



Originality in Oral Literature and the Creative Agency of the Oral Artist

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ORCID: 0009-0007-4176-5068

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.22842165](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22842165)

Submission Date: 06 Aug. 2026 | Published Date: 19 Sept. 2026

Abstract

Oral literature is often regarded as a communal form of art because its narratives are transmitted from one generation to another without clearly identifiable authors. This has raised questions about whether individual originality and authorship can exist within a tradition based on collective ownership and transmission. This study examines how the oral artist can exercise creative agency and ascribe originality to an oral product originating from the communal repertoire. Drawing on Isidore Okpewho's theorisation of the oral artist and building on the works of scholars such as Ruth Finnegan and Albert Lord, the paper argues that originality in oral literature does not depend on the invention of new content but on the artist's distinctive treatment of existing material. Using a qualitative approach, the study employs close textual and comparative analysis of selected African oral narratives, including Limba narratives and variants of the Tortoise and Bird tale concerning the origin of the tortoise's cracked shell. The study examines how the fluid and unfixed nature of oral tradition creates room for individual creative agency through narrative variation and manipulation, performance innovation, individual artistic choices, audience, occasion, and cultural context. It argues that these mechanisms enable the oral artist to transform inherited communal material into a distinctive oral product and thereby ascribe originality to it.

Keywords: Oral literature, Originality, Oral artist, Creative agency, Oral performance, Narratives.

Introduction

Oral literature, according to Isidore Okpewho, has its own unique culture of creation, transmission, and consumption, distinct from the noetic of typography. The concept of Oral literature is simply literature delivered by word of mouth (Okpewho, 1992). An important figure in the literary realization of this propagation is the Oral Artist. For the purpose of this paper, it is therefore crucial to define the Oral Artist. Isidore Okpewho in *African Oral Literature: Background, Characters and Continuity* (1992) defines the oral artist as one who modifies his art and performance for the benefit of his audience. Taofeeq Suleiman (2003), describes the oral artist as "someone who uses spoken words and oral communication as a primary medium for artistic expression." In *Oral Literature*, the artists' skill is often a question of memory, organization, creation, and understanding of the audience, using this skill to develop and electrify the skeleton of available plots with subsidiary details. Having properly accounted for a definition of the oral artist, we should, of course, be honest enough to admit that the source/material of a large portion of oral literature, originates from a distant past and that the original creators/authors cannot be accounted for.

However, the Evolutionists, who studied human cultures, believe that with the generational transmission of oral literature, it is impossible and immaterial to speak of an author or creators, and that in-any-case, the oral "performers" of the past were too primitive to be considered, artists, in any regular sense of the word. Another school of thought, encouraged by the sociological interest in folklore, believe that oral artistry is a communal heritage and that anyone could be an oral artist; One would often hear a statement such as "Anybody in the village can tell you a story" (Okpewho 1992). But, a closer look at the materials and performers of oral literature soon opened the eyes of scholars to the level of creative and imaginative skill that went into an oral performance. Thus, Okpewho posits that the reductionist opinion of oral artist amounts to saying that anyone that is educated could be an author or poet. Hence, it can be argued that what generally separates the artist from the non-artist is more than the average sense of what is interesting and entertaining, it is the mode of expression, the effective way of expressing the art, using ornamental languages, such as,

proverbs, imagery, idioms, infusion of elaborate forms of oral performance, which involves the use of music, dance and dramatic devices to enhance the effect of the narration. There is this, a distinction between someone casually (Re)telling a story and a skilled oral artist who consciously shapes material for artistic effect. Most earlier studies of African oral literature put undue emphasis on the fact that a proverb, a song, or a tale was the common property of the society in which it was found. Since these texts were handed down from person to person and from one generation to the next, the question of individual authorship was considered superfluous. This raises pertinent questions. How then can the oral artist claim authorship and ascribe originality to his product? If oral literature is communal and transmitted from one generation to another, at what point can we determine an “original”? How can the artist exercise creative agency? This study adopts a qualitative based approach, drawing on documented oral narratives and relevant scholarly works on African oral literature. Selected narratives from Limba folklore and variants of the Tortoise and Bird narrative concerning the origin of the tortoise’s cracked shell serve as primary oral narratives for analysis. Through close textual and comparative analysis, the study examines how variation, narrative manipulation, performance, cultural context, audience and individual artistic choices enable oral artists to negotiate, perform and ascribe originality within inherited oral traditions.

The Fluidity of Oral Literature as a Basis for Originality.

Oral literature is by its nature a fluid form of art (Okpewho, 1992). Until scholars understood better the fluid nature of oral literature, it was assumed that the “oral tradition” was handed down from one source (or generation) to another in “word-perfect” form. But there is simply no way in which an oral artist, however skilled, can recall every word of the extensive texts of, say, Ifa divination poetry or tales like those of Sundjata/Sundiata or Ozidi. As a story passes from one narrator to another, variations may emerge as successive artists introduce their own interpretations and modifications since the tales bore no signatures (Finnegan, 1967). Hence it is expected that the artist uses his imagination to fill in the gaps or make whatever adjustments are necessary. Nonetheless, the possibility of artistic originality in oral literature is grounded on the fluid and unfixed nature of the oral tradition, unlike written literature, which generally exists in a relatively stable textual form. This fluidity provides the oral artist with an opportunity to modify, rearrange, embellish, or reinterpret oral material, therefore creating the conditions within which individual artistic creativity can emerge.

This fluidity is also evident in the relationship between oral composition and performance. As Albert Lord famously argues in *The Singer of Tales*, an oral poem is “not composed for but in performance.” The implication is that the oral artist does not simply reproduce a completed text before an audience. Instead, elements of the narrative are shaped in the process of performance. The artist responds to the particular audience, occasion, atmosphere, and circumstances of the performance, making adjustments that may not have been anticipated. Consequently, the same oral narrative performed before different audiences may assume considerably different forms. Because of this fluidity, an oral artist may emphasize particular episodes, alter the tone of a narration, introduce songs or dramatic devices, or modify certain details according to the interests and expectations of the audience. The fluidity of oral literature also allows the oral artist’s personality and lived experiences to influence the character of the work. Hence, Whatever may be the form in which a story exists within tradition, storytellers inevitably treat it in their own way, according to their energies, temperament, experiences, and overall personality. Consequently, the same traditional narrative may acquire different emphases, tones, characterizations, or details when rendered by different artists. Thus providing the artist with the opportunity to imprint aspects of their individual identity upon oral material, further demonstrating how fluidity within oral tradition can become a basis for originality.

The ephemeral nature of oral performance further reinforces this fluidity. Once an oral performance ends, the particular arrangement of words, gestures, tones, songs, and dramatic effects disappears. Its recreation depends upon another performance, which will inevitably contain alterations. Thus, each retelling becomes an opportunity for renewed artistic intervention, demonstrating that the fluidity of oral literature is but a fundamental condition of its artistic vitality. The fluid nature of oral literature therefore provides the oral artist with the space to exercise creative agency. While the oral artist is privy to basic materials of oral literature, he is not necessarily confined to reproducing them exactly as received. Through each act of performance, inherited materials can be reshaped into a distinctive artistic expression. Fluidity as a basis for Originality in oral literature consequently emerges not necessarily through the invention of entirely new stories, but through its capacity for variation, manipulation, adaptation, and renewal that allows the oral artist to negotiate individual originality within a fundamentally communal tradition. However, there remains the question of how far there can be individual variation, innovation, or creation within the traditional framework of story-telling?

