their aim. Our conclusion is that so long as there are human beings who enjoy being praised, there will be praise-singers to blow the horn that will swell heads till wallets are opened. Praise-singers use mostly flattery and sometimes subtle sarcasm embellished with imagery, metaphors and hyperboles, through songs or poetry, to transmit their messages. Every praise-singer survives at the expense of the client who mistakenly considers the praise-singer as a low-class hired labourer.

Key words: Art % Craft % Changing Fortunes % Praise-Singing % Praise-Singer

INTRODUCTION

Praise-singing is as ancient as ancient Greece and as old as the Old Testament. Whilst Greek bards such as Homer sang their kings' praises using the lyre, the luth and other musical instruments in the Middle East, David in his Psalms invites us all to hail our Maker using all available mediums, as illustrated by Psalm 150:

... Praise God in his sanctuary/ Praise him in his mighty heaven
Praise him for his acts of power/ Praise him for his surpassing greatness
Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet/ Praise him with the harp and lyre
Praise him with tambourine and dancing/ Praise him with the strings and flute
Praise him with the clash of cymbals/ Let everything that has breath praise the Lord...
(Holy Bible, NIV "Zondervan" [1])

In the Middle Ages, the best exponents of praise-singing were the troubadours and minstrels who excelled in the art of eulogizing distinguished warriors as well as ladies. Around the same time, the courts of ancient African kings were teeming with experts who dedicated their skills to the glorification of the monarch. They often ended up immortalizing if not deifying their patron. Ancient Ghana and Kanem-Bornu are typical examples. However, in Black Africa, the 19th Century seems to mark the most prosperous era as far as praise-singing is concerned. Most memorable are the examples

Corresponding Author: P.B. Mireku-Gyimah, Languages Section, University of Mines
and Technology (UMaT), Tarkwa, Ghana

of Dahomey, Yoruba, Benin, Ashanti, Mossi and Zulu Kingdoms. In all these secular kingdoms, praise-singing was an inseparable part of royal pageantry. In this paper, we aim at finding answers to the following questions:

- Ⓒ Who is the praise-singer and what are the techniques used in praise-singing?
- Ⓒ What are the current and future statuses of the praise-singer?

The Praise-Singer and The Techniques Used in Praise-Singing: We distinguish two types of praise-singers: the full time “griots” and the part time “free-lance bards” both of whom usually communicate their messages through poetry including songs.

The Praise-Singer: The full time griots are historians, genealogists and tutors of young princes. In *Soundiata or the Mandingo Epic (Soundiata...)* (originally *Soundiata ou L’Epopée Mandingue*), Niane [2] informs us in the “Foreword” (*Avant-Propos*) that in the very hierarchical society existing before colonialism where everybody had a role, the griot, like an archivist, was the guardian of customs, traditions, principles of government among other functions. According to him,

Formerly, the griots were Counsellors to Kings, they kept the Constitutions of Kingdoms, thanks to their memory; every royal Family had its griot dedicated to the conservation of tradition. It was from among the griots that the Kings selected tutors for the young princes (5).Ⓒ

Niane’s protagonist, Mamadou Kouyaté, featured in *Soundiata...* is one of the most celebrated griots in West African literature. As though Kouyaté was the elected spokesman of all griots, he undertakes an interesting survey of the various functions of praise-singers. And he introduces himself as follows:

I am a griot. My name is Djeli Mamadou Kouyaté, son of Bintu Kouyaté and Djeli Kedian Kouyaté, master orator; from time immemorial the Kouyatés have been servants of the Keita Kings of Mandingo: we are talking bags containing secular secrets (chatter boxes). Oratory has no secrets for us; without us the names of Kings would be forgotten. We are the memory of men...
I have tutored Kings in the history of their ancestors so that the life of their ancestors would serve them as models, for the world is old, but the future is rooted in the past (9-10).Ⓒ

Similarly, Camara Laye [3] paints a glowing picture of griots in *The Guardian of the Word* (originally *Le Maître de la Parole*).

