Mbum (Cameroon) Oral Poetry as a Changing Activity of Recreation and Redemption

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Abstract
This paper preoccupies itself with both Mbum religious and social poetry and seeks to investigate the recreational and redemptive roles of this literature in a changing society. Oral literature is one of the most vibrant aspects of the African cultural heritage. Since culture is dynamic or a changing phenomenon, the Mbum oral traditions that encapsulate and reflect the world view of the Mbum; their mores, ethos and philosophy are also dynamic. Consequently, the oral poetry of the Mbum people is studied in this paper as a tool of recreation and redemption of the past, present and future society. Considering the crucial relevance of history in the oral traditions of a people, the analysis of this paper is guided by new historicism. The findings reveal that Mbum oral poetry is a good instrument that can be used for the entertainment and redemption of the Mbum society in particular and the Cameroonian society in general.

Keywords: Mbum, Cameroon, Oral Poetry, Changing Activity, Recreation, Redemption

Introduction
Oral literature is one of the significant aspects of the African cultural heritage. Since culture is dynamic, oral literature is also dynamic or a changing activity. Human societies largely depend on oral traditions for their meaningful existence and interactions. This is because oral literature is both a reservoir and creative expression of cultural values, which lead the society along its moral path or along a redemptive function. Put differently, oral literature is the repository of the cultural values of a given people, and the Mbum people are not an exemption. This literature can, therefore, be perceived as both the mirror and window of a people’s culture because it reflects the cultural heritage of a people, and this people can better ‘see’ themselves through their culture. Consequently, this paper hopes to demonstrate this in the oral poetry of the Mbum.

Oral literature varies from society to society because different communities have their belief systems, customs, myths and legends that constitute their culture. This view is also tenable in the Mbum people of Donga Mantung Division of Cameroon whose oral literature has been handed down from one generation to the other. A critical appreciation of this particular literature reveals that it encapsulates the worldview of the people, their mores, cultural nuances, and philosophy and belief system. That is why these researchers make bold to submit that the most significant aspect of the study of oral
literature is that scholars are not only studying a tradition of antiquity but studying the antecedent of, and indigenous literary background to, Cameroonian and African written literature.

Geographical Location of Study Area
The Mbumb tribe occupies the Nkambe Plateau situated in Donga Mantung Division of the North West Region. J. A. Ngwa in *A Geography of Cameroon* says the Mbumb tribe lies between latitude 6030 and 6.40 North and longitude 10.25 and 11.20 East of the Greenwich. The Mbumb tribe shares boundaries with other tribes of Donga Mantung Division: Membe, to the East, Tamba and Mfumte to the North and to the West with Noni, and Chaney and to the South with Nso. The area occupied by the Mbumb people has an estimated surface area of about 14.00 square kilometers. The Mbumb tribe is one of the most populated ethnic groups in the North West Region of Cameroon. Agriculture is the main occupation of the Mbumb people. The primary occupation is farming, bee-keeping, hunting and wine tapping. Farming is subsistent and customarily, an occupation for women. Men go hunting, tapping and bee-farming. The main foodstuffs produced are maize, beans and Irish potatoes. The traditional dish of the Mbumb is corn fufu and huckleberry.

Aim and Objectives
The aim of this paper is to examine Mbumb oral poetry as a changing activity or instrument that can be used for recreation and redemption of Mbumb society of the past, present and the future. However, this study has three objectives, viz, to document some of the incantatory poems (poems) in Lingumbum, (the language spoken by the Mbumb people), as well as present their approximate translations into English and second to highlight the aesthetic qualities of these songs in relation to the recreational and redemptive functions of literature. The relationship between the various themes found in these songs and the form reveal a symbiotic relationship, which is at the same time dialectic in nature. Put differently, there is a dialectical relationship between content and the aesthetic qualities of these songs that contribute immensely to Mbumb oral poetry providing the people recreation as well as seeking to redeem them and their society.

Conceptual Clarification
The topic of this study demands some conceptual clarifications for the readers to comprehend the bearing of these researchers. These concepts are: oral poetry, changing activity, recreation and redemption. All these concepts are discussed here relative to the phenomenon called literature and considered in this study as characteristically expressive and typically a human phenomenon. It is for this reason that this research concedes to Nkem Okoh’s contention that:

> Like love and laughter, literature (no matter its shape, preferred form, mode of existence or perpetuation) is not the exclusive property of any one nation, culture, or race, no matter how sophisticated, arrogant, or disdainful of other cultures. No society is so backward, deprived, depraved, or under-privileged technologically, as to be totally lacking in literary, artistic activity. God the creator cannot be said to have denied any people imagination or capacity to create things – whether literature, or other product – from available raw materials. (21).

Mindful of the foregoing submission, these researchers argue that even within the basic framework called literature, a wide array of different forms can be detected from different societies. That is why this study hopes to concentrate on one of these forms; the oral poetry of the Mbumb community. For the arguments here, this oral poetry is going to be concerned with the following two types; religious and social. In his *Orature in Africa*, Kashim I. Tala submits that religious poetry covers prayers, hymns and ritual incantations while social poetry includes the dirge, praise and blame, work songs and children’s songs (43). It is this definition that these researchers hope to utilize in this work.
The second concept that needs clarification here is changing activity which is inspired by the fact that literature is a social reality that is not static, but a dynamic activity or process. The dynamism of this truism or realism consists, according to Marxist theory, in the production and reproduction of life. This argument encourages these critics to further submit that oral poetry can effectively be utilised to interpret the past and contemporary realities of any community as well as provide direction for the future and also offer recreation and redemption to any changing environment. Recreation also needs some clarification so that the readers can understand the bearing of these researchers. Oral poetry may have had remote origins partly in magic or drama in religious rituals; but from time immemorial, recreation has been the most general and obvious function of imaginative literature in general. It has brought variety, interest, excitement, to drab lives; assisted consolatory fantasies; distracted people from troubles; or made them laugh. Talking about the function of literature in general relative to recreation, Marjorie Boulton argues:

Mere entertainment, relaxation, amusement, are important, not only because pleasure is desirable unless it is an obstacle to something more important, but because most of us, without some unwinding mechanism, would go mad; most of us become at least unreasonable under stress alarmingly soon. (8)

These researchers take refuge in this submission to assert that if literature were not in part entertainment, then there could be no literary trade. It is from this perspective that the oral poetry studied, will be used to illustrate that fact that it provides recreation to its listeners.

In using the term redemption for one function of oral poetry (literature in general) these researchers are certainly not intending, to make a theological statement or suggestion, but they are also not just alliterating in their subject or topic. It is the contention of this paper that there are moments in literature that have something in common with religious experiences. One would especially see this when some religious poems or incantations are studied. The religious experiences are, indeed, unforgettable. In this study, these critics emphasise that listening to things about the goodwill of others will not immediately make us good; but it may throw a little light on the path. It is because of redemption that Marjorie Boulton argues that through literature, “a terrestrial globe is very instructive, but sometimes we may be allowed a sight of a celestial globe” (12). Literature offers glimpses of our undeveloped, better selves as they might be; that is one way of putting it; there may be no satisfactory way of saying this relative to the redemption of literature. This is what the paper considers as the redemptive function of literature.

Oral poetry, therefore, is a branch of oral literature. It expresses itself in songs, ritual incantations and praise or salutation to gods and men. It is spontaneous and covers all that cannot be expressed by ordinary every day speech. Kashim Ibrahim Tala in Orature in Africa thinks that:

[…] The oral poetry of Africa reflects ideas and truths that are shared. It communicates to us the nature of our common identity, and it appeals to us in two ways. Firstly, it touches us emotionally so that we feel either pleasure or pain, and it stirs our minds so deeply that we are obliged to reflect on some fundamental concepts of life. In so doing, it fulfils the basic requirements of true poetry. (41)

Oral poetry, as the name implies, is mostly orally composed, orally transmitted and orally performed. In Africa today, both context and text of oral literature have to cope with the challenge of modernity and survival through a series of transformations over the years. That is why oral poetry, for instance, may not only be composed orally, transmitted orally or orally performed. Works like ours can transmit and preserve oral literature today. This submission highlights the relevance of this paper in a changing world.
Methodology and Critical Approaches
This section sets out to attain two objectives; the first is to identify and explain the research methodology used in collecting the data for this study from the field and other sources. The second is to briefly highlight the analytical tools that are employed in this work.

Methodology
Research has shown that there are several methods of collecting oral literature as it occurs in its natural setting. However, the natural and probably, the most effective and appropriate method is field work. Kashim Ibrahim Tala prescribes this in his definitions of field work thus:

The observation and careful collection of orature as it occurs in its natural setting, which, in the case of Africa, is the village. It is often conducted in an alien environment and naturally gives rise to certain situations that the researcher must anticipate by preparing a range of possible responses. (14)

Tala’s submission here lays emphasis on careful observation and warns the potential field worker to anticipate unforeseen circumstances in the field. His submission does not also recognise the changing nature of oral literature, which this paper seeks to highlight. Oral literature in Africa can also be collected in urban centres not only in the village because of its changing nature. Nkem Okoh endorses this view when he quotes Emmanuel Obiechina as arguing that:

The average town-dweller in West Africa … is still a peasant at heart, with a thin layer of modernist sophistication concealing the deep centre of traditional beliefs and feelings. Even the intellectuals of West Africa, who are most exposed to world intellectual traditions and world urban technologists culture, are equally at home in their local traditional culture. (84 – 85).

The implication here is that even those who live in the cities still have knowledge of traditional beliefs and the cultures of their people. Consequently, these researchers did not find it unscientific or odd getting some data from specialist informants who live in the cities but have knowledge of their oral tradition.

Nol Alembong on his part, submits that field work entails careful observation, interviews and the administering of questionnaires. He argues strongly that the observation method facilitates the collection of data by direct observation. It also, according to him, enables the researcher to pay particular attention to:

Such concerns as physical and social settings of events, interaction between participants, ideas and sentiments expressed, modes of expression and the overall performance aesthetics, as well as the time and duration of events. (14 – 17)

Alembong pursues his argument further by stating that the interview method is suited to the collection of information on “what informants knew, believed in, expected, felt, did, or which explained or gave reasons for any of the preceding” (17).

In spite of the submission of the foregoing two scholars of orature on the collection of data, one method, the library search, has not been mentioned. This method is currently very important and relevant when the researcher has to deal with data that has already been collected, translated and published. That is why Graham Furniss is right to state:

Long gone are the days when the only way of seeing and hearing a verbal art performance was by being physically present as the story was told, the song was sung, or the play enacted. It is commonly held among a number of academics and commentators in Nigeria that performances of some ‘traditional’ literature (and part of the programme of some cultural
commentators is to identify and revalue a L’adun Gardajiya ‘traditional customs’) have all but ceased under deleterious effects of radio, television and modern culture. (ii)

Unfortunately, it is important to observe here like other researchers have rightly done, that the bulk of the early collections was poor from the literary point of view. Ruth Finnegan points this out in the following submission:

Indeed, when one considers the vast amount published, it is surprising how poor much of it is. Poor, that is, in the sense that so much is based on unquestioned assumptions and so little is said about many topics in which a student of literature would naturally be interested like, for instance, the art of originality of the individual composer, the nature of the audiences reached, the local assessment of the relative worth or seriousness of stories against other forms, or the position of the story-teller himself. (317)

Gershon Legman is of the same opinion as Finnegan on the methods of collecting and publishing oral texts. He states below how such texts should be handled:

It is not enough, and it will never be enough, to publish raw collections of folktales and folk materials or hundredth reduplicative versions of over-collected song texts. What is necessary now, and long overdue, is to base publication deeply upon some meaningful and mature interpretation – socio-analytic, or psycho-analytic, or any other kind of analytic so long as it is analysed of what the materials means, and meant of the people who have transmitted it. (254)

Both Finnegan and Legman are recommending that collectors of oral literature should break away from the traditional folklore and anthropological approach to the collection and study of oral literature. That is why these researchers argue that this recommendation brings out the worthwhileness of the present study of Mbum oral poetry as a changing activity of recreation and redemption. There is also sufficient evidence in contemporary scholarship to corroborate the fact that many scholars have understood the foregoing message from Finnegan and Legman, and are now paying more attention to such characteristics of oral literature as the cognitive, expressive and social features. That is why Ben-Amos insists that:

The attempts to discover the principles of oral literature communication in each culture in Africa must begin with the identification and analysis of the cognitive, expressive and social distinctive features of oral literature forms. The cognitive features consist of the names, taxonomy and commentary by which a society labels, categorises, and interprets its forms of oral literature within a wider system of discourse; the expressive features are the styles, the contents and the structures which characterise each genre, and the social features are the constituents of the situational contexts of each oral literature performance. (216)

The substance of the foregoing contention highlights the fact that recent collections of African oral literature are more reliable because they are made by scholars who pay particular attention to many literary aspects which earlier collectors tended to ignore or overlook. This view supports the research worthwhileness of the study of Mbum oral poetry as a changing activity that carries out two functions of literature; recreation and redemption. This collection would also demonstrate that oral literature is not static but is a dynamic activity that changes with the changing times and, therefore, is very imperative that it is collected and preserved for future generations.