The Oral Artist and Creative Agency

Agency is the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices (Giddens, 1984). Building on this, creative agency is defined here as the capacity and freedom of the oral artist to make choices. The recognition of fluidity within oral literature necessitates a revaluation of the role of the oral artist within the production and transmission of oral narrative. If oral narratives are continually modified and altered as they circulate from one performance to the next, the oral artist therefore cannot be regarded merely as a passive transmitter of oral narratives. Rather, the oral artist occupies an active creative position, exercising judgement in the selection, modification, interpretation and presentation

of oral narratives according to the individual artistic choices and the demands of the performance. Thus, the artistic realization depends considerably on the creative agency of the individual performer. The question, therefore, is how the oral artist exercises this agency within the framework of oral literature. Arguably, creative agency is not necessarily expressed through the invention of a completely new narrative, but a demonstration of artistic competence in the choice of determining what aspect of a narrative to emphasize, what episodes should be added, removed or modified, interpretation of traditional motifs, how particular characters and events are presented, what linguistic or dramatic technique are employed, the decisive manipulation of voice, tone, rhythm, gestures, songs, and other dramatic devices deemed important. Consequently, two artists working with the same oral narrative may produce substantially different versions, because of the distinct artistic skill and creative agency employed, and the manner in which it is rendered, bearing the creative imprint of the oral artist. Audience and context further influence these creative choices. The oral artist does not perform in isolation but responds to particular listeners, occasions, and circumstances. This influence's the artist's choice of language, emphasis, tone, and manner of presentation. Creative agency of the oral artist's therefore operates within the social and performative conditions in which oral literature exists. Okpewho further illustrates the creative agency of the oral artist through the relationship between performance and patronage (audience). In his discussion of patronage in *The Oral Artist*, he notes that artists, in their efforts to make a living, may "bend the truth a little bit," particularly when doing so serves to avoid offending their patrons (Okpewho, 1992). This demonstrates the capacity of the oral artist to creatively manipulate aspects of a performance according to the interests, expectations, or sensitivities of those for whom it is performed and the creative freedom that the oral artist benefits availing them the freedom to treat narratives according to their individual energies, temperament, experiences, upbringing, and interests. Furthermore, the use of innovation and creative agency becomes particularly evident in storytelling performances. Across many narrative traditions in Africa, the storyteller may possess only the basic outlines of a story and is expected to make appropriate adjustments to its details. The narrative framework provides the artist with a recognizable traditional structure, while the details remain open to individual artistic intervention. The artist is therefore able to expand, omit, rearrange, or modify episodes without necessarily abandoning the identity of the traditional narrative. Okpewho in *African oral literature: Backgrounds, Character, and Continuity*, demonstrates this through the case of the *Ozidi* story. So long as the performer recognizes the fight with the Smallpox King as the final confrontation or test of the hero Ozidi, the episodes occurring between the major points of the narrative may be rearranged according to the performer's artistic choices and judgment. Each performance can consequently constitute a new act of composition. This *Ozidi* example therefore illustrates that while the artist remains bound to the recognizable framework of the oral narrative, he possesses considerable freedom in determining how that narrative is developed and presented and realized in performance. Thus, the oral artist's creative agency lies precisely in this freedom to make choices and capacity to make an inherited story new in each performance, thereby producing a distinctive rendition through which originality can be asserted.

Mechanisms of Ascribing Originality in Oral Literature

Having established the fluid nature of oral literature and the creative agency of the oral artist, it becomes imperative to examine the specific ways through which originality is produced and ascribed by the oral artist in oral performance. The originality of the oral artist does not solely reside in the invention of an entirely new narrative. More often, than not, originality in oral literature is not absolute originality of content; it is originality of treatment. The oral artist may thus alter language, manipulate narrative structure, employ distinctive performance techniques, respond to the audience and occasion, incorporate personal experiences, or reinterpret traditional materials within a particular cultural context. Through these mechanisms, oral artists negotiate, construct, and ascribe originality to their oral products.