The second category of praise-singers whom we describe as “free-lance bards” is made up of exponents who broke away from the King’s palace at one time or the other in history, to commercialize their art for a living. In francophone Africa, given the serious blow dealt to chieftaincy by the colonial administration, whatever remains of traditional institutions as a whole is too weak to support full-time praise-singers. This explains the proliferation of the omnipresent drumming-dancing-singing griot. In the anglophone sector where chieftaincy was tolerated to some extent as a support base for colonial regime, royal praise-singers still exist even though they are a pale shadow of themselves. Besides, most of them are part-timers. Recently in Ghana, free-lance bards perform at funerals, durbars, festivals, engagements, etc.

The Techniques Used in Praise-Singing: Generally, the praise-singer transmits his message through poetry including songs. Among the Akans of Ghana, the message (songs and poetry) may be delivered by voice (*kwadwom*), by the horn

(*ntahra*),) on drums (*atumpan* and *f~nt~mfr~m*), or a combination of these. No matter the mode of delivery, flattery using imagery, metaphors and hyperboles is the major tool. “Every flatterer”, says La Fontaine (1621-1695) in “The Crow and the Fox” (originally “*Le Corbeau et Le Renard*”) “lives at the expense of the one who listens to him”ⁱⁱⁱ. Indeed all flatterers succeed at the expense of their gullible victims. La Fontaine’s seventeenth century fable has an interesting parallel in African literature. It is about the encounter between Soundiata’s griot and spy by name Balla Faseke and the dreaded Soumaoro [2]. As the latter rushed on him fuming with anger, Balla played a wonderful tune on the king’s own xylophone as follows:

Hail him, Soumaoro Kanté/ I salute you, you who sit on the skin of kings
I salute you, Simbon with the deadly arrow/ I salute you, you who wear a cloak made of human skins (76)^{iv}

Soumaoro was so pleased that he immediately appointed Balla Faseke as his personal griot, instead of executing him. Niane is quick to observe from this that kings are human beings after all. Against them swords may be impotent but words do succeed. In other words, kings are sensitive to flattery.

Even Chaka the Zulu, the warlord depicted by Thomas Mofolo as an extremely wicked king, is no exception to the rule. Here is a tribute paid to him by Niane [4] in a play entitled “Chaka”:

Bayeté, Zulu, great-footed elephant/ Show your paws, You are the Lion who devours men
You whose glory hovers in the sky/ O Zulu, celestial leader, lead the people
On the glorious road to victory/ Shower on the people your justice
Bayeté, Bayeté Chaka the heavenly one .../ You who communicate directly with the gods
You who know everything and hear everything/ Oh Son of Nandi, the Zulus
Are waiting on their knees for your infallible word...
 (“Chaka” Act 2 Scene 7 pp. 85-86)^v

The comparison with the elephant and the lion in the above-quoted extract is a powerful imagery to flatter the King and it confirms the belief in traditional societies that a successful ruler cannot separate victory from wickedness.

Whenever a mortal is credited with divine qualities, “deification” is meant. On the other hand, whenever great awe-inspiring men are compared to wild and dangerous animals, the phenomenon is described as “lionization”. In the above quotation, Chaka is first, deified (“celestial leader”, “the heavenly one”; “he who communicates directly with the gods”); secondly, he is lionized (“great-footed elephant”, “the lion who devours men”).

Strictly speaking, it is not only living humans who attract praises. Indeed the dead are credited with an uncountable number of qualities no living person ever earned. All the more so as by custom it is wrong to say any bad thing about the dead. Indeed, funeral dirges are a special genre of panegyric which space would not allow us to go into. By general convention, nobody says anything foolish about the dead person who is invariably described as “*daaseberg*” (the all-generous), “*mm~bor~hunfo~h*” (the all-merciful). With his demise, his wife, children and grand children are condemned to eat the spider, that is, to eat the inedible: “*Wo yere ne wo mma ne wo nananom bgwe Ananse*” (Your wife, children and grandchildren will chew the spider).

The contrary is the case with death as an abstraction whose appellations are mostly negative: “*Owuo koremfœ, owuo trimuēdenfœ, owuo desgini*” (Death the thief, death the wicked one, death the destroyer). That is perhaps the best a frustrated society can do to console itself in the face of an unconquerable, insensitive and pitiless enemy - death! If there is no way of arresting death, there is at least a way of mitigating its effects on a society whose survival lies in its ability to regenerate itself.

