

THE CONCEPT OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL  
ORAL POETRY

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the features of African traditional oral poetry. It is an exposition on what constitutes African oral poetry, its features, its composition, its classification, and the theories informing it. To achieve this, the paper re-examines earlier critics' contributions and suggests a new approach to classification paradigm. It also takes a different stance on the composition of oral poetry giving credit to unknown

poets/composers though acknowledging that most oral poetry becomes communal properties over time. The paper also expounds the principles of the “alter-Native” theories been proposed to critique indigenous African oral literatures.

The existence, quality and value of African indigenous oral poetry were a matter of debate until about five decades ago. However, the controversy over the authenticity of African oral poetry as ‘true’ poetry motivated African oral literature scholars to collect, and analyse samples of African oral poetry. Assiduous efforts have been made to disprove the argument that there was no poetry in Africa until the arrival of European civilization. This assertion was made by some European and eurocentric scholars. According to Isidore Okpewho (1985:5), such scholars argue

that poetry is a mark of advanced culture or civilisation and the business of men of specialised skill and training who devote their time to observing and commenting on life with beauty and seriousness. Traditional African societies were, in the view of these critics, still groping in the dark with elementary problems of existence, and had not yet attained the level of achievement whereby men could indulge in the pursuit of poetic excellence. Besides, their languages were not yet sufficiently developed to cope with the complex techniques of poetic expression. Nevertheless, it has been proved beyond doubt that, “oral poetry possesses all the beauty of language, content and style associated with the best of written poetry. The case for the recognition of oral poetry as true poetry has been most successfully made.” (Olajubu 1981:71).

Similarly Aderemi Bamikunle (1985:48) contends that instead of defensive criticism, textual analysis of our literature should concern oral literature scholars. This is so because “we should disregard “the pre-judicial judgement of western critics who in ignorance said the most atrocious things about oral literature.” What is the nature of African oral poetry? Oral poetry has been defined by various people and many explanations have been offered on its nature. A. Emovon (1981:205) opines;

*Traditional oral poetry must be seen within the context of folklore – that is songs or recitations having measured rhythm and dealing with verbal aspects of customs, observances etc of a people... Essentially, a traditional poetry is a song that very often tells a story. It is a poem that no matter how composed has been transmitted primarily by word of mouth and learnt by imitation or example.*

This definition underscores the musicality of oral poetry.

Ruth Finnegan (1992:16) also states; “oral poetry essentially circulates by oral rather than written means in contrast to written poetry. Its distribution, composition or performances are by word of mouth and not through reliance on the written or printed word.” She nevertheless warns that many generalizations made about oral poetry are

over-simplified and misleading. According to Finnegan, oral poetry can take many different forms and occur in many cultural situations. It does not manifest itself only in the one unitary model as argued by some scholars.

By Finnegan's critical standards, Emovon's definition quoted earlier is an over-simplified view of oral poetry. Emovon reduced oral poetry to traditional songs only. Isidore Okpewo (1985:9) on the other hand, explains that "there are two types of music which we generally hear in the performance of oral poetry. One of these is the instrumental music... the other kind of music we hear in oral poetry is vocal or tonal". From Okpewo's assertion, we can deduce that music, either instrumental or vocal is a component of oral poetry but there are still other features. Finnegan (1992:26) states further;

*What we must look for is not one absolute criterion but a range of stylistic and formal attributes – features like heightened languages, metaphorical expression, musical form and accompaniment, structural repetitiveness like recurrence of stanzas, lines or refrains, prosodic features like metre, alliteration, even perhaps parallelism so that the concept of poetry turns out to be a relative one depending on a combination of stylistic elements no one of which need necessarily and invariably be present.*

The nature of Yoruba oral poetry is elaborated upon by Oludare Olajubu (1981:72).

*Yoruba oral poetry is a living and dynamic verbal art. It is meant to be sung, chanted, intoned in performance in the presence of an audience at a given social, religious, cultural, political or informal occasion. Its performance is usually accompanied with drum, music and dance. The poets perform either singly or in groups but most poets perform in orchestras made up of soloist, chorus, singers, drummers and dancers. Therefore, the poem in Yoruba is essentially a song and its performance is a musical dramatic opera.*

We contend that Olajubu's conclusion, which reduces all poems in Yoruba to songs, is wrong. Yoruba poetry as pointed out by Olatunde O Olatunji (1982) have three modes, namely the speech, chant and song modes.