i. Narrative Variation and Manipulation

Narrative variation and manipulation constitute perhaps the most direct means through which an oral artist distinguishes an individual version of a traditional story. Since oral narratives are not fixed texts, the artist may exercise considerable freedom in determining which elements of the traditional framework to retain, modify, expand, reduce, or omit. The artist may choose one stock character rather than another, introduce a new character or name, include many or few episodes, embellish the basic structure with songs or additional details, or emphasize an aspect of the narrative that another teller might ignore. Such choices demonstrate that the oral artist does not merely reproduce a traditional narrative but actively reconstructs it. The basic plot may remain recognizable while its internal details undergo considerable transformation. The artist can alter characterization, rearrange episodes, modify dialogue, introduce new incidents, or choose a particular type of conclusion. A story may end with a moral, explanation, comment, question, or some other form of closure depending on the artistic choice of the performer. The *Ozidi* tradition provides a useful illustration of this principle. As discussed by Okpewho, so long as the performer recognizes the fight with the Smallpox King as the final confrontation or test of Ozidi, the episodes leading to that confrontation may be rearranged according to the performer's judgment or recollection. The traditional framework therefore remains intact, but the details within that framework remain susceptible to individual manipulation. Each performance consequently becomes a new composition of the narrative. Narrative manipulation can thus be understood as a form of creative transformation. The artist does not need to abandon the inherited story in order to produce something distinctive. Instead, originality emerges through the selective modification of its components and embellishment of the oral narrative.

Furthermore, D.T. Niane's *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* (1960) provides another illustration of how narrative variation and manipulation can become a means through which an oral artist asserts originality of his oral product. In his rendition of the epic, the character of the Griot; Djeli Mamoudou Kouyate, establishes his authority by identifying himself through his lineage, describing himself as the son of Djeli Kedian Kouyate and emphasizing that his knowledge has been transmitted through generations of griots: "I am a griot. It is I, Djeli Mamoudou Kouyate, son of Bintou Kouyate and Djeli Kedian Kouyate, master in the art of eloquence. Since time immemorial the Kouyates have been in the service of the Keita princes of Mali; we are vehicles of speech, we are the repositories which harbor secrets many centuries old... I derive my knowledge from my father Djeli Kedian, who also got it from his father. . . . I teach kings the history of their ancestors so that the lives of the ancients might serve them as an example My word is pure and free of all untruth; it is the word of my father; it is the word of my father's father." The claim of Griot Kouyate is engineered by D.T. Niane, a purposeful embellishment influencing the legitimacy of the oral product and manipulating its reception by narratively claiming authenticity. Niane's distinctive embellishment therefore demonstrates how the oral artist can negotiate between fidelity to tradition and individual creative intervention, deploying narrative variation and manipulation in ascribing the originality of his oral product. Finally, the existence of different versions of the *Sunjata/Sundiata* epic, alongside the additional episodes incorporated into Niane's rendition, demonstrates the capacity of the oral artist in ascribing originality.