In fact, non humans are sometimes credited with appellations. The Earth is hailed as “*Asaase Yaa Amponyinamoa*” (Great Earth the Thursday-born Lady, the one who does not reject anyone, living or dead, not even cats). The stone for sharpening tools is called “*Siribo~Sakyi*” (Sakyi the aftermath of war, teaser of the bullet). The bush cow is referred to

as “*gkoE Asimpi*” (confidence incarnate). The appellation for almighty elephant is “*Jsono Mpuroko*” (the great, great animal). The eagle is “*Jk~de~ brasiam*” or “*namfinam*” (flesh eater). Similarly, the leopard and the lion have for praise-names “*etwie*” (that which scratches) and “*~sr~ mu S~e*” (conqueror of the savanna) respectively.

From the discussion, it would be noted that praise-singing as a genre is not dedicated exclusively to aristocracy as some people may claim. We also observe that all the aspects of praise-singing studied so far have one thing in common and it is the use of the literary technique of the hyperbole which consists of magnifying beyond recognition. In societies where there are no microscopes, praise-singers serve as a perfect substitute.

The praise-singer can be a professional flatterer armed with several weapons. As already noted, the first weapon aims at making his patron believe he is what he is not. This patron - or rather the client- whose head is thus swollen with undeserved praises, loses his guard and opens his wallet. Through the literary technique of the hyperbole, the praise-singer manages to extend and highlight the qualities of the client thereby boosting the latter’s ego. Such magnification of the client’s virtues may be illustrated with the following appellations which contemporary Akan chiefs love so much to be described with such that they assign them to themselves as titles:

“*Daasebrg*” (the merciful), “*oseadegye*” (the trustworthy), “*okumkem*” (the generous), “*kantamanto*” (dependable), “*edggfoe*” (the gracious), “*sgmanhyia*” (the problem solver), “*amansan boafoe*” (people’s helper), “*Emama*” (the noble one), “*kantinka*” (the great one), “*yiadom*” (the deliverer).

The second weapon lies in the ability of the praise-singer to convince the patron’s subjects that their master is not an ordinary mortal and that he wields power over life and death. The praise-singer achieves this effect through intimidation and bullying, again, by being hyperbolic. By emphasizing the king’s cruelty and extreme wickedness, he succeeds in terrorizing the subjects into total submission and silence. This technique explains the awe-inspiring appellations that raise the king to an almost extra human level, like:

“*kurotwiamansa*” (the tiger), “*awennadze*” (the lion), “*susubiribi*” (master planner/strategist), “*suobiribi*” (fear something), “*kuntunkurunku*” (blanket extraordinary), “*odiamono*” (the cannibal), “*diawuo*” (the murderer), “*osie amono*” (he who buries people alive), “*okumanin*” (killer of males), “*sisi kwabrafo*” (the bear) “*Anoma kEdeg a odi mogya bun*” (the eagle which feeds on fresh blood).

We may observe that much of the imagery are centred round wild animals which, in the olden days, used to terrorize man. Thanks to science and technology, this scare is gradually disappearing as lions, tigers, bush cows and others can now be viewed without danger, in zoos, game reserves and at circuses.

When dealing with a distinguished warlord, the praise-singer focuses on the extraordinary military prowess of the patron. In societies bedevilled with rampant wars, the technique of hero-worship assumes supreme importance. The warlord should be able to strike terror into the heart of all potential enemies. And it is the duty of the praise-singer to describe him in the most hyperbolic terms in order to paint the much needed awe-inspiring picture of him. For example: “*ekofroboe*” (he who fights while climbing rocks), “*esabarima*” (warlord), “*katakylie*” (rearguard), “*gyeaboe*” (he who defies pellets), “*osuo abroboe*” (rock that defies rain), “*esagyefoe*” (reclaimer), “*bediatio*” (he who defies guns), “*kum apem a apem bgba*” (kill a thousand and a thousand more will emerge).