Nevertheless Olajubu's definition highlights the performance feature of oral poetry. In addition to rhythm, oral mode of transmission and other stylistic elements, performance is an integral component of oral poetry. Finnegan (1992:72) postulates three ways of determining any oral poem. They include composition, mode of transmission and performance. She further reveals that oral poetry does indeed possess a verbal text like written poetry but for a piece of oral literature to reach its full actualisation, it must be performed. The text alone cannot constitute the oral poem. For this reason, no discussion of oral poetry can afford to concentrate on the text alone, but must take account of the nature of the audience, the context of performance, the personality of the poet-performer and the details of performance itself. "The poet in Yoruba oral poetry is a performer. In reality, he is a singer and an actor because his performance involves a combination of singing, drama and dancing, masquerading and costume parade..." (Olajubu 1981:74). The importance of performance in oral poetry is further emphasized by Isidore Okpewho (1985:8) in *The Heritage of African Poetry*. He likens the performance of oral poetry to a modern stage play in which a performer has to support his words with the right movement of his body or control his voice on order to make an effective impression. Furthermore, Olajubu (1981:72) opines;

*A written poem exists and is transmitted and perpetuated in print. But Yoruba oral poetry like all oral works of art exists and is transmitted and perpetuated in performance, that is, without performance, a Yoruba oral poem has no means of existence.*

Another significant feature of African traditional oral poetry is the audience. The audience constitutes a very important part of the performance. In many instances, the audience plays an active role in the performance even though the main artist is easily distinguishable. “Oral poetry achieves its forcefulness not only at the hands of the performer himself, part of this forcefulness comes from the participation of various persons (present at the scene of performance) in the creative act taking place” (Okpewho 1985:8).

Oludare Olajubu (1981:18) identifies three elements that inform the performance of the oral poem. These are – the situation, the audience and the text”. Similarly Ayo Opefehintimi in “indigenous criticisms of Yoruba Orature” recognises the role of the audience as critics of Yoruba orature performance (YOP). According to Opefehintimi (1995:159);

*...the audience uses various means to command and praise the effort of YOP artists who impress the audience. This can be done in various ways. First, occasional para- linguistic nodding of heads in certain manner can be indicative of approval. Second the placing of money on the foreheads of artists is a glaring evidence of aesthetic approval. Third, the audience often finds it irresistible to have shouts and claps of applause in situations of aesthetic satisfactory experiences... Therefore criticism on stage is the interaction between the artist and the audience, the latter contribute through statements of critical acuity and even chorus of songs while the artists endeavour to satisfy the audience by involving them in YOP in diplomatic ways. Therefore, the stage performance critical facet of YOP is essentially dialogue oriented. Often, questions and answers feature between artists and audience as a proof of this interaction.*

So far, we have examined African oral poetry as an academic discipline. Besides, we have attempted to examine the nature of African traditional oral poetry and have been able to identify rhythms, oral mode of transmission, performance and audience participation as important features of this art. An examination of the

composition of oral poetry is discussed below because in spite of efforts being made to understand the content, context and scope of oral poetry, the problem of composition still remains. It was widely believed that oral poetry is fixed and has to be transmitted verbatim. The texts are seen as communal properties of older generations. The whole community, and not simply an individual, is credited with the composition of the text. Such texts are built over time and enriched by each succeeding generation. New artists apparently learn the fixed texts by 'rote' method that is, memorizing them.

In contrast, Oludare Olajubu (1981:76-77) argues that the text of any oral poem was composed by a poet-composer at a point in time. According to him;

*Yoruba oral poetry like most forms of African verbal art is composed in performance. That is the artist performs his poetry/song as he composes it in the presence of his audience. The two cannot be separated. They go on simultaneously. The whole process is extempore and impromptu. There is no room for rehearsals or pre-prepared/ composed poems... No Yoruba oral artist can make repeat performance in the past. Each attempt he makes to repeat an old chanted poem yields a new different poem.*

Olajubu's position here is based on the concept of variability of the three elements affecting the performance of an oral poem. According to Olajubu, the three elