

Abstract

The major object of pursuing this study was to understand how oral literature has been used in the communication of change and innovations in Kenya. The study focuses attention on Central Province of Kenya. In the work, oral literature has been studied as a literary media delineating the genre's communicative role in relationship to messages in social-cultural, political and health fields. In this study, we begin from understanding the traditional context and the literary content of the study sample and proceed to analyze and discuss the new and innovative messages communicated by the genre. In the course of the work, oral literature emerges as continually changing and adapting to the social, historical and health challenges that confront the people of the Central Province of Kenya. The primary sources of data used for analysis in this study have been from the Kikuyu people of Central Kenya. Oral texts were recorded and sourced from oral artists, composers and storytellers during fieldwork in this region. Oral narratives, oral poetry in the form of songs, proverbs and oral dramas constitute the main data used for analysis in this study. We have also used in the analysis a few texts from secondary sources. The texts are analyzed as literary genres that are culture-bound. Interviews provided useful collaborative and augmentative data for the study. We have four broad categories of classifying content in our analysis. These include: (i) courtship, marriage and family, (ii) social construction of gender, and (iii) politics and governance and (iv) HIV/AIDS communication. Oral literature among the Kikuyu emerges in this study as a genre that continues to communicate normative values while at the same time exploring new contradictions that have affected the various institutions of courtship, marriage and family. The study also indicates that oral literature continues to play a visible role in gender socialization validating disparate roles for men and women. The genre contributes to the gender debate by extracting a multiplicity of standpoints on gender relations. At the same time, it emerges a medium of contesting not only traditional gender values but also the emerging modernist positions. Over the last century, oral literature also emerges as having played a key role in communicating change and innovations in the politics and governance of Kenya. The resilient nature of the genre is further demonstrated in this study by the way oral literature has responded to HIV/AIDS epidemic in the country. In confronting this relatively new phenomenon, oral literature becomes a tool that helps the people in conceptualizing and protecting themselves against the disease. The conclusions that we draw from this study is that oral literature continues to play a significant role in social communication in spite of various technological and literacy changes that have taken place in Kenya. The genre is constantly being created and recreated to serve specific needs and to respond to the crises of the moment.