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# Oral and Written Literature's Influences on African Christmas Celebrations A Case study of Selected Authors Part1: Washington Irving

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**ABSTRACT:** Literature as a change agent touches hearts, souls, and minds and makes changes from the inside-out. Good literary writers have influenced world politics, cultures and social behaviour. Using the preceding theory, this study analysed the literary works of Washington Irving including: *The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon, Christmas, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and A Knickerbocker's History of New York*, together with oral literatures like *The Poetic Edda* and Norse traditions related to Christmas. Events in these texts were juxtaposed with present day Christmas celebrations – a new celebration that was not part of the old African society yet has taken over most if not all of Africa. This study confirms the theory that literature writers are the propagators of present day Christmas celebrations including the Christmas trees, Santa Claus and the reindeers. It confirms that literature subtly or with an upheaval depending on the tone the author sets in his writing impacts and changes cultures, traditions, social norms and practices of civilizations.

**KEY WORDS:** Oral Literature, Written Literature, African Christmas Traditions

## I. INTRODUCTION

Literature as a discipline has hitherto not been accorded the respect it deserves. It is a tool that has been used to affect behavioural changes in society and many if not most of the world's traditions and cultures are a result of literature whether oral or written. To justify this claim, the origin of one of the famous traditions was analysed, the tradition of Christmas. The changes in Christmas traditions can be attributed to both oral and written literature which have conditioned the readers, the societies to conform to their messages as Lotman suggested that:

“A text and its readership are in a relationship of mutual activation:

A text strives to make its readers conform to itself.” (Lotman, 1990)

This statement by Lotman explains why people will want to emulate anything they read that makes them feel good about themselves because they have been activated/ or spurred on by the text. The ever evolving changes in Christmas traditions can be attributed to both oral and written texts which have influenced the readers and made them seek to put into practice the noble traditions they had seen the communities in the text practice hoping to achieve the desirable outcomes they had observed in the texts.

Oral literature is the oldest form of communicating creative, artistic work and beliefs of a society by word of mouth usually from the adults to the young in form of stories, cultural norms and practices. (Wikipedia, oral gospel tradition, 2021) In recent years, oral literature has been written down with the aim of preserving it in its original form to minimise changes as it is passed on from one person to another. It is often referred to as oral tradition or oral lore and defined as knowledge passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth that is not written down. It includes the historical origins, cultural beliefs, laws or rules, educative recreational or leisure songs, poems and stories of any community or people group. It encompasses the three genres of literature namely poetry, play and prose/story forms. Oral literature is characterised by repetition, strong rhythm and rhyme, strong imagery, idiomatic expressions, music accompanied by costumes and props. Written literature refers to fiction writing that displays a sense of reality, conveys a main idea and uses figurative language. This form of literature began after the invention of writing materials and was boosted by the printing press. (Kachele, 2019) .



## II. RELATED LITERATURE

It is notable that Christmas was first celebrated in 221AD by Sextus Julius Africanus who chose the date because of a popular holiday in Rome, Dies Natalis Solis Invicti (Birthday of the Unconquered Sun) (Hillerbrand, 1998), (Weller, 1956), (History.com, History.com, 2019). His basis for choosing to celebrate it was a result of oral literature/ traditions that believed that that day or season was the birthday of the unconquered sun. When the Christians started observing Christmas, they only held a midnight mass or a service on the 24<sup>th</sup> of December (History.com, History.com, 2009), (Durstun, 1985). However, in most parts of the world today, Christmas is celebrated with lavish decorations, the ever green tree, sending Christmas cards, singing Christmas carols, gift giving, partying, feasting and Santa Claus. (History.com, History.com, 2019).