The foregoing submission and the earlier arguments by Finnegan, Legman and Ben-Amos relative to the collection of oral literature, raises a fundamental question, can oral literature that has been collected and published still be considered as oral literature? The answer, according to Finnegan (in Simms), is in the affirmative:
In this process, writing has played an important part. Indeed, there is a striking overlap between oral and written literature. It is true that when one speaks of ‘oral literature’, the obvious model is of literature that is composed, transmitted and performed orally, and this indeed is true of some cases. But there are also instances where literature is oral only in some of these senses. For example, a piece may be composed in writing, but then transmitted and performed orally; or it may be composed and performed orally but writing may be used in its transmission. (22 – 23)

The implication here is that oral and written literatures are not two separate categories of material. They are complementary. In spite of these complementarities, however, in this paper, emphasis is placed both on mode of transmission which is oral and the fact that the poems are sufficiently imaginative and creative.

In light of the above, these researchers will analyse some poems recorded live by them and others from recorded sources. In the course of the analysis, the importance of the social context in which the poems are performed is emphasised. When performance principles of Mbum oral poetry are discussed, due attention would be given to both the performers and audience as well as the meaning, place and significance of the poems in the life of the Mbums who produce and use them. Isidore Okpewho argues that:

To play down social context and mode of performance of oral literature is to give a very truncated picture of its nature and essence. With written literature, to ignore the social background and the public to which it is addressed gives a misleading view of its significance. And with oral literature, the impact of a particular piece can scarcely be discovered from the textual context alone, without some attention to the occasion, audience, local meaning, individual touches by the performer at the moment of delivery and so on. (42)

They are all these considerations that inform the choice of the analytical approaches that these researchers utilize in this analysis of Mbum oral poetry.

The analysis of the songs and ritual incantations was guided by new-historicism and cultural criticism. These two critical approaches were found relevant considering that Mbum oral poetry is informed by its rich cultural heritage. Again, considering the fact that Mbum oral poetry is appreciated against the backdrop of both historical and contemporary realities, new-historicism and cultural criticisms are considered important. New historicism and cultural criticism are united by their compulsion to relate literature to history, and to treat texts as indivisible from, the socio-historical and cultural contexts. In his introduction to his New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, Kiernan Ryan contends:

New historicism and cultural materialism have enriched the field of literary studies by letting all the other disciplines in on the act, plugging texts back into historical contexts, probing literature’s implication in social, racial and sexual oppression, and giving criticism a political edge and pertinence it had generally lacked. (xvii)

It is against this background that new historical literary criticism and cultural criticism are utilized in this paper. Mbum oral literature is informed by both the Mbum history and culture. Indeed, the most promising developments in recent radical new historical criticism have been concerned with reflecting on the past, opening up the horizon of futurity and highlighting contemporary issues. That explains our theoretical choice. Hence, if this radical new historicist perspective is to be relevant in enhancing contemporary reality furnished by historical past, the power of the poetic texts from the remote and recent past should call our attention to the preconceptions in to question, disclosing insights in to its world and our insights deemed possible.
Statement of the Problem
The major problematic worth investigating in this paper is the fact that many scholars and researchers of the Euro-centric tradition have continued to collect data on African oral poetry, but have not bothered to subject this poetry to literary analysis. They let it be used as handy materials for ethnology, anthropology, linguistics, theology, psychology. African oral poetry has thus remained a treasure trove of manners and customs, a storehouse of vocabulary, a reservoir of archetypes, an inexhaustible source for the historian, a training ground of the phonetician, a quarry for the anthropologist, a paradise for myth-collectors. African oral poetry as literature seems to have remained unexplored territory. Ruth Finnegan points out that the bulk of the early collections of oral literature was poor from the literary point of view:

Indeed, when one considers the vast amount published, it is surprising how poor much of it is. Poor, that is, in the sense that so much is based on unquestioned assumptions and so little is said about many topics in which a student of literature would naturally be interested like, for instance, the art of originality of the individual composer, the nature of the audiences reached, the local assessment of the relative worth or seriousness of stories against other forms, or the position of the story-teller himself. (317)

It is against this backdrop that we set out to examine and situate Mbum oral poetry within the realm of literature. Thus, like most written scripts, Mbum oral poetry can be considered as a changing activity that successfully carries out the literature functions of recreation and redemption in a changing environment.

Research Questions
A series of questions arise; how far are the texts collected by linguists, ethnologists, anthropologists and missionaries to be considered literature? What exactly is literature? And how is oral poetry/literature to be distinguished from mere speech? If we do extend the term ‘literature’ to oral matter, the fundamental question will be: can any text be considered literature simply because it is handed down and preserved? Given that the avalanche of written poetic works has beclouded the focus of researchers on oral poetry, and Mbum oral poetry is not an exemption, can this oral poetry carry out the literature functions of recreation and redemption? Is it aesthetically fulfilling and ideologically appealing? These are some of the questions that this paper seeks to address.

Hypothesis
Based on the research problem and questions stated above, it is the hypothetical contention of this paper that Mbum oral poetry, a good changing activity and good literature, is a veritable instrument that can be used to recreate and redeem the Mbum people. For example, Mbum oral poetry can be used to settle land disputes, raise political awareness, debunk social injustice and satirise social ills like theft, prostitution, abortion and sexual misdemeanor. Simply put, Mbum oral poetry is literature and can effectively carry out the literature functions of recreation and redemption.

