THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF HAUSA POETRY FOR SUSTAINABLE EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF NIGERIA

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Abstract

In recent times, there have been complaints about the language of poetry, its versatility or dexterity. In this paper an attempt was made to examine the relevance of poetry in the administration of learning in our schools and colleges. The factors contributing to the declining interest in the teaching and learning of Hausa poetry in Nigerian Universities was the target of this write-up. Some pleasurable and more effective ways of teaching and learning poetry are recommended with a view to improving the standard of teaching and learning poetic devices to enlarge the epileptic situation of Nigerian schools and institutions of higher learning for sustainable educational development of the country.

Key Words

Teaching, Learning, Hausa Poetry, Education and Development

Introduction

There are three branches of literature: namely; poetry, drama and prose, poetry is the most that has a debatable precise definition. Just like the proverbial story of the six blind men, each of whom differently described the elephant based on its part he was able to touch, so are people who attempted to define poetry. Each
defined it from his own perspective, which makes the definitions debatable. When Edward Alfred Housman, an accomplished poet, was asked about poetry, his response was: "I could no more define it than a terrier could define a rat".

That notwithstanding, Clive (1990: 14) defined poetry as "a rhythmical form of words which express an imaginative, emotional, intellectual experience of the writer, and express it in such a way that it creates a similar experience in the mind of his reader or audience". Encyclopedia Britannica describes poetry as "an obviously rhythmical use of language, manipulating accent, stress and cadence in such a way as to create recurrent patterns of emphasis". Therefore, verse is the most peculiar attribute that distinguishes poetry from prose or drama.

The questions usually asked by many are: How does a person become a poet? Is poetry learned or it just comes spontaneously? Is a poet born a poet or is he made? And similar other questions to these, Keats (1970), the famous English poet, was of the opinion that "if poetry comes not naturally, let it not come at all" in other words, poetry is something intuitive as far as he was concerned.

Similarly Aliyu (2007: i-iii), the great Hausa poet, when asked one of the above questions, replied: "poetry is not learned; it is a God – given gift which improves with effort by the poet". While this natural gift may show in some at an early age like Milton (1608-1674), who composed immortal poems as a teenager-others do not discover it until later in life or when forced. A person might have never written a single line of poetry, but when pained by loss of a dear one he starts with an elegy, or when he finds himself deep inside the ocean of love, he cuts his teeth with a love poem.

Meaning of Poetry

Poetry has many and varied definitions. The compact edition of the Oxford English Dictionary (1971: 2220) defines poetry with special reference to form and function. Based in the former, poetry entails: "Composition in verse or metrical language or in some equivalent patterned arrangement of language, usually also with choice of elevated words and figurative uses and option of a syntactical order, differing more or less from those or ordinary speech or prose writing".

With reference to function, poetry is the expression or embodiment of beautiful or elevated thought imagination or feeling in language adopted to stir the imagination and emotions. Both immediately and also through harmonic suggestions learnt in and implied by the words and connections of words actually used such language containing a rhythmical element and having visually a metrical form.

The word poetry is derived from the Greek word "Poiein" which means. "to make". Originally, poetry refers to any creative literary work. But with the development and diversification of literary forms, poetry came to be used for metrical compositions in any mode as distinct from writing in prose. Therefore, the term poetry has assumed an evaluative rather than descriptive significance and is often used for any literary work of distinctly imaginative or evaluative kind (Robe,
Dangambo (1972:292) defines poetry as, “Literary work in metrical form or patterned language; designed to produce pleasure through beautiful, elevated, imaginative or profound thought”.

According to Wordsworth (1970 – 1850: 234), “poetry is the imaginative expression of strange feeling, usually rhythmical.... the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquility”.

Deutch sees the term as, “the art, which uses both speech and song to reveal the realities, the senses record, the feeling of salute, the mind perceives and the shaping of imaginative orders”.

Baldick (1990:156), also defines poetry as, “language sung, chanted, spoken or written according to some pattern of recurrence that emphasizes the relationships between words on the basis of sound as well as sense: this pattern is almost always a rhythm or meter which may be supplemented by rhythms or alliteration or both”.

All cultures have their poetry and are used for various purposes, ranging from sacred ritual to obscene insult, politics. It is generally employed in those utterances and writing of emotion dignity, politics adverbs of expression, or subtlety of meditation and praises. Poetry is valued for combining pleasures of sounds with freshness of ideas whether these are solemn or comical. Some critics make an evaluative distinction between poetry. This elevated or inspired and verse which is merely clever or metrical. However, three major categories of poetry exist, namely, narrative, dramatic, and lyric, the last being the most extensive and favored most poets.