Chiefs and wars aside, there is an interesting development that deserves mention. It is the proliferation of self-styled titles seeking to identify the bearer with a royal family or clan or simply to boost his ego. Such people may or may not have a teaspoonful of royal blood in their veins. They seem to be saying: “if you don’t blow your own horn nobody will blow it for you.” Here are a few examples:

- a. *~heneba* (the king's child), *ehene nana* (the king's grandchild), *ewoahene* (parent of kings / one who gives birth to kings), *nana yere* (the king's wife), *~deneho* (the sovereign one),
b. - *asonaba* (child of the Asona Clan), *gko~ba* (child of the Eko~na Clan), *bretuoba* (child of the Bretuo Clan)
c. - *"Kwakye Adegffg"* (Kwakye who is a joy to behold), *"Nyaako Aboreɲoma"* (Nyaako the Pigeon), *"Abrafi K~t~_h*(Abrafi the Crab), *"Adwubi Kete"* (Adwubi the famous Kete dance), *"Addae Mununkum"* (Addae the Cloud).

The transfer of aristocratic titles to commoners must not be looked down upon. For such common people may deserve praises by virtue of their contribution to society. After all, "money", they say, "is blood"- *"sika y, mogya"*. In this particular context, it could mean that money can buy royal blood. This should not be seen as bastardization or prostitution of the noble art. Rather it should be interpreted as an attempt to inject merit into royalty which is traditionally inherited rather than earned or deserved. The implication is that there are many men and women out there with many leadership qualities. In short, there are many role models outside the palace, who need to be recognised and encouraged.

Paradoxically, there is a third weapon that could be subtly used to deceive, criticise or even insult a patron. If we may go back to La Fontaine, the French man has many fables illustrating the gullibility of kings. A case in point is "The Death of the Lioness" (originally, "La Mort de la lion) where a stag is brought before the mourning king for failing to weep and mourn the death of the queen. For this crime he was sentenced to death, except that he concocted a nice dream in which he claimed to have seen the dead queen on her way to heaven, in the company of angels. The king was so delighted on hearing this that he promoted the condemned stag to a very high position in his palace. We do not need to explain that the gullible lion we are talking about is none other than the absolute, divine king, Louis XIV. The foregoing shows that praise-singers do not always praise. They sometimes use their sugar-coated tongue to make fools of their clients who seem incapable of seeing through ironical statements.

When criticising or insulting a patron, the praise-singer is often double tongued; the audience cannot tell where the so-called praises change into disguised deceit, criticism or insult. In any case, the language is often deliberately so esoteric that the patrons themselves may not realise that they are the target of the chant. The following recital by a praise-singer at a traditional marriage ceremony in the city of Kumasi in Ghana demonstrates disguised criticism of and some insult, to the patron (the bridegroom):

Abrante ~ aho ~f~, ~mmaa dodo ~ kunu
Wo na wode w'aho ~f~ gye nkor ~fo~ yere
Mmaabaawa ne mmerewa mpo ko wo ho
Nn ~ de ~ wonsa aka wo yere
~baa aho ~f~ a ~fata wo ~
Ahunab ~birim, ma asomdwoe ~ mmra
Abrante ~ aho ~f~, y~reb ~ wo aba so
Onyame nhyira wo ne wo yere

The literal translation is as follows:

Young handsome gentleman, husband to numerous women
You who, by your mere looks, snatch off others' wives
Young women and old women quarrel because of you
Today you have finally found your wife
A very beautiful lady who suits you
You, the one to behold and tremble, give peace a chance
Handsome young gentleman we salute you
May God bless you and your wife.

The praise-singer chanted the above-quoted words in such a way that the audience could barely hear clearly. When we asked him to explain what he chanted, he answered simply, "If I wanted you to hear everything, I would have spoken clearly". However, in chambers, he offered to recite the appellation slowly and clearly. He explained that he needed to tell the audience about the bridegroom's character in a polite way.

Most praise-songs are dedicated to royalty, brave warriors and other distinguished personalities. Indeed most of us have always seen praise-singing as an aristocratic genre. As such, it may attract the scorn of some class-conscious critics who may see in it discrimination against peasants, workers and the less privileged in society. This impression is valid to a very large extent, though not always right. For example, Nketia [5] sums up appellations reserved for all hunters even though hunters do not, by any stretch of imagination, count among the privileged and it is as follows:

' *Jdomankoma Asiemiri; toto atuo ma-mono; mmaa kunu; mmerewa mpena; katakyie ne "Serebo Sakyi a yese ne so dadee kodi aninsem"*' (3).