Scope / Textual Analysis
Although Mbum oral poetry manifests itself in different forms, this paper preoccupies itself with two types: religious and social poetry. According to Kashim Tala, religious poetry covers prayers, hymns, and ritual incantations, while social poetry includes the dirge, praise and blame, work songs and children’s songs. (43)

This paper will, however, treat three religious poems/songs and more social poems bringing out both their socio-cultural flavour and taste, the six poems/songs are supposed to be presented first in Limbum, and thereafter transcribed and translated into English, but due to the constraint of space, only four will go through this process. Two others will simply be presented in their English versions.
The Mbumb people, like the Kikuyu people of Kenya in East Africa, consider land an important medium through which they communicate with their ancestors and forefathers. In this regard, each time there is a land dispute, the Quarter Head, Sub Chief, the Chief or Fon pours libation while invoking the spirits resident in the ancestral land to come and dispense justice. This type of justice administered by pouring libation and the intervention of the ancestors, the Mbumb people believe, is very effective. This is because the land is eventually given to the real owner, and the intruder or invader who lays false claims is eventually exposed. Below is a typical incantatory declaration made by two chiefs with regard to a land boundary dispute. The declaration is poetically rich and ideologically appealing. Hear the two Fons, the Fon of Ndu and the Fon of Ngarum disputing over the boundary between Ndu and Ngarum.

Séne yu le nta ñntaŋ di’,
Aba ene di’ ha ñmba ene tur mé
Nwe mó’ a she lâne tur e ye.
Me ambo’ tar we ñfûñj she mé tur d’ha
A she lâne, me, ka’bâne mbó’ d’ha tur méâh
A te séne ne’ ndoŋ ha a she tur-e
À wéñyu mbe nshe she a yu mbe nshe na,
A’ wéñyu we ñdfûng, ka’ ban e me nya’ba mde
Aba, m’ka’, kur ndoŋha no’ nshe le njono,
Aba mnoŋ viba le bta, m’ye’
To?’ mâmbu, ma’ eku cuu
Ashe la-me ne m’be no ndoŋha,
Fa mfura fonjte ye ye no,
Ka’ ba ene e ku ñfî mèfîp-1-
Yeye ku ye

Yeye-egwe’, to ma’mbù, má’ eku cuu
Keyu ba yaŋ- he, kéyu bâke –oh
Yi dun e ñwēshe e ñfdîf-1-
Ka’ ba ne ñwēshe di’yu yi,
Efa’byee a’ of ñe ye,
Kebe tap yi ru, mo’ viba njip mbù ta’p
Bane a le ndoŋme kur ma,
A fane ye te e no, a le nshe njø,
Te mé me no, te be du le cu a mda’p
Ye le yu she be le fu.

(Approximate English translation)

Today, we are scrambling over a piece of land,
Which I know I am the owner,
Some one now claims ownership of it
I, the Fon of Ndu, who owns this land,
Now proclaim that if this land does not belong to me
I stand here with this cup to pour,
You gods of this land who dwell here
You gods of the soil of ndfûng (Ndu);
If I do perjure, haba!
When I pour from this cup,
When I put some of this soil in it and drink
Haba! In three days I should see;  
Defecate and vomit at the same time;  
When I drink from this cup  
I will give my brother to drink  
If he seeks to cheat, let him see;  
When he falls, defecates and vomits at the same time. Whether it is a diseases;  
Let it afflict the fraudster.  
As to the right owner of this land;  
When he farms, let him harvest;  
Let the harvest fill the bands and overflow  
Here I pour the wine  
I give to him that he too may drink  
With some earth  
I too will drink, let people stay at home  
And see what will happen.

The Fons of Ndu and Ngarum would speak and drink from the traditional cup; and this way, a land dispute is settled. Instead of going to the neo-colonial court, the land crisis is traditionally settled. The reality today may be different considering the advent and the institutionalization of neo-colonial courts; this is what used to be obtained in the past. Society could be easily redeemed from this approach where all citizens are encouraged not to indulge in disputes, especially where one is falsely claiming what does not belong to him/her. This incantation points out two basic concepts that run through world religious systems – namely, the idea of the power over and above men which demands goodness from man whose nature emanates from HIM, the source, the GOOD. The other is that there is within the nature of God and His universe, a perfect arithmetical retribution/rewards which may take various forms for actions of man; and therefore, evil must be avoided to avoid self destruction. It is from this kind of interpretation of the foregoing incantation or poem that one can rightly draw inspiration from Daniel N. Wambutda’s “There cannot be sustained Justice without the reality “God”” where he argues thus:

It is in the unalloyed nature of man like – his source the GOOD to have the only freedom to pursue the course of goodness; a deviation from which, though possible, leads to destruction since it amounts to self-negation. (Abstract)

From the foregoing submission, therefore, one can rightly contend that Mbum oral poetry and literature in general contributes enormously to the redemption of its society.

The incantations chanted in various occasions in the Mbum land address different issues. There is hardly any restriction in becoming the officiating priest of an incantation ritual. Certain incantations, however, may require somebody whose family background, training, career and social status have been determined by society. For example, the two Fons mentioned above are prominent priests of some shrines in which incantation rites are performed. In land matters, like the land boundary dispute between the Ngarums and the Ndu people, the two Fons are automatically landlords; consequently they are the officiating priests of such incantation rituals. Membership of this restricted category is hereditary since their sons succeed the Fons, Chiefs and Sub-Chiefs upon their deaths.

From the incantation chanted above, two things are emphasised: there is the constant repetition of ‘I’ for emphatic reason. Both the Fons of Ndu and Ngarum use ‘I’ and not ‘we’. However, the ‘I’ should be understood as the royal ‘we’ since the Fons/Chiefs in the Mbum land have the qualities of epic heroes. The fate of the community is inextricably linked to the fate of the Fons. Apart from the emphasis stressed by this ‘I’ persona, there is also an element of formal realism as the constant and frequent use of the ‘I’ persona creates an atmosphere of reality and authenticity. The two Fons give
the impression that they were there from the time of creation since Fons, Chiefs and Sub-Chiefs do not die in the Mbum cultural and traditional senses. They get ‘missing’, and can be “found”. In other words, since another Fon/Chief or Sub-Chief is crowned in the event of the death of the other Fon/Chief or Sub-Chief, the Mbum people use the euphemism ‘missing’ and not death.