**History of Poetry**

Poetry has been very influential to man right from its earliest times. It goes along with scholarship due to its written nature that takes into consideration rhyme, rhythm and meters. Civilizations and peoples, past and present has been influenced by poetry. For example, the ancient Greek, Latin and Roman writers and philosophers had been deeply engaged in poetry. The available translations of their works in English are proof of their poetic endowment. In Greek mythology, three out of the nine muses of the liberal arts, namely Caliope, Euterpe and Erato were all of poetry. English literature also gained much from its creative poets. English poetry is very rich and has helped a lot in the growth of the language.

More so, the Arabs have also been so attached to poetry in all quarters of their lives that one can hardly read an Arabic book, magazine, journal, etc., from cover to cover without coming across some elements of poetry. As such, Arabic philosophy and wisdom was fully controlled by Arab poets from generations. This made the spread of the language fast. It is humorously said: “they have been denied rain (for dwelling in the Sahara) but compensated with poetic eloquence”. The Arabs hold this belief till today.
Hausa Poetry

The historical origin of Hausa poetry is still under cloud, however, Hausa poetry started right from its earliest time, when the Hausas used their mouths to sing orally and later the Ajami to write poetry. However, with the introduction of western education in the 19th century, they used the letters of the English Alphabet to write poems just like in other fields. There are professionals and amateurs in Hausa poetry. The professionals do it for a living, while amateurs do it for leisure.

Classification of Hausa Poetry

Hausa poetry is classified into two main groups: that is the Hausa Oral Poetry and Hausa written Poetry. The meaning of Hausa oral poetry (Wakar Baka) in Hausa is, “zance sarrafaye, auunanne wanda ake aiwatar da shi ta bin hawa da saukar murya, ta yan amfani da layuka da ake rerawa bisa wani daidaitaccen isari wani lokaci tare da kida”. Meaning, “an organized speech which goes in rhythms and with orderly lines and chanted in an organized manner and in some cases with drumming”. In other words, this kind of poetry is sung and chanted or spoken orally.

The Hausa written poetry are those poems that were written in books after the coming of Islam and the Europeans or colonial administrators. The Hausa written poetry is divided into two units: The 19th century poems and the 20th or 21st century poems. The 19th century poems are those poems written after the Jihad of Sheikh Usmanu Danfodiyo. They are purely Islamic poems. They are used for preaching Islam and praising Prophet Muhammad (Peace and Blessings of Allah be Upon Him) and other renowned Islamic jurists. The 20th or 21st century poems are those that were written after the coming of the Europeans or Colonial administrators, with the introduction of western education in Northern Nigeria. These poems are based on worldly matters in general.

The Hausa oral poetry on the other hand are not written; they are poems that are sung, chanted or spoken by mouth, and also drums are used as a complementary device. This is what all the Hausa film and video makers use in their films to attract customers in selling their products. This paper was confined to the written Hausa poetry.

Aims of Teaching Hausa Poetry in Universities and Other Institutions

There are a lot of benefits to derive from the art of poetry. First of all, there is a dire need for a literary education on poetry in Nigeria. According to Berry (1971:27), “poetry should be the most enjoyable subject in the school curriculum. It develops the spiritual and emotional sides of our nature and it gives us values other than material ones”.

In addition Nkosi (1981: 34) states, “the poem carries an exciting narrative quality that gives it special interest apart from its material and the beauty of its language…. It flows forth as a swift river, a strong current of feeling – of pure lyricism”. 

177
The language of poetry (written in any language) has innumerable advantages and effects. It develops the individual's capacity to understand and appreciate a work of art within a short period of time. Poetry is a universal language of communication. As far back as the earliest time history has recorded, man has tried to tell others through poetry some form of or another of his experiences, not only in the field of human endeavors, such as politics, economy, religion, culture etc. but also in the field of emotion such as love, hate, hope, despair, triumph, regret, sorrow and joy. Poetry reveals the desire of man to express and to pass on to posterity the deeds and thoughts of the present. A greater part of art is short-lived, but poetry is one form of art that seems to bear within it the power to possess some mysterious sense of immortality.

Apart from material and spiritual gain, poetry brings fame and respect to its writer. Poetry in the words of Keats (1795 – 1821), "is a thing of beauty, indeed a joy forever and for all times". The effect of poetry is normally achieved through language. Therefore, language and poetry are inseparable instruments through which communication can be achieved in schools or outside the school environment.

Another aim of teaching poetry is to promote human values, this is because, it allows a person to express his feelings, thereby enabling him to express in verses what he could not adequately express in prose or in speech. Unfortunately, Hausa poetry has lost its glamour among learners and teachers a like. The popularity of Hausa written poetry in modern times is fast fading out. Next to fame is immortality. The poet would have his works read even after his death. Keats lived for only 26 years on earth (1795 – 1821). But he is literary speaking, still alive 182 years after his death. Also Imru’ul Qais, Zabigha Abu Uwais, Hassan Ibn Thabit and lots of others would have lived and died unnoticed but for their poetry they are still alive.