Literally Translated, this Means: The Gracious Asiemiri, shooter of guns to provide fresh meat, husband of women, keeper of old-aged mistresses, Sereboe Sakyi, the sharpening stone on whom we sharpen our weapon to indulge in manly acts of bravery.

This of course may be seen by critics as a double-tongued appellation to scorn and at the same time to praise hunters. The following quotation from the praise song of Afua Kuma [6], "*Kwaebrentuw ase Yesu*" ("Jesus of the Deep Forest"), dedicated to the glorification of Jesus, throws light on another literary technique dear to praise-singers:

*Jye akwatafo] anuonyamhene/ Mmubuafo] somboafu
Anifuraefo kwankyerefo/ Awurade Yesu a
N'ani fra awia nsensan mu/ Na ehyeren hu baabiara (10)*

Translation:

Honourable King of lepers/ Indispensable helper of the handicapped
Guide for the blind/ Jesus our Lord whose
Eyes are in the sun's rays/ That give light to every dark corner.

The technique in question here is the oxymoron, that is, the juxtaposition of conflicting notions or terms meant to heighten emotions with a view to achieving maximum effect.

The Current and Future Statuses of the Praise-Singer: The gradual disappearance of the experts and custodians of oral tradition and the reluctance of the younger generation to take up the profession of praise-singing is the major factor that points to a decline in the fortunes of praise-singing. Increasing materialism of the modern world which militates against everything traditional societies stand for or treasure, tends to marginalize whatever is not immediately lucrative. This explains why the youth are losing interest in oral tradition as a whole.

Modern technological gadgets like the radio, television, video and the internet are surely a threat because they offer readily accessible forms of entertainment and education delivered right into the homes of most people. The kind of entertainment and information they offer may be culturally alienating but the positive side is that they are packaged for mass consumption and are readily available. But the other side of technology is praiseworthy. Thanks to the microphone, tape recorder, video tape, television and other gadgets, we can view live performances of praise-singers, their sounds and gestures magnified and embellished by science. Thanks to the same gadgets the art and craft of the praise-singers, can be preserved for the benefit of posterity.

Another important factor is the emergence of democratic governments at the expense of monarchies and the subsequent erosion of traditional powers as well as sources of income. Declining economic fortunes of kings and chiefs make it difficult for them to support full-time praise-singers. In the olden days, kings and chiefs used to send emissaries to collect tolls and royalties from all users of stool lands. For instance hunters were duty-bound to send to their master designated parts or portions of whatever animals they killed or trapped even where the master had no knowledge of the catch. These and many other resources such as shared farm produce and proceeds from royal tribunals provided enough to satisfy royal needs. Sub-chiefs also benefited from royal largesse or from the people directly in the form of gifts. For instance, artisans would proudly offer to royals specially designed sandals, stools, umbrellas, *kente*, *adinkra*, etc. This was a wonderful way of advertising their craft, for whatever his majesty accepts to use must be the best of its kind.

All these facilities have, needless to say, suffered a decline due to changing economic conditions. Royal courts have lost part of their clientèle to constitutional courts; artisans find it more lucrative to vulgarize their wares for the consumption of the wider public; the drummer is better off playing at funerals than in the palace; the genealogist finds willing and gullible customers at funerals, naming ceremonies, engagements, etc.

We are currently witnessing a situation where praise-singing dedicated to the glorification of royalty and practised exclusively by talented individuals for the benefit of a selected few, seems to be losing grounds. Its place is being taken by a phenomenon we call vulgarization i.e. the aristocratic medium is gradually travelling outside the palaces for public engagements such as funerals, birthdays, weddings, naming ceremonies and others, but it may be premature to say that the praise-singers now aim at entertaining the masses. Far from that for, from among the huge crowd gathered, the praise-singers single out only the potential patrons for glorification. As there is the likelihood that the gathering includes celebrities, the artists are assured of a wide and lucrative market.