Another aspect/element of style evident in the above incantation is symbolism;

When I pour from this cup
When I put some of this soil in it and drink
Haba! In three days I should see;

Numbers like colours in the Mbum cosmology have religious meanings attributed to them. The number ‘three’ seems to be sacred or special among Mbum people. For example, those who have titles, and those who have been initiated in the traditional way of greeting the Fon/Chief clap three times before the Fon/Chief and say nsfh. Equally related to the significance of number ‘three’ are the three gods: nyuh ngong, God Almighty, nyuh mbuh family god and nyuh lah, the god of the community. In this vain, Mbum people are merciful and considerate people. That is why after the incantation ritual, the two contenders over the piece of the disputed land are given up to ‘three’ days to either reconsider their positions if they are laying false claims to the land or face the wrath of the gods. In the Mbum tradition and culture, this ritual incantation is taken very seriously as many fraudsters have met their demise through this. Today, however, the reality seems to be different. People prefer to settle land disputes more in courts, which may not be the best because the rich mostly buy their way out. There is more justice in the traditional and cultural way of dispensing justice than in the modern context where justice seems to be meant for the highest bidder. Most traditionalists still depend on the ways of their ancestors for such disputes to be settled.

Given that the traditional method of dispensing justice is more genuine than the justice in the neo-colonial courts that have been corrupted by money, this paper advises that land settlement or land disputes in the Mbum land should be traditionally and culturally arranged since these researchers concede to Daniel N. Wambutda’s contention that:

… mundane laws cannot bring about sustained justice in the world because these must fail to penetrate the ultimate principles of existence and that only man’s realization that he is an offshoot of the Ultimate Source of Entity to which by nature he responds to his happiness and salvation or neglects to his destruction. Only that realization can bring about lasting justice in the world community; and the concept of ”God” is needed for that. (Abstract)

This is exactly what these critics argue that Mbum oral poetry can contribute greatly to redeeming society. The content of good poetry as the one just analysed brings out the redemptive powers of literature in the society.

In many and various ways, the Mbum people respond to their spiritual world of which they are sharply aware. This response generally takes on the form of worship, which is eternalized, in different acts and sayings. Some of these acts are formal, regular or extempore, communal or individual, ritual or unceremonial, through word or deed. Sacrifices and offerings constitute one of the commonest acts of worship among the Wimbum. In times of difficulties or adverse situations like drought, epidemic, hunger and starvation, sacrifices and offerings are directed to one or more of the following: God, spirits and the living-dead. The spirits and living-dead are regarded as intermediaries between God, the Almighty and men, so that God is the ultimate recipient.

John S. Mbiti in African Religions and Philosophy advances four main theories to explain the function and meaning of sacrifices and offerings in the African cosmological system in general. They are the
gift theory, the propitiation theory, the communion theory and the thank-offering theory (59). The Mbumb traditional and cultural offerings and sacrifices fall within the propitiation theory as demonstrated in the incantatory rituals below. The entire community and its chief priest gather to appeal to the gods through their ancestors for rain to fall so that the hunger crisis could be resolved:

Sè’e me nepwer fai Ndzishotôh
Ene nhu a lé sangur
A she lâne aba, a we we’ am du ntombe’
A we we’ am da’h wer mbe tuŋ she na
Ashe ke’, a wer-e
Wer-e ndfuŋ wer a she lâne
Nji she le koo
Ambô nyu a sangur na,
Ndip vi gushi we we
Mbinj à kane argwe’h
A she biphine we’ ene a we ke
Kè’ ne wer’e
Bane we ge te mbingweh,
Te bshii vi vu
kaba ne wer’a fa’ ba ke
O ke fa’ yuk u, kwe le ba ñgup, kwe mbu
A le mbvu wer’a turn a
A she se e le fa we mmêr sè’ne
Ene ke yu ba ke, e, we f’sil wè’re
Fale mbinj-ker-la’ wa’a
Wer’eke la’ e we tur rtarè k à
Nọŋ vi ba btar le ye

(Approximate English Translation)

Standing in the shrine are the rightful priests
The Fon and Fai Ndzishotôh
That the earth is baked by the sun
We have come to say that
Haba! You went ahead of us
You brought us to this earth
You have been taking care of us
Now there is famine and starvation in the land
Caused by drought
The seeds that were sown
Are all dry
We have come to ask for rain
From our care-takers
Let the sown seeds germinate
If we have wronged you in any way
Let the goat be sacrificed in our place
Here is the goat we slaughter
Give us rain
We plead for rain
We have no doubt when we plead
Because in three days, we will see!
The Mbhum people believe that the dead are not yet dead; that is why they channel their pleas through the departed, their ancestors to God. In this regard, an ontological balance is maintained between God and man, the spirits and man, the departed and the living, so that when this balance is upset, those living experience misfortunes and sufferings, or fear that they (the living dead/spirits) will strike them. The making of sacrifices and offerings in the Mbhum land has a dual function. Apart from the fact that it is a psychological device to restore the ontological balance between God and man, the spirits and man, the departed and the living, it is also an act of averting danger and a way of appeasing the gods. Again, it is an act and occasion of making and renewing contacts between God and man, the spirits and man, that is, the spiritual and the physical worlds. When these acts are directed towards the living-dead, as is the case in the incantation above, they are a symbol of fellowship, recognition, that the departed are still members of their human families, and still exert an influence on the living. It is against such a backdrop that the chief priest makes a passionate appeal to the departed to intervene in this crisis:

Haba! You went ahead of us  
You brought us to this earth  
You have been taking care of us  
Now there is famine and starvation in the land  
Caused by drought  
The seeds that were sown  
Are all dry  
We have come to ask for rain

The speaker/chief priest is talking in the shrine, and in the right hand is a cup of palm wine and in the left is a he-goat meant for the sacrifice. The blood of this goat is symbolic. It is meant to cleanse any abomination committed either consciously or unconsciously. Generally, in the Mbhum land, the common animals used for sacrifices are goats, sheep and fowls (cocks), and the blood from these animals is used to cleanse the land. Richard J. Gehman in *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspectives* commenting on the Akamba example affirms this when he contends.