Okpewho further emphasizes the significance and creative function of narrative variation and manipulation to oral performance, arguing that "variation or manipulation of the material is a standard ingredient in the performance of oral literature." This observation is particularly significant to the question of originality, as it establishes it not as deviations from the traditional form but as inherent features of oral performance. By modifying inherited material through the addition, omission, rearrangement, or embellishment of narrative details, the oral artist produces a rendition that bears the imprint of individual creative intervention. Thus, variation becomes one of the principal means through which the oral artist negotiates and ascribes originality to the oral product. In addition, narrative variation in the retention of a recognizable basic plot does not require the artist to reproduce every detail in an identical manner. Instead, the oral artist manipulates the inherited narrative by adding, omitting, rearranging, or emphasizing particular episodes. In this way, variation allows the artist to maintain continuity with tradition while simultaneously introducing individual creative choices. Ruth Finnegan's illustration of two Limba stories, *The Man Killed for a Spinach Leaf* and *The Man Killed for a Banana*, provides a compelling demonstration of this argument. Finnegan identifies the two narratives as detailed variants of essentially the same basic plot, performed by two oral artists, Karanke Dema and Dauda Konteh, from adjacent chiefdoms. Despite their shared narrative foundation, however, the two versions differ considerably in their treatment of particular episodes and details. For instance, in the Spinach version, the girl consults only her mother about her plan to avenge her father, whereas in the Banana version, she seeks advice from the finch through divination. The versions also differ in the treatment of the girl's suitors: in one, they are identified by the names of actual chiefs from real chiefdoms, while in the other they are not. Further variations occur in the development of the narrative. In the Banana version, the girl prays to Kanu for forgiveness before killing her new husband, followed by an episode in which children peep into the hut and tread on the blood. His senior wife subsequently discovers what has happened, and the girl employs a ruse to deceive one of the chief's followers pursuing her. These episodes are absent from the Spinach version. Instead, the latter contains a vivid description of the chief's cousin discovering his corpse with flies buzzing around him, while the chief's eldest son eventually abandons his pursuit of the girl after being captivated by her beauty. These differences are significant because they demonstrate that the oral artists are not merely reproducing a fixed narrative. Each artist selects, develops, and emphasizes different elements of the shared plot, thereby producing an 'original' distinctive version. The Banana version's additional episodes, prayers, and narrative developments distinguish it from the Spinach version, just as the latter's vivid descriptions and alternative treatment of the characters distinguish it from its counterpart. More importantly, the differences do not prevent the two stories from being recognized as variants of the same traditional narrative. The basic plot provides foundation, while the variations provide individuality demonstrating that originality in oral literature can be achieved through the artist's manipulation of existing oral narratives.

Moreover, the various versions of the Tortoise tale in the African cosmology further demonstrate how the oral artist curates an individual rendition from inherited oral narratives through variation and manipulation, thereby ascribing originality to the oral product. Although all existing versions share a recognizable narrative framework; Tortoise's desire to gain access to food or a feast, his use of cleverness or deception to achieve his objective, his subsequent downfall, and the resulting damage to his shell; the treatment of this basic framework differs considerably across versions. In Chinua Achebe's *Why Tortoise Shell is Not Smooth*, Tortoise learns of a feast in the sky and persuades the birds to lend him feathers so that he can accompany them. He subsequently adopts the name "All of you" and manipulates the feast's hosts into allowing him to eat before the birds. After the birds reclaim their feathers, he falls from the sky when his wife, misled by Parrot, places hard objects beneath him instead of the soft materials he requested. His broken shell is subsequently repaired by a medicine man. A different version; *How the Tortoise Got Its Scars*, substantially rearranges this narrative framework. Here, drought and famine provide the motivation for Tortoise's journey. Rather than obtaining feathers from the birds, he composes a song praising Vulture and persuades Vulture to carry him across the mountains to a fertile land. Tortoise subsequently deceives the birds by claiming ownership of the land before eventually falling when

he irritates Vulture in mid-air. His cracked shell is then treated by doctors. Another version; *Mr. Tortoise's Cracked Shell*, alters the narrative even further by replacing the relationship between Tortoise and the birds with a friendship between Tortoise and Duck. Duck carries Tortoise into the air with a stick, but Tortoise's pride leads him to open his mouth while flying, causing him to fall and crack his shell. These narrative variations demonstrate that the oral artist does not merely reproduce a predetermined sequence of events. To create a distinctive original, the oral artist further manipulates the tortoise's motivations, characters, episodes, methods of action, causes of conflict, and resolutions. The Tortoise's journey, for example, is achieved through borrowed feathers in Achebe's version, through Vulture's assistance in another, and through Duck's intervention in yet another. Similarly, the circumstances responsible for Tortoise's downfall are not fixed: he is deprived of his borrowed feathers in one version, loses his grip after irritating Vulture in another, and falls because of his inability to control his pride in the version involving Duck. The manipulation also extends to characterization and moral emphasis. Achebe's Tortoise is characterized particularly through eloquence, cunning, and calculated deception, as he uses his gift of speech to persuade the birds and manipulate the hosts of the feast. In the Vulture version, his resourcefulness and capacity for improvisation are more prominent, while the Duck version foregrounds his pride and overconfidence. Thus, narrative variation enables the oral artist to ascribe originality to his oral product by making his particular rendition distinguishable from other versions of the same traditional narrative. The artist's selection of episodes, alteration of characterization, rearrangement of events, and introduction of new details become identifiable marks of individual authorship within a communal tradition. Originality is therefore located not in the ownership of the traditional story itself, but in the distinctive manner in which the oral artist makes that story his own.