Wherever the praise-singers go, they rely on the same techniques. A little background research reveals the identity of most of the dignitaries and important members of the bereaved family. Even more important are the clans which the potential clients hail from. These are the raw materials the praise-singer needs to fabricate a genealogical tree whose sole aim is to give credit to the targeted dignitary, the lofty deeds, mythical or otherwise of his ancestors. The artist knows for sure that the client does not know the great ancestor he/she is being compared to. The praise-singer also knows that the entire gathering is watching the scene. Under such circumstances, it would be most unbecoming of the beneficiary of the praises to refuse to reward the praise-singer. Indeed the beneficiary has no choice. At this point, we may also mention another very important human foible, which is vanity. So long as human beings continue to be vainglorious, praise-singers may always find fertile grounds to till.

Vulgarization of the medium also means commercialization which in turn leads to proliferation of praise-singers. The youth, who, as already seen, are reluctant to perform for kings, are these days ready to drum, sing and recite during public ceremonies. Besides, they have formed several groups of *kete*, *adowa* and *nwomkorɛ* (these are different musical genres played with different musical instruments on festive occasions) who continually proclaim the glory of the dead, of death personified or of the living.

As the praise-singers migrate from the palaces to the public domain, many of them find in the churches a very comfortable home. Using the same techniques they use in the palaces and sometimes the same language, they shower praises on their maker in modern vibrant melodies. Unlike the royal medium, gospel music appeals to the masses, literates and illiterates alike who, without much effort, join the choruses and dance to them. Looking at the modern musical instruments used, the mass participation and the vigorous dance, one may not easily associate it either with the palace praise-singing or with the church, yet a close study shows that the artists are doing no more than what Psalm 150, already quoted, enjoins us all to do. At the same time, the lyrics remind us of praise songs formerly dedicated to kings and deities.

Currently, in Black America, gospel music which is another name for praise-singing is so vibrant that it has eclipsed negro-spirituals. Similarly, in Ghana, it has pushed to the background the solemn, sophisticated hymns that originally came along with orthodox Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian and other churches. It seems therefore that Christianity is busy

casting off its western robes and either africanizing itself or going back to ancient roots. The following quotation from Bishop Kwasi Sarpong [7] is a fitting summary for what we have been saying about praise-singing in the church. In characteristic style, the Akans personify God as the King of kings whom they describe in the most superlative terms: The Asante call Him “*Amowia*” (The Giver of Light), “*Amosu*” (The Giver of Water), “*Abomobuafr~*” (The one you go to with your problems), “*Nya-amane-k~se*” (The Refuge of sinners). But they also call Him “*Totrobonsu*” (The Fount of Water), “*Tetekwaframo*” (The Eternal) (95).

In short, praise-singing is still alive even though it has lost its former prestige. In Senegal, the griot used to be buried in the hollow base of the baobab tree because, like the everlasting tree, the griot, they said, never died. Today, he belongs to an inferior caste and is seen by many as a parasite. This picture epitomizes the changing fortunes of the traditional praise-singer.

We close this chapter with a quotation from Afua Kuma’s [6] long praise-song dedicated to Jesus. It is a superb illustration not only of the various techniques discussed above, but it also shows clearly how praise-singing has migrated from ancient palaces to seek shelter in modern churches and cathedrals:

*“W~de nkesua akogu aketesa b~n ano,/y~k~e na aboa no awu h~;
wakogyaw nkok~ mma akor~ma berebuw ano/ akor~ma no aguan agya nkok~mma no.*

*Yesu na ~de oguansae ak~to ~pataku daber~/Pataku no aguan agyaw ne mma h~
Nguano no atiatia ne mma so aku w~n/Ns~nkyer~ne wura, wo na woate~ wo nsa
W~ sare so ama ~h~ ay~ kwae”(7, 9).*

Translated as:

They placed eggs near the cobra’s hole/ When they went back, the snake lay dead
They left chicks in the nest of the hawk/ The hawk fled leaving the chicks alone

Jesus who placed a fattened ram in the wolf’s lair/ The wolf ran away leaving its kids behind/The sheep trampled the wolf’s kids to death/ Master of miracles,

You pointed at the desert and it turned into a forest.