Many commentaries have described Christmas as a pagan festival without acknowledging that it was a creation of both oral and written literature. Literary writers in their bid to unite the world of their day borrowed from the celebrations that united communities and wrote joyful stories about those who celebrated Christmas. Christmas traditions refer to activities people engage in at Christmas time (Miller, 2017), they include customs, religious rituals, folklore some of which are universal (Elizabeth.C.Hirschman and Priscilla.A.LaBarbera, 1989). According to (Wikipedia, Christmas Traditions, 2020) traditions associated with Christmas are diverse and have evolved from when it was first instituted to more elaborate secular celebrations. The common traditions include church attendance, decorations, nativity plays, music and carols, extravagant meals and gift giving. Each community has particular aspects of these traditions that they emphasise more and differently from other communities. Some people in Africa attend midnight mass religiously each year, others go for day time services very smartly dressed with pomp and show, yet others spend most of the day in drinking sprees.

## III. METHODS

Critical instance case study design, observation guides, interviews and document analysis of literature related to Christmas were employed to gather data. The selected texts were cross referenced with present day activities observed in the ember months of October through to December in many African communities and other communities around the world. Convenience sampling was employed in selecting specific oral traditions related to the subject and popular literature which make reference to celebrations at Christmastime. (Richard Hayes, Brittany Kyer, Emily Weber, 2015)

## IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### a) Effect of Ancient European Oral Literature on Christmas traditions

Oral literature was transmitted through personal and spiritual appeal using repetition to form belief systems among the people. Various communities celebrated their deities in December as they had been taught by their spiritual leaders and observed their fathers and mothers do particular rituals and traditions during that season. (Durant Will, Durant Ariel, 1975). In the Norse culture among the Scandinavians they celebrated the winter solstice with fathers and sons selecting a suitable log and bringing it into the house with great ceremony to symbolise the return of the sun. (Cooper, 2000). They would set the Yule log on fire and feast until the log burned out, which could take as many as 12 days. The Norse believed that each spark from the fire represented a new pig or calf that would be born during the coming year. (Travis, 2018). The action of bringing the log into the house is related to present day fathers carefully selecting Christmas trees with their children and bringing it home before Christmas and decorated it with twinkle or fairy lights.

The Romans on the other hand, honoured Saturn the god of agriculture and held a festival called Saturnalia which was at first celebrated for a single day but by 133 - 31BC it had expanded to a weeklong festival beginning December 17<sup>th</sup> leading up to the winter solstice which fell on 25<sup>th</sup> December. Saturnalia was an extravagant, incontinent, sensualist time when adults took time off work and gambled, feasted, sang, played music, socialised, gave each other gifts, decorated their homes with wreaths and flora and wore colourful clothing. (Salisbury, 2009). Members of the upper class in Rome celebrated Mithra's birthday as the most sacred day of the year, on December 25 as Dies Natalis Solis Invicti (Birthday of the Unconquered Sun). It was believed that Mithra, an infant god, was born out of a rock (Jennadestined, 2013) and on that day cooked elaborate, extravagant feasts and made merry. All these traditions were a result of the oral traditions/ literature of those communities passed on from generation to generation. This oral tradition/literature formed a basis for cultural behaviour of the Norse and the Romans. Present day Christmas celebrations also have similar practices like those in the oral traditions of the Romans and the Norse.



**Juxtaposition of present day Christmas celebration with Mithra traditional celebration**

Ceremony	Feast	Colourful clothing	Greenery	Gift giving	Wreaths	25th Dec	Song/music	Socialise	Make merry
Mithra tradition	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Present day Christmas	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

According to the table above, it is evident that the earlier feast created by oral tradition, influenced the celebration of the later feast. It is believed that the literary writers who wrote about Christmas based on their knowledge of the oral traditions which were similar to the birth of Christ to build stories of how they felt the celebration ought to be observed. Even though Literature is fictional, yet it is closely related to what is observable in society and employs symbolism to effectively communicate the writer's message.