**The Declining Interest in Hausa Written Poetry**

Today, many can be heard complaining about the language of poetry, its versatility or dexterity. It was well stated by a critic that “unfortunately conscious of their student’s frustration and hostility, many secondary school teachers confessed to feeling uneasy with poetry in class” (Robert, 1973: 27). University teachers too, complain that their students claim either not to have read much poetry at lower schools or it is being introduced to them for the first time. Robert (1973: 12) observed that poetry is particularly hard to work with in schools for three main reasons: it is comparatively unpopular with students; they have misleading perceptions or it's difficult in terms of its rules and regulations and in its writing; and it demands a different kind of reading from prose. No wonder that these problems are also noticeable in Hausa society today. You can hardly find people reading Hausa poetry on the street. Though you may hear poetry reading from radio, you can hardly see Hausa written poetry competitions on television: you rarely can see Hausa written poems published in our newspapers on a daily or
weekly basis as the case may be.

Although, poetry generally is a beautiful subject, it happens to be a difficult subject to teach. The treatment of drama and prose has many things in common, but the teaching of poetry is recognizably different. This is because poetry is usually tightly compressed with thick density of meaning, unusual word sequences, etc. which often pose problems to learners. Many teachers therefore avoid teaching.

Adewoye (1994:15) has rightly observed in his article entitled, “Rudiments on literary Appreciation” that “poetry generally has constantly constituted a bizarre of fear and confusion for its learners”. Nowadays, readers/learners seem to be baffled when it comes to poetry teaching or learning. This is not unconnected with the peculiarities of the language of the poetry in general, which is characteristically very symbolic and imagistic.

**Language of Hausa Written Poetry**

The language of Hausa written poetry like in any other culture is very difficult to understand. This is because the way words are used in poetry differs from prose and drama. This can easily be discerned from the unusual way words are used and arranged so that a desired effect can be achieved.

The demands of verbal patterning usually make poetry a more condensed medium than prose or everyday speech. It often involves variations in syntax, the use of special words and phrases peculiar to poets, principal metaphor and simile or poetic diction.

Hausa written poetry has always been seen as a literary phenomenon that constantly reflects an unknown and unseen world. Because of its involvement in emotions, passions, imagination and sentiments, learners of poetry have always decried its remoteness from the concrete perceivable world.

One major problem confronting the students in studying and appreciating Hausa written poetry is the issue of imagery and symbolism. But poetry has no meaning without the interplay of images and symbols. The symbols and images includes: imagery, simile, metaphor, figures of speech, personification, paradox, climax, rhyme, rhythm and stanza.

**The Problems of Teaching and Learning of Hausa Written Poetry**

Mivi (2000: 34) asserted that all is not well with the teaching and learning of poetry in schools, especially at tertiary institutions. Some of the factors that impede the teaching and learning of Hausa poetry are as follows:

i. Limited time allocation: The teachers, no doubt, are experienced but the time allotted to teaching should be revised to pan both semesters for adequacy and continuity. The teaching of poetry course (s) in just one semester (i.e. either first or the second semester) no doubt, affects the quality of the scope of what is being done in Hausa poetry, and this in turn leads to the development of negative attitudes by learners and teachers towards the subject.
ii. Lack of teachers' exposure to Seminar/Conference experience: Most teachers of Hausa poetry rarely attend conferences and seminars where innovative approaches to teaching and learning of poetry could be learnt. Consequently, such teachers continue to teach with their old and archaic lecture methods and personal attitudes to the subject.

iii. Lack of knowledge of poetry: Another disturbing revelation is that some teachers often perceived Hausa poetry as difficult. The implication is that the time allotted to its teaching is not effectively utilized and learners not effectively motivated. This is as a result of giving a Hausa teacher by birth not by profession to teach Hausa poetry without undergoing necessary training to be a poetry teacher.

iv. Lack of material resources: Another problem is that learners are not provided with the relevant learning materials and some are not ready to access the relevant materials for teaching and learning poetry. They are provided with typed copies of the selected old Hausa poems for study. In recent times, Hausa poets do not write poetry, this is because of the society's negative attitude towards written poetry. People do not buy published Hausa poetry books as before. They only concentrate on Hausa prose love books and Hausa film videos, where they used to listen to orally dramatized Hausa poems.

v. Lack of seriousness on the part of the teachers: Furthermore, many teachers engage in businesses nowadays, such as running of provision stores, Computer centers, video clubs, etc. which deprive them of the time that should have been devoted for the spadework needed for successful teaching. Teaching thus becomes more of a side business, a secondary assignment. And the adverse effects on the quality of teaching Hausa poetry are better imagined than told. The subject demands the teacher constantly prepare, think, read and investigate in order to be effective in teaching it.

