The Narrative in Africa During the Middle Ages

Narrative is usually defined as an account in prose or verse of an historical or fictional event or a sequence of such events. The narrative might be simple in that it tells the events and is chronological in the arrangement of details, or the narrative might be more complicated in that it is less chronological and relies more on a plot which is usually arranged by a preconceived artistic principle determined by the plot itself. The African narrative of the Middle Ages follows the dictates of the narrative form; however, the narrative tradition in Africa is oral as well as written. The narrative in Africa, like the narrative in the West, embraces history, myth, legend, letters, travelogues, folk tales, prose, and songs.

What written narratives that exist of Africa during the Middle Ages are, for the most part, in Arabic. Scholars have been eager to point out, however, that we should not entertain the idea that written narratives did not exist in indigenous languages in Africa prior to Europeanization. Basil Davidson insists that a Swahili poem from the fourteenth century is extant, and other scholars suggest that indigenous written literature, perhaps narratives, did exist but that such literature was in the domain of priests and secret societies and that the common people did not use the written word.

Two written narratives that are reflective of Africa during the Middle Ages are the Kilwa Chronicles and Kano Chronicles. The latter work was done in the seventeenth century, but this account is based on an earlier version written by the Arabic geographer al-Idrisi. The Chronicle discusses the emergence of the Hausa city states and especially the predominant state, Kano. According to the legend, there were seven original cities, with Kano, under the guidance of two strong leaders (Ruma, 1405-1409 and Abdallah, 1409-1509) emerging together as a powerful kingdom with a strong government and a powerful center for trade and commerce from the caravan trade routes with North Africa. Perhaps Kano became a powerful center because its rulers adopted the Arabic alphabet for writing their own language or because the rulers developed a manual of government rules and statecraft to enable them to become better administrators.

Whereas the Kano Chronicles are concerned with developing kingdoms of West Africa, during the medieval period, the Chronicle of Kilwa is concerned with the developing cities of East Africa. Generally, the Chronicle refers to the development of cities along the east coast of Africa from Somalia to Tanganyika. Specifically, the Chronicle treats Kilwa Kaniwa, the island governed by a dynasty of powerful sultans from AD 957 to 1200. Because of the island's propitious location, all merchant vessels using the shipping lines of the Indian Ocean stopped at Kilwa. The port was ideal for refurbishing supplies. But if ships did not stop at Kilwa, the ruling sultan would send his fleet to intercept such vessels and force them to pay taxes. Kilwa became the major city state for trading in gold. This island kingdom also established trade with India, Portugal, China, and Siam.

The narratives of Kilwa and Kano are documents that were created for the ruling elite who could not be considered as disinterested individuals. However, there are two narratives that come out of medieval Africa that are considered to be objective. One of these works is the travelog of Abu Abdullah Ibn Battuta. Born in 1301 in North Africa, Ibn Battuta became one of the greatest world travelers of the fourteenth century. As a young man, he left home to make the hajj to Mecca, and he continued traveling for the next fifty years. Toward the end of his wanderings, Battuta made two excursions into sub-Saharan Africa. For six months during 1331 he traveled, by boat, down the coast of Africa, stopping at Mogadishu, Mombasa, and Zanzibar.
Another narrative form that is usually associated with the epic tradition is the praise song or the praise poem, which is based on the African oral tradition. These songs were usually composed to honor people, especially the gods, who had achieved significant accomplishments. The praise song is an important genre in African culture, and it is often performed during ceremonial events, such as funerals, weddings, and other important occasions.

In African culture, the praise song is not just a form of entertainment but also a way to express gratitude and admiration for the achievements of individuals. The songs are composed in a stylized form, often using metaphorical language and descriptive imagery to convey the qualities and characteristics of the person being praised.

The praise song is an important component of the African oral tradition, which is passed down through generations through the art of storytelling. The poetic style of the praise song is often characterized by its rhythmic structure and the use of musical instruments. The songs are performed by a group of musicians, who accompany the singer with drums and other instruments.

In conclusion, the African praise song is a unique and important form of expression that is deeply rooted in the cultural heritage of Africa. It is a testament to the rich and diverse traditions that have shaped African society over the centuries.