ii. Performance Innovation

Performance innovation constitutes another important mechanism through which the oral artist ascribes originality to an oral product. Since oral literature exists primarily through performance, the manner in which a story is enacted can distinguish one rendition from another even when the underlying narrative remains recognizable. Ropo Sekoni (1990) observes that a successful oral narrative performance requires not only a good voice and skillful use of language but also effective bodily movement and other performative techniques. He further notes that each occasion of storytelling is, in a sense, a unique, original artistic creation because the oral artist actively (re)enacts the tale through mimicry, exaggeration, tone, speed, rhythm, singing, and onomatopoeia to make the narrative vivid, attractive, and amusing to the audience. These performative choices demonstrate that the oral artist's assertion of originality in oral literature is not confined to the modification of narrative content. Consequently, the oral artist can distinguish his rendition through how the oral product is delivered. A familiar episode, for instance, when performed with exaggerated gestures, a particular tone of voice, changes in pace, or the incorporation of song, mimicry, and other dramatic devices, can significantly alter the effect of an otherwise familiar narrative. Thus, performance innovation produces a new artistic version, establishing the originality of the oral product. In *The Singer of Tales* (1960), Lord's observation that an oral poem is "not composed for but in performance" is particularly relevant here, meaning that whatever text the artist has in mind before a performance, they necessarily make certain adjustments to suit whatever type of audience they face. These adjustments transform each performance, making each rendition a distinctive expression of artistic originality. In addition, the use of dramatic devices also enables the artist to transform a relatively familiar narrative into an engaging and memorable performance. The artist may physically (re)enact the actions of characters, alter the voice to distinguish speakers, employ rhythm to create suspense, or introduce songs that reinforce particular emotions or themes. Furthermore, by making distinctive performative decisions, the oral artist establishes the originality of the oral product.

iii. Individual Artistic Choices

Individual artistic choices constitute another mechanism through which the oral artist ascribes originality to the oral product. Although the oral artist draws upon inherited material, the manner in which that material is rendered is influenced by his personality, temperament, experiences, preferences, and artistic judgment. The artist may therefore emphasize certain characters or themes, alter characterization, introduce particular details, or give greater prominence to aspects of the narrative that appeal to him. Finnegan's account of the Limba narrator Karanke Dema, as recounted in *Limba Stories and Storytelling* (1967), provides an illustration of this assertion. After Finnegan told Karanke the story of the temptation and fall of Adam (Adamu) and Eve (Ifu), she returned to the community more than two years later and found that Karanke had incorporated the story into his own repertoire. When Finnegan asked where he had heard the story, Karanke acknowledged that it was from Finnegan, but stated that he had "told it in his own way." By then, the Judaic narrative had undergone considerable reworking and had acquired the form and content of a Limba story. Karanke introduced a traditional Limba opening, portrayed Eve as thoroughly subservient to Adam, renamed the serpent bankiboro, a local species, and interpreted the relationship between Eve and the serpent according to a Limba conception of an illicit affair. He also connected the events of the story to present-day experiences, providing explanations for the hostility between humans and the bankiboro and for the hardship associated with human labour. Notably, Karanke's statement that he had "told it in his own way" is particularly significant to the question of originality. Karanke acknowledges the source while simultaneously distinguishing his rendition from that source through his own artistic judgment, choice of characterization, emphasis, interpretation, and presentation. Thus, the oral artist's individual choices provide a means of transforming existing oral narratives into a rendition that bears the artist's artistic imprint and can consequently be ascribed an original. In addition, the oral artist exercises considerable freedom in determining how

inherited material is rendered. As Finnegan observes, the artist may choose one stock character rather than another, introduce a new character or name, include or omit episodes, embellish the basic structure with songs and special details, emphasize particular aspects of the narrative, or determine whether the story concludes with a moral, an explanation, a comment, or a question. These choices demonstrate that the oral artist is not merely reproducing inherited material but actively determining the form and direction of his rendition. It is through this freedom of choice that the artist gives an inherited narrative an individual character, thereby ascribing originality to the oral product.