vi. Lack of interest on the part of the students: The students on their part, lack the desired interest to learn Hausa poetry. Instead, they prefer to study science-related courses or lucrative courses such as Business Administration, etc. Furthermore, the lackluster situation of Hausa poetry in our institutions is the wrong assumption that some teachers often makes; that their students have known the nature and function of poetry and method of its art. With these erroneous assumptions, they plunge into the teaching of poetry. But the language of poetry is prone to diverse individual interpretations and these interpretations would be impossible if the students have not acquired command of the language of poetry, including those that contravene the basic structural principles through inversions, ellipticism.

As mentioned earlier, the time allotted to the study of Hausa poetry is often very short and also there are no available relevant references for poetry readily
available. Beside that, most poems taught in the classroom do not aim at stirring the imagination of the students, but are geared at making it possible for the teacher to cover the poetry syllabus. But as earlier stated, poetry is a language-intensive discipline, and in a second language situation, the difficulties the students face include mastery of linguistic jugglery that are involved in poetry become formidable. Thus, teaching Hausa poetry solely for examination purposes does not provide the students the required time or atmosphere to understand and appreciate poetry.

Poor background is another obstacle to the teaching and learning of Hausa poetry. Since poetry has been and is still originally an oral art in many cultures, children should be made to get the feeling of poetry even before they are introduced to the formal study of poetry in schools. Students should, as far as it is possible, continue the study of Hausa poetry from the infant stage through primary to secondary/Colleges and Universities. When students are kept in constant touch with poetry as part of their academic activities, they will not be totally baffled by more advanced methods of studying or reading poetry.

Methodology of Teaching Hausa Poetry

The teacher can make use of a great variety of techniques in order to actively involving students in a poetry lesson. For instance, students can be meaningfully involved in choral reading dramatization and creative writing group work, as part of their enjoyment and exploration of different types of poems.

In addition, the teacher should adopt me-to-you of teaching i.e. teacher – student interactive discussion. There are selected occasions when it is necessary for the teacher to impart some background information or explain concepts and terms which may be helpful in discussing, analyzing and evaluating poetry.

Prospects of Hausa Written Poetry

What is worth doing at all is worth doing well. A new lease of life must be injected into teaching and learning in general and poetry in particular. This will help it to regain its past glory before the advent of drama and prose. The following recommendations should be properly utilized. If properly considered they will surely brighten the prospects and help to revive interest in Hausa poetry.

1. Hausa poetry has its built-in devices, meter rhythm and figures of speech. The teacher should use them at the appropriate time to develop interest in students.

2. Learners should be made to enjoy rhythm in the poems through repeated reading aloud before actual study, analysis and critique. When students enjoy poetry they are likely to be committed to its study.

3. Teachers must have interest in reading and writing so as to write their own poems for study in the class. This will motivate learners to compose their own poems too.

4. The Hausa oral poems that were composed in Hausa video films should be
utilized for practical lessons in the classroom. This, it is hoped will give students an idea on how to compose poems.

5. Enough qualified and experienced teachers in literature must be employed in higher institutions to avoid discontinuity in teaching and learning of poetry.

6. Poetry curriculum/syllabus should be re-oriented to run through all the semesters from foundation to the final level.

7. Libraries should be well equipped with relevant anthologies and literature books on poetry.

Teaching and Learning Hausa Poetry for Sustainable Educational Development of Nigeria

The mission of most of the Nigerian Universities is to produce well-grounded, sound, God fearing and entrepreneurially-minded graduates, equipped with problem-solving and other skills attuned to the demands of the 21st Century environment, who can be self-employed, and whose skills and knowledge would accelerate community development in particular and nation building in general through the regular and distance education modes, using information and communication technology as a tool, thereby widening access to higher education significantly.

The above stated mission can be achieved through giving students proper training in all the courses taught in the Universities through the use of poetic devices. Through the teaching of poetry in our Universities our students will be able to know our missions as well as visions that will enable our educational system sustain the challenges of modern time.

Conclusion

In spite of its immeasurable qualities and usefulness to society, Hausa poetry has lost its appeal in most institutions of higher learning. There is, indeed, a combination of reasons, which include poor language standard, negligible knowledge of poetry, lack of reference materials, obsolete methods of teaching poetry, the indifferent attitudes of teachers and students to the teachings and learning of Hausa poetry.

Hausa poetry can be made more lively, meaningful, pleasurable and satisfying, if sincere, thorough and timely teaching of students in poetry is rendered at all levels of studying poetry. Also, with competent and committed teachers of Hausa poetry, the prospect of the teaching and learning of poetry will begin in delight and end in wisdom.
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