The most common animals sacrificed are cows, sheep and goats all without any spots. The animals were strangled to death so that the blood could be collected and poured as libation from a half gourd at the foot of the tree. (207)

From Gehman’s research on the Akamba’s culture, some similarities can be established between the Akamba’s method of sacrifice and the Mbhum people. The similarity lies in the items used for sacrifices. Apart from using a cow, the Wimbum use goats, sheep and fowls for sacrifices.

The number ‘three’ once more comes up. We have observed in the previous incantation that the number three has some religious and cultural attributes and significance. The number ‘three’ stands for the three gods:

We have no doubt when we plead  
Because in three days, we will see!

The exclamation sign apart from showing the speaker’s emotions brings out the speaker’s conviction that in three days, the community will have rain.

In the Mbhum land therefore, the vagaries of nature like drought, ceaseless rainfall, poor harvest and epidemics are attributed to the passivity and negligence of the ancestors who are supposed to channel the people’s predicament to the gods. However, today, the reality seems to be different. Hunger and famine could be attributed to the failure of government policies to improve on the living conditions of
the people. For example, in Ngugi wa Thiongo’s *Petals of Blood*, when the Ilmorogians are hit by a devastating drought, Karega, Munira, Wanja and Abdulla mobilize the Ilmorogians who stage a protest march to the city to register their disappointments at Nderi wa Reira’s neo-colonial government. Their argument is predicated on the basis that their Member of Parliament, Nderi a Reira has failed in the discharge of his duties since he had abandoned his constituency and is resident in Nairobi. However, before this epic march, which eventually draws national and international attention, Njuguna had suggested that the drought was a community crisis requiring sacrifice; he suggests that Abdulla’s donkey be sacrificed:

> We send this donkey away. We sacrifice a goat. Nobody has the mouth to throw words back at Mwathi. You know he is the stick and the shade that God uses to defend our land. (114)

The Mbum people are fast drifting away from making sacrifices and offerings and are moving towards Christianity or blaming the government for one thing or the other. In the Mbum land today, there is a proliferation of churches, and these churches denounce these sacrifices and offerings, and term them “paganic and anti-Christ activities”. This notwithstanding, the hard-core traditionalists have not abandoned these practices as they consider them an integral part of their existence.

In his *Preface to Oral Literature*, Nkem Okoh contends that:

> No one can deny that westernization, modernisation and urbanization have made serious inroads and gained enormous grounds, even in the rural areas. Still, there is hardly any Nigerian culture in which at least a yearly festival is not customarily fixed or celebrated. (227)

Such a submission can only support the view of this paper that in spite of the fact that the Mbum society is changing and has become modern, oral poetry remains a vibrant force in it. We hope to demonstrate later in this study that satirical or political songs sometimes carry the news for the day as well as address weighty issues of contemporary concern.

Another interesting aspect of the Mbum culture is the fact that joblessness may be ascribed to the ancestor’s inability to assist the job seeker to have a job. As a consequence, some rituals, offerings and sacrifices have to be performed. In this third incantation rite, Nfor, who has sought for a job without success has met the chief priest with the other family members to make some sacrifices and offerings. It is the belief of this people that after the sacrifice, the “door of fortune” will open for Nfor. Due to constraint of space, only the English version of this incantation rite is produced here.

(Approximate English translation)

> The family members
> Have gathered today
> On behalf of Nfor
> Who has come to present his palm wine and fowl
> That we went to school and completed
> But has not got a job
> This case is presented to you
> That haba!
> It is here that you show us signs
> You initiated this shrine
> And left it to us
> We still do as you told us
> Here I pour this wine
Give him blessings  
Let him shine  
When he goes out to look for a job  
Let him have what he wants  
Cleanse his house and family  
For it all begins from the house  
He is in harmony and good terms with his family  
Here is his fowl  
Replenish and brighten his face and future  
When he appears  
Let him shine like the sun and moon  
Let him have a job  
I am the priest of this shrine  
Together with his family  
I offer this sacrifice.

Nfor’s misfortune in this circumstance is ascribed to the failure of the departed to perform their duties. Like the other African societies, the Mbam society believes that the dead are not dead. The chief-priest declares that Nfor has not done anything culturally abominable. In this regard, he deserves the blessings of their ancestors.

A yi ñgup na ambo mɛ se ɛ  
Here is his fowl, which has been slaughtered  
Ene à ghoni ambo me là nà  
Accept the gift  
Fa ye bsirara  
And give him a bright face and future  
Ambo nyu ba nwe ɛ  
Like the sun and moon  
Te ɛ e bokone le rfa’a  
So that he can have a job

Such a performance is not as regular today as it was in the past. Today, however, the problem of joblessness is partly of the government’s responsibility and not solely the ancestor’s responsibilities. Most Mbam people now turn either to the government for solace or the church.

However, when the unity of the Mbam community is threatened by conflicting doctrines preached by the new churches that crop up in the society everyday, sacrifices are offered to the ancestors in order to ensure peace in the land. The following incantation is relevant here:

Oh you the ancestors! O you the gods.  
What are these new teachings?  
Do not allow these bad teachings  
To gain grounds in this land.  
Today, this church, tomorrow this or that  
People are now divided: husband and wife,  
Mother and children, brother and sister,  
No!! Not here! May anyone who brings such  
Doctrines lack words with which to preach them here!.
This threat to peace is perceived in the poem above when the performer says:

Today this church, tomorrow this or that.
People are now divided: husband and wife,
Mother and children.

Peace and security are threatened by the fear of the people falling apart. The performer here sees these conflicting doctrines as a sharp knife put on what holds the people together. The outcome is division and disunity. These words uttered by the performer sounds like Obierika’s in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* when he accuses the Whiteman thus:

Now he has won over us and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on things that held us together and we have fallen apart. (124)

The Mbum society, like the Ibo was one in the past that thought and spoke like one. It shared a common awareness of the moral principles that governed the lives of the people at various points and levels of their existence. The new churches have now brought new words, new usages and new applications. These all violate peace and security in the community as they gain entrance into people’s hearts and heads.