The Poetic Edda just like all other oral traditions passed on by spiritual leaders to the people introduced Odin the ruler of Asgard a deity among the early Germanic tribes. According to (Wington, 2018) Santa is a modern depiction of Odin. Oral tradition says that Odin used to lead a hunting party through the skies riding an eight legged horse which could leap great distances. Odin just like Santa and St. Nicholas, is also portrayed as an old man with a long white beard who rewarded good children during winter as he flew by leaving gifts in their boots placed near the chimney. (Vigfusson, Gudbrand, Powell, F. York, eds, 1883). These oral traditions just like all other cultural stories are a branch of literature and present day Santa instead of using eight legs on one horse uses eight reindeers. As discussed earlier, oral tradition was transcribed to avoid losing the original versions of the story because oral traditions evolve as they are communicated from person to person just like the story of Santa has evolved in the means of transport he uses to visit the various homes. Snorri Sturluson an Icelandic poet who in the 12th century wrote in the prologue of the Prose Edda the origin of Voden (Odin) was a literary writer and also contributed to later writers' description of Santa. (Sturluson, 2005). The oral traditions of the Scandinavian people had a character that rewarded children who had been good throughout the year with presents dropped inside their homes at night. This same practice is done by parents today who put presents in socks for children on Boxing Day to celebrate the holiday. This affirms that oral literature has influenced the celebration of Christmas by adding to it the character of Santa and the practice of giving surprise gifts in stockings to children claiming that it was the work of Santa.

**b) Relationship between Statements in Texts Referring to Christmas and Modern day Christmas celebrations*****The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon by Washington Irving (Washington, 1820)***

Washington Irving was not only a diplomat, short story writer, essayist, biographer but also a magazine editor. He wrote this book in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century as a series of stories about the celebration of Christmas in an English manor house. (Heitman, 2016). He was an excellent persuasive writer and this skill is visible in how he presented what he envisaged people would do at Christmas time. Gent has four subsets dedicated to Christmas season and its celebrations.

***Christmas by Washington Irving***

The sketches feature a squire who invited the peasants into his home for the holiday. This story depicts two groups the rich and poor mingling freely during the Christmas holiday.

"It brought the peasant and the peer together, and blended all ranks in one warm, generous flow of joy and kindness."

In the statement above, Irving the diplomat introduced a culture of people gathering together to celebrate Christmas regardless of their social status. The people who read Irving's story were drawn to emulating the good will and cheer of the season and they spread the good cheer and soon it became a culture that at Christmas time the well to do would invite the less privileged to their homes for a meal and servants and bosses started sharing a luncheon together. Through this short story, Irving encouraged the society to forget the barriers of bosses and servant at Christmas time and celebrate life together. This is done today in many work places at Christmas time where bosses organise parties for



all staff and there is mingling between the bosses and their staff because of the writers who introduced this custom at Christmas time.

Literature through Irving's work introduced to society the notion that people at Christmas time should have music in church sang by large choirs singing in harmony.

"I do not know a grander effect of music on the moral feelings than to hear the full choir and the pealing organ performing a Christmas anthem in a cathedral.. with triumphant harmony"

On observation churches in Africa and around the world at Christmas time have massive choirs singing Christmas carols in harmony as Irving foresaw in his writing. In this aspect written literature also contributed to the customs and traditions of Christmas. Irving in his short story showed Christmas as a time for love to bloom and a time for 'dead' relationships to be revived.

"The scene of early love again rises green to memory beyond the sterile waste of years; and the idea of home, reanimates the drooping spirit,"

Literature is responsible for the present expectations that people have around Christmas time that they will meet a special someone and fall in love. It is a result of literature like Irving's that gives people hope and faith that Christmas time love to rise again in their lives. Today, during the Christmas season, many men and women walk around with high hopes that they will meet that special someone in the magic of the season because literature has promised them so. Literature created a sense of expectancy in the society at Christmas time that their fortunes might change for the better out of the blue!

#### **Christmas Eve by Washington Irving**

Irving's fictitious celebrants enjoyed "ancient customs," including the crowning of a Lord of Misrule. Other customs that Irving suggested in his story was the gathering of the entire family to celebrate Christmas together.

"..It was composed of different branches of a numerous family connection, where there were the usual proportion of old uncles and aunts, comfortable married dames, superannuated spinsters, blooming country cousins, half-fledged striplings, and boarding school hoydens."