In the extract quoted from Afua Kuma’s “Jesus of the Deep Forest”, we may draw attention to the prevalence of voracious predators like the wolf and the hawk. Even more dreadful are the most poisonous and aggressive snakes like the mamba and the cobra. The contrast between the hawk and the innocent chicks, between the wolf and the humble sheep, between the cobra and eggs, paint the highly incredible picture of the conqueror conquered by his victim. In short, it is a topsy turvy world which only Jesus can create.

CONCLUSION

We have been trying, in this paper, to find answers to some questions: Who is the praise-singer and how does the praise-singer transmit messages? How has praise-singer fared since ancient times and what is the future of praise-singing? We started the journey from ancient Greece and the Old Testament, passing through the Middle Ages, the Seventeenth and Nineteenth Centuries to the present times. The itinerary took us through several places: Europe, The Middle East, America and Africa. Ghana was our final destination.

Our general conclusion is that, as a genre, praise-singing has existed since time immemorial and has been used to eulogize and also to criticise in a very diplomatic way. In West Africa, the full time griots dedicate their services as walking libraries to the king at the palace while the free-lance bards are mostly part-timers. The most important literary device used is the hyperbole, together with the metaphor, flattery and sarcasm. We can conclude that practically every one of us is potentially vainglorious and is involved in praise-singing in one way or the other. We either praise others or we receive praises or shower praises on ourselves. In other words, we are only transmitters or receivers of praises. Lastly, some of us are transmitters and receivers at the same time. This latter case of self-glorification is close to narcissism. In other words, we contemplate and adore our own image created by none other than ourselves. The mirror, we know, has never told anybody that he or she is ugly; it only reflects the kind of picture we want to see. So does the self-admirer; he/she is his own judge. As such, he/she never fails to extol his/her own virtues, greatness or beauty. But he/she never sees his/her own weaknesses and ugliness.

Over the years, praise-singing has shown itself to be very resilient, always adapting itself to suit changing circumstances. This character makes it difficult for anybody to predict its demise even in the face of modern technology and the ever growing materialist appeal. However, the picture of the changing fortunes of the praise-singer is abundantly clear.

Endnotes

The original French versions of the cited texts are as follows:

ⁱAutrefois les griots étaient les Conseillers des rois, ils détenaient les Constitutions des royaumes par le seul travail de la mémoire; chaque famille princière avait son griot préposé à la conservation de la tradition; c'est parmi les griots que les rois choisissaient les précepteurs des jeunes princes. Dans la société africaine bien hiérarchisée d'avant la colonisation, où chacun trouvait sa place, le griot nous apparaît comme l'un des membres les plus importants de cette société car c'est lui qui, à défaut d'archives, détenait les coutumes, les traditions et les principes des gouvernements des rois (5-6).

ⁱⁱJe suis griot. C'est moi Djeli Mamadou Kouyaté, fils de Bintou Kouyaté et de Djeli Kedan Kouyaté, maître dans l'art de parler. Depuis de temps immémoriaux les Kouyaté sont au service des princes Kéita du Manding: nous sommes les sacs à parole, nous sommes les sacs qui renferment des secrets plusieurs fois séculaires. L'Art de parler n'a pas de secret pour nous; sans nous les noms des rois tomberaient dans l'oubli, nous sommes la mémoire des hommes... J'ai enseigné à des rois l'Histoire de leurs ancêtres afin que la vie des Anciens leur serve d'exemple, car le monde est vieux, mais l'avenir sort du passé (9-10).

ⁱⁱⁱ... tout flatteur/Vit aux dépens de celui qui l'écoute...

^{iv}Le voilà, Soumaoro Kanté./ Je te salue, toi qui t'assieds sur la peau des rois./Je te salue, Simbon à la flèche mortelle./Je te salue, ô toi qui portes des habits de peau/ humaine (76).

^vBayeté, Zoulou, elephant aux grands pieds/Montre des giffles, Lion qui dévore les hommes/Toi dont la gloire plane dans le ciel/O Zoulou, toi le céleste, conduis les peuples/Sur le chemin glorieux de tes victoires/ Répands sur les peuples ta justice/ Chaka le céleste.../ Toi qui t'entretiens directement avec le Ciel/ Toi qui sais tout, entends tout/ O Fils de Nandi le peuple Zoulou/ Attend à génoux ta parole infallible ... (85-86).

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