This performance till date is a condemnation of those preaching and a warning to those who embrace the new churches that they should not produce conflict which ultimately leads to disunity and division in families. Through this performance, the performer makes the people aware of the dangers inherent in the new ways of worship. In this way, he contributes in restoring peace and denounces conflict, thereby encouraging unity in the society. This explains why the Mbums view dishonesty, disunity, cheating and conflict with a lot of disdain. This is, indeed, how redemptive Mbum oral poetry can be.

In another instance of redemption, Mbum religious poetry condemns abortion, murder, witchcraft, incest, stealing, just the same way as the social poems do. The people discourage such acts because they violate peace and threaten people’s lives. They believe that these wayward behaviours invite evil to their land. Such ills are always protested against and the ancestral spirits are often invoked to watch over the land. In times of such misfortunes or others such as drought, famine and rampant deaths, the ancestors are consulted. They are offered sacrifices and pleaded with to rescue the people from such situations or crimes. When an individual, for instance, commits abortion, the family incantation (a prayer) is offered.

**Abortion**

E you the ancestors! E you the gods,
This child has brought a goat and a chicken.
She made a mistake
She has off-rooted the seed!!
Here is palm wine
May you forgive her and
Cleanse this land of
Destroying your offsprings!!

The performer in this case names the crime of the person who has demanded the sacrifice as he invokes the gods through their ancestral spirits. This view is shared by John Njinti in “The Wimbum Traditional Sacrifices and the New Testament” when he argues;
The performer on offering the sacrifice enumerates the wrong doings of the one who demanded the sacrifice audibly addressing the gods through the ancestors. (12)

Societal ills are also deplored and condemned in religious poetry just as they are done in most Mbhum social poems. This is how redemptive Mbhum poetry has been and can be in such a changing environment as ours.

From the incantations studied above, this study can rightly state that they reveal a statement on the religious life of the Mbhum people. Culture is a people’s way of life. The Mbhum people have a culture though it is not written. Incantations are part of this culture and are performed around shrines. Sacrifices are offered to the supernatural entities to mollify and put them in agreeable mood. Such has been their way of life since the establishment of their community. Through these incantations, the priests advise members in order to redeem and expose those who deviate from the accepted norms. He makes them see the consequences of their actions not only on them but also on their society. In present day Mbhum society, the traditionalists still believe in these performances while some believe in the doctrines of the so many churches in their society.

Apart from religious poetry, the Mbhum people also have social poetry. This type of poetry is intended chiefly to debunk and correct certain vices in the society, thus, highlighting the redemptive role of this literature. This type of poetry either lavishes praises on some one for a job well done or lambastes and satirises the behaviour of social deviants and non-conformists. Whereas religious poetry is used on more serious and solemn occasions, social or secular poetry (with the exemption of the dirge which is a lament for the dead), is used on less solemn occasions like marriages, initiations and harvest festivals (Tala 51). The social songs/poems that will be examined here have three thematic concerns: abortion, theft and jealousy and gossip. All these themes are discussed in relation to the recreational and redemptive functions of Mbhum oral poetry.

Social poetry in the Mbhum land plays the role of the press, newspaper and radio. Ruth Finnegan in Oral Literature in Africa commenting on the significant role played by social poetry in the African society as a whole observes: “At a local level, public singing can take the place of the press, radio publications as a way of expressing public opinion and bringing pressure to bear on individuals” (237).

Abortion, theft, jealousy and gossip are considered in the Mbhum land anathema; in fact, these are culturally abominable. Consequently, any one who is involved in such deviant habits is ridiculed and criticised.

Abortion in the Mbhum land is considered a criminal affair as it entails the taking of human lives. The song below highlights this culturally abominable affair.

“Fur mu”

Kose mse yon é tatâ
She em te nta à she cheb hé
Ene be o là ne Bokà fur mu
Bokà a’ ka fur mu à tuŋ à chanjâ
Du mba kap ngang
Ne blè nwe she ambo she sú’
Kop she om she là ne à kop Mgogû’
Wé bokó’ wéchaŋ nîngjo
‘Abortion’
What a pity for Tatâ (Chief)
Who abused people at the market square
Because they said Bokà aborted a pregnancy
buried the foetus and ran to Ngang forest
with blood flowing over her.
A forest reserved for Mgogú’ (indigenous
women of a village)
You Bokà you ran into it
You Tatâ who brings out nwarong
and kenag (secret cults that defead the
land from abomination and witchcraft)
Bonje, what did you say about this?
I said nothing, I said nothing
What did you say when she cooked food?
I gave it to Tatâ, I gave it to Tatâ
Bonje and Bokà and Tatâ, God has
Erased your names from the book of life.

The three key figures enacting the drama are guilty of one crime or the other. Bonje, Bokà’s mother is involved in bribery, Bokà has committed abortion, which is criminal and culturally abominable. The chief Tatâ is promoting and encouraging what he should fight against. Tatâ condones what he should condemn. This is as a result of the fact that Boka’s mother gave him food as a sort of bribe. The conclusion of the song is that God has erased the names of all three from the book of life.

Among the Mbhum people, songs have a special function. Like the newspaper, radio and other instruments of communication, songs in the Mbhum land comment on the daily activities of the society in order to maintain and check excesses. This section will later on comment on the effectiveness of songs as a recreational tool par excellence. The above song highlights an aspect of corruption among the Mbhum people. Bonje, Bokà’s mother is a personification or corruption. In spite of the chief’s significant role in preserving his culture, he accepts a bribe in the form of food. Bokà’s mother’s move is to prevent the chief from allowing the law of the land to take its course; that is by expelling Bokà from the land, as the laws of the land prescribe.

Theft is another vice castigated by the Mbums. Anybody that is caught stealing is publicly ridiculed and disgraced. Ngala in the following song produced here only in English is a victim of a theft scandal:
(Approximate English translation)

“Theft”

Ngala eh, Ngala eh, Ngala eh, Ngala is evil.
Some one passed here going to the market,
Follow him; he will steal dishes eh!
Ngala eh, Ngala eh, Ngala eh. Ngala is evil.
We do not sing out hatred for you.
Your misdeeds have caused “moskware” (a
Group that specializes in the composition and
Performance of satirical songs) sing about you
Ngala eh, Ngala eh, Ngala eh. Ngala is evil.