Furthermore, the individual choices of the oral artist can also be influenced by his personality and lived experiences. The artist's temperament, upbringing, interests, experiences, values, and artistic preferences can influence the understanding and reconstructing a story. Finnegan observes, that the artist "impresses his or her personality upon the content of the work," as storytellers treat the story according to their energies, temperament, and overall personality. Consequently, different artists may emphasize different aspects of essentially the same narrative. A comparison of versions of the same subject may therefore reveal differences that point to the upbringing and personal lives of the respective artists. Ipinmisho's *Art as a Mirror of Life: The Case Study of a Folktale in Ogidi-Ijumu, Kwara State* (1980) defends this position with his study of two narrators, Ajayi and Thaddeus Medupin, who each narrated the popular folktale *Idawa Erekefo*. Although the two artists worked with the same basic story, their versions differed significantly in characterization, length, dialogue, songs, description, and emphasis. Ajayi's version was influenced by aspects of his own personality and circumstances. His version gave considerable prominence to drinking and presented the hunter's wife as a dominant and quarrelsome figure. The narrative's emphasis on alcohol and female authority consequently corresponds in interesting ways with details concerning Ajayi's own life. Thaddeus's version, by contrast, was considerably longer and contained fuller dialogue, three songs, elaborate descriptions, poetic idioms, and a more complex plot. His version also gave greater prominence to the male figure. These differences correspond with the description of Thaddeus as an expansive personality and a man who was particularly interested in food. The presence of food and drink in his version and the stronger authority attributed to the male figure demonstrate how an artist's personal disposition can influence the treatment of traditional material. The significance of these contrasting versions lies not simply in their differences but in what those differences reveal about individual artistic identity. The same oral narrative becomes a different artistic product when filtered through different personalities and experiences. The versions of *Idawa Erekefo* therefore demonstrate how individual choices in characterization, gender relations, and the emphasis on food and drink can reflect the artist's personality, temperament, and experiences. The artist's choices therefore reshape the oral narrative, leaving an individual artistic imprint that contributes to the originality of the oral product. In this sense, originality is not only produced through what the artist changes in the traditional narrative but also through the personal qualities and individual choices that shape how those changes are made.

iv. Audience, Occasion, and Cultural Context

The audience, occasion, and cultural context constitute significant mechanisms through which the oral artist ascribes originality to an oral product. Oral performance is a social activity, and the artist must consider the people for whom the performance is intended, the occasion, and the setting in which the story is being told. On this basis, an oral narrative changes when performed before different audiences or on different occasions. The artist modifies the language, humour, emphasis, characterization, or length of a narrative according to the interests, expectations, sensitivities, and level of participation of the audience. Who is listening, where the story is told, when it is told, and what the artist hopes to achieve provide the framework within which the oral artist makes the choices that give the oral product its distinctive form and originality. The occasion is equally influential in the production of originality. A story told at a ceremonial gathering is presented differently from the same story told in an informal setting. The artist emphasizes particular themes because they are relevant to the occasion, introduces references that resonate with the audience, and omits details that would be inappropriate or ineffective in a particular context. The occasion does not merely provide a setting for oral performance; it shapes the artist's creative choices and the form the core of the performance. Okpewho's discussion of patronage further acknowledges the superiority of the audience in a performance. Oral artists, particularly those who depend on their performances for their livelihood modify their narratives in consideration of their patrons. Their willingness to "bend the truth a little bit" when necessary, demonstrates that the oral performance is governed by social, economic and cultural considerations. These adjustments show how the oral artist negotiates between oral composition and the demands of a particular performance situation, producing a rendition that differs from how the same material would be presented elsewhere. Cultural context is the third and most powerful means by which existing oral narratives acquires a distinctive form. The oral artist transforms a narrative by incorporating local customs, social relationships, beliefs, values, cultural references, and explanations of familiar phenomena. Through this process, a story acquires meanings that reflect the cultural environment in which it is performed. The transformation of the narrative need not alter its entire basic structure; the artist reshapes its characters, relationships, events, and meanings to make it recognizable within a particular community. Ruth Finnegan's account of the Limba narrator Karanke Dema provides a literary demonstration of this argument. After Finnegan told Karanke the story of the temptation and fall of Adam and Eve, the narrative was transformed when he incorporated it into his repertoire: it acquired the form and content of a conventional Limba story. Karanke introduced a conventional Limba opening, appointing an audience member as an "answerer." He reinterpreted the characters and their relationships within Limba cultural terms: Eve was presented according to traditional patriarchal Limba conceptions of the relationship between husband and wife, the serpent was identified as a