In the excerpt above, Irving beautifies the coming together of all relatives knowing that human beings are social beings and have a desire to belong. Irving's suggestions of what was done on Christmas Eve, served as guidelines for the society in subsequent years for all who desired to participate in Christmas festivities. At Christmastime in many parts of Africa, many people gather as families and it is the time they meet long lost relatives. Most folks embark on long journeys back to their villages to celebrate the day with their extended families. This is a practice that was introduced by literary writers into Christmas. As we have observed earlier, the early Christian church did not celebrate Christmas and when they started observing the day, they only held midnight mass on the 24<sup>th</sup> of December.

In the excerpt below, Irving borrows the Yule log from the oral tradition of the Norse culture and makes it part of the traditions of the Christmas season. And to give more concrete direction, informed the readers that the Yule log was brought in twelve days before Christmas. These are all subtle ways in which literature guides society.

"...by the squire throughout the twelve days of Christmas, provided everything was done conformably to ancient usage.....the Yule-clog and Christmas candle were regularly burnt, and the mistletoe with its white berries hung up".

In this excerpt, we see the collaboration between oral literature and written literature one feeding and directing the other. It is believed, that all of the Christmas celebration is a result of oral tradition as shown earlier in the relationship between Christmas and Mithra celebrations. In many present day communities in Africa, people will strive to find a pine tree, bring it in their houses before Christmas and if they cannot afford a live one, will buy a plastic Christmas tree.

#### **Christmas Day by Washington Irving**

In Irving's story *Christmas Day* he describes a beautiful romantic Christmas morning where children sing Christmas carols and he refers to them as "the most beautiful little fairy groups that a painter could imagine" (Irving, telelib, 2005). He goes on to describe the day as,

"everything conspired to produce kind and happy feelings in this stronghold of old-fashioned hospitality". (Irving, telelib, 2005)



This short story has impacted the present day celebrations of Christmas where holiday films about Christmas depict children singing Christmas carols from door to door during winter. These films also display a spirit of goodwill towards all men as Irving had said in his story. Irving further directed the society on what to do when he said,

“At Christmas be merry, and thankful withal, and feast  
thy poor neighbours, the great with the small.” (Irving, telelib, 2005)

In this excerpt he suggests how people should conduct themselves wherever they live. This literature has impacted communities in Africa where it has been observed that a well to do family in the village will cook extravagantly and invite the whole neighbourhood to celebrate Christmas with them. Usually these feasts are crowned with alcohol for the adults and soft drinks for the children.

Irving in this story elaborately described what was done in the world of his imagination on Christmas day from morning till evening. He laboured to explain the kind of elaborate breakfast that was served, then a trip to church for all even those who did not ordinarily go, then an invitation to a lavish luncheon by the wealthy to all the less privileged and their servants, then to merry making and dancing the rest of the evening till dinner. Present day celebrations of Christmas include an early trip to church by all and especially those who have not attended church the whole year round. They go to church with an air of piety and others with an air of pomp to be seen wearing new clothes and giving generously in the offering baskets. It was observed, that even the non believers went to church on Christmas smartly dressed. Among the homes that were sampled, Christmas breakfast included expensive items they would not normally eat the whole year round like butter, well stuffed sandwiches and all types of rare fruits. By this kind of behaviour, it can be asserted that literature has impacted African societies and led them to adopt a celebration that was not part of their cultural practices.