The Mbums uphold certain values and virtues. At the same time, certain vices like abortion, stealing and backbiting are condemned. Ngala in the song above is involved in a theft scandal. And because of the corporate and communal existence of the Mbums, the relatives of Ngala are also targeted and ridiculed. In the Mbum cosmic, if a person steals a goat, pig or fowl, the person’s relatives are involved because the goat belongs to a member of that corporate body. The particular song is a satire on theft, and signals the danger of stealing to the communal and collective existence of the Mbum people. Mbiti is therefore right when he states:

   If a person steals a sheep, personal relations are at once involved because the sheep belongs to a member of the corporate body, perhaps to someone who is a father or brother or sister or cousin to the thief. (205)

The next social vices that are attacked by the use of satiric songs are jealousy, and gossiping. The Mbum people consider these two vices as the threat to their progress, collective wellbeing and social existence, consequently, those who are involved in such vices like jealousy and gossiping are lampooned in songs as a way of deterring them from such activities. The Mbum man believes that those who are engaged in these nefarious activities are those with idle minds; and as the saying goes, an idle mind is the devil’s workshop. The song below discourages such activities, which endanger the collective wellbeing and communal existence of the Mbum people:

(Approximate English translation)

   “Jealousy and Gossiping”
   Jealousy eh, jealousy eh, jealousy eh!
   Why are you jealous of something that
   Belongs to some one else?
   Jealousy eh, jealousy eh, jealousy eh!
   Why are you jealous of something that
   Belongs to some one else?
   Oh oh gossiping, oh oh gossiping
   Has spoiled the world
   Some people don’t think about
   What will help them in the future, they
   Spend their time gossiping and defaming others’ characters
   Tales without credibility have spoiled this peaceful world.

This special satire is therefore a scathing indictment on those Mbum people who misplace their priority. Instead of idling and gossiping, this song cautions and advises them to engage in valuable activities. To those with jealous minds, the song challenges them to emulate and work harder in order to uplift their social and cultural wellbeing. The series of exclamatory marks that punctuate the song reinforce the seriousness of the tone of speaker considering the devastating nature of jealousy and gossiping.

ηκό’νδοη ἢ, ηκό’νδοη ἢ, ηκό’νδοη ἢ!
Again, another important stylistic element is the rhetorical question that emphasizes the destructive and devastating nature of ŋko’ndoŋ ba Msa né, that is, jealousy and gossiping:

We ye yu nwe moh à ŋko’ndoŋ njobeke e?
Why are you jealous of something that
Belongs to someone else?
We ye yu nwe moh à ŋko’ndoŋ njobeke e?
Why are you jealous of something that
Belongs to someone else?

The various rhetorical questions and repetitions of certain lines in the song are stylistic/poetic devices par excellence. These elements of style emphasise the negative implications of these social vices called jealousy and gossiping, which are considered as threats to the communal existence of the Mbum people.

**Songs**

In order to further highlight the recreational and redemptive functions of Mbum oral poetry, it is important to quote H. Ogungbeson and D. Woolger, who in their *An Oxford Senior Poetry Course* contend that:

Poetry and song are basic human activities, and in traditional African society, the people have used these forms of expression to accompany the activities of daily life, to give utterance to their joys and sorrows, to comment on life, or simply to entertain. (7 – 8)

From this submission, one readily sees the function of recreation emphasised but redemption can only be seen when the “activities of daily life” are analysed or discussed. This comment by Ogungbesan and Woolger that poetry and song are basic human activities cannot refer only to traditional African societies but also to modern African society.

Talking about the theme of protest and satire in oral poetry, Jack Mapanje and Landeg White have the following observations:

“Poetic justice”: this neat phrase, once used to describe the chopi musicians of Southern Mozambique, refers to the rule in many African societies that allows poets an unusual freedom of speech. Sons may criticise their fathers, wives their husbands, workers their employers, and everybody, the chief or officials who rule them so long as it is done through poetry or song. It is a freedom which the rulers of some independent African states have found embarrassing and unacceptable. (129)

This explains the tremendous vitality of African satire. The songs discussed above are satirical and are quite clear about the wrongs in the society and how the faults may be corrected.

This paper also argues that just as three quarters of the people of modern Africa continue to live outside the cities, so an even higher proportion of the literature created in modern Africa continues to be oral. So, far from dying under the impact of western civilisation, oral literature, (oral poetry) remains a vigorous art, rooted in rural communities but flourishing too in the towns. As a changing activity, it is adapting to modern circumstances just as it adapted to and reflected change in the past. This leads us to the reason why oral poets can be heard dealing with aspects of the refugee problem, Ebola, proliferation of churches, exploitation, corruption of government officials and violence which are sadly but absolutely modern. Henry K, Jick has stated in his “Popular Song as a Vehicle for Social and Political Commentary in Post-Colonial Cameroon” that;

In spite of the profound ideas the artists discuss in their songs and the revolutionary explanations that they proffer with a view to awakening the consciousness of the majority of
the society, they remain popular in their communities. The reason for this lies in the theme of pleasure that the songs treat. Here, we refer to pleasure in singing and dancing, pleasure in drumming and musicianship, pleasure in the beauty of landscape and a whole range of pleasures … (80)

This contention highlights and underscores the relevance of recreation as discussed in this study relative to Mbum oral poetry in particular. Consequently, this essay argues that what is true of the Mbum social poems under reference in this research relative to recreation or pleasure is also true of oral literature as a whole.

Conclusion
In conclusion, therefore, it can be tentatively submitted here that Mbum oral poetry, divided in this study into religious and social poetry, is a changing activity, which can be effectively used for the recreation and redemption of the Mbum people. This is because the incantations and social poetry discussed do not only address the Mbum past but also look at the present as well as the future. The religious poetry is used to settle land disputes, restore peace in the community, discourage inter and intra-tribal wars and conflicts and contributes to culture continuity.

Meanwhile, the social poetry of the people for example, is considered here as a change agent, a recreational tool as well as a redeeming outlet for the people of the society. Satirical songs like the ones on abortion, theft, jealousy and gossiping are intended to discourage such social vices that are replete in modern day society. Indisputably, such songs provide entertainment and an enormous boost for the moral health of the society in question. This is how Mbum oral poetry can be considered as a change activity of recreation and redemption since in it “time present and time past are both perhaps present, in time future and time future contained in time past” (Okoh 223).

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