local species; the bankiboro, and the relationship between Eve and the serpent was rendered through the culturally recognizable framework of an illicit affair. The ending was likewise adapted to explain present-day Limba experience. The hostility between human beings and the bankiboro became a direct consequence of the events in the story, and the hardship of human labour was tied to the expulsion from Eden. Karanke did not reproduce the story he received from Finnegan; he reworked it to reflect the social relations, beliefs, experiences, and worldview of his Limba audience. The Limba example demonstrates how audience, occasion, and cultural context can influence the form, meaning, and interpretation of existing oral narratives, with the performance and social meaning altered to suit the cultural worldview. The oral artist therefore gives the oral narrative a distinctive identity by making it relevant to a particular audience and cultural context. Thus, the artist's response to audience, occasion, and cultural context becomes another means through which existing narratives are transformed into a distinctive oral product and its originality ascribed to the oral artist.

Conclusion

The creative agency of the oral artist and the role of the artist in ascribing originality to oral products cannot be overemphasized, particularly within a literary tradition that is regarded as communal, inherited, and without a single author. This study establishes that the fluid nature of oral literature creates the space in which the oral artist can exercise creative agency. Since oral narratives are not fixed texts, they can be modified, rearranged, embellished, interpreted, and performed differently from one occasion to another. The oral artist is therefore not simply a passive transmitter of communal narratives but an active participant in their creative realization. The study also explored the mechanisms through which the oral artist exercises this creative agency and ascribes originality to the oral product. Narrative variation and manipulation allow the artist to add, remove, embellish, and rearrange episodes while keeping the basic plot recognizable, as seen in the different versions of the Tortoise story and in Niane's rendition of Sundiata. Performance innovation, as Lord (1960) and Sekoni (1990) note, allows the artist to distinguish a rendition through voice, gesture, tone, rhythm, and other dramatic devices, so that even a familiar story becomes a new artistic event each time it is performed. Individual artistic choices, shaped by the artist's personality and lived experiences, as seen in Karanke Dema's retelling of the Adam and Eve story and in the contrasting versions of *Idawa Erekefo* by Ajayi and Thaddeus, show that the artist's personal qualities can leave a mark on inherited material. Finally, audience, occasion, and cultural context influence how a narrative is presented, interpreted, and adapted to a particular setting and community. Taken together, these findings support the argument that originality in oral literature is not necessarily the absolute invention of new content but is more accurately located in the artist's distinctive treatment of existing oral narratives. The communal oral narratives provide the foundation, while the creative agency of the oral artist determines how that material is shaped, performed, and transformed. Through these processes, the oral artist gives the communal narrative a distinctive artistic identity and ascribes originality to the oral product.

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CITATION

Iviero, J. O. (2026). Originality in Oral Literature and the Creative Agency of the Oral Artist. *Global Journal of Research in Humanities & Cultural Studies*, 6(5), 44–50. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22842165>