#### ***A Knickerbocker's History of New York by Washington Irving***

Washington Irving in 1809 published a satirical fiction “*A Knickerbocker's History of New York*” (Irving, *A knickerbocker's History of New York*, 2004). He said in his work that his aim was to bring humour to otherwise forgotten subjects so people could go back and revisit their histories. Irving begins his novel with several postings in the newspaper about Mr Knickerbocker who has gone missing. He tells of how he came to publish the work of a certain old man who walked out of his lodging one day without paying his bills in order to get back some payment for the rent the man owed. All this captured the attention of the readers of his day who wanted to find out what the old man had been writing in his room all the time he had stayed at that lodging. Irving's style made the novel not only attractive but also easy for people to accept any short comings in the novel. Irving describes St. Nicholas' appearance as having,

“..mighty pipe which the saint held in his mouth;  
a whiff of which was a sovereign cure of indigestion”  
“riding jollily among treetops, or over the roofs of houses,  
now and then drawing forth magnificent presents from his  
breeches pockets, and dropping them down the chimneys  
of his favourites.” (Irving, *A knickerbocker's History of New York*, 2004)

In this excerpt, Irving not only introduces St. Nicholas or Santa, but also the idea that good children are rewarded at Christmas time. By adding the idea of rewarding good children the same season adults are relaxing and making merry, he enlarged the base of the people who would be looking forward to Christmas. He made Christmas a time of joy for both adults and children. For the adult it would be a time to rest after working hard the whole year, for the child a time to have their good behaviour rewarded. This was also aimed at encouraging good behaviour among children and this is one of the aims of literature, to encourage good behaviour by showing that good behaviour earns the good person a reward.

Irving alludes to the St Nicholas from oral tradition and legends who it is believed that he was born in AD 270, died in AD343, and was an early Christian bishop of Greek origin who performed many miracles. Irving in the excerpt above presents St. Nicholas as a saint whose pipe's smoke cured those who had stomach problems. Irving's description of St. Nicholas, added to the traditions of Christmas a Santa who was a happy man and rode on rooftops dropping gifts down through the chimney. Irving's depiction of Santa as being jolly has served as the basis for the present tradition of Santa Claus exclaiming “Ho! Ho! Ho!” to all the passersby to show that he is happy. In his description of pipe smoke being able to cure stomach upsets he contributed to the modern world's view of the magical Santa Claus. The difference is that Irving's St. Nicholas rode on roof tops and tree tops and down chimneys not on the road like other human beings. These differences were the work of literature and were drawn from oral literature in the Scandinavian myths that believed in a god that led a hunting party and rode in the sky. By adding the supernatural into the celebration of Christmas Irving raised the expectation and hope of both children and adults in divine providence at Christmas time. It



also gave confidence to people to eat new things knowing that they would get relief from the smoke from St. Nicholas's pipe.

In all these stories we see an introduction of various customs and traditions to the reader. Irving's detailed description of what was done gave the readers the information they needed to join in the tradition of celebrating Christmas. Irving's manner of writing made the reader desire to be part of the society that practices those traditions. He directly addresses the audience when he tells them in the present tense that "at Christmas time be merry" using present tense verbs like "be" to direct the reader on what to do. Through his writing he gently directs like the diplomat that he was, into what he envisioned society would do at the time of Christmas. This is the work of writers to direct societies into the course of action they are to take. Irving's literary texts, guided societies in the manner in which the celebrants were to conduct themselves at Christmas time.

## V. CONCLUSION

The celebrations of Christmas originated in both oral and written literature. Even the rulers who chose 25<sup>th</sup> December as Christmas day did so because of the influence of oral traditional beliefs and practices. Irving reinforced the oral lore by borrowing from it and modelling for the reader what a Christmas celebration looked like. This picture that he painted on paper has been duplicated over the years by people across the world knowingly and unknowingly. In this respect we can say that literature achieved its aim to change societal behaviour.

The analysis shows that while literature may not make changes which are immediately tangible like the sciences do, yet it makes lasting changes that go beyond science and other disciplines. This is because literature creates and changes the belief system of a peoples and communities. Through the relationship above between Irving's literatures and Christmas we learn that literature has the power to change societies for good or for worse. Those who understood this fact from time immemorial have used it to influence multitudes for centuries. Let the reader decide whether literature has made a desirable influence on Christmas traditions or created a burden for the society. In that decision lies the realisation that literature is a change agent that should be revered today as our ancestors did who understood its power and used it as the means of preserving traditions, cultures and beliefs of their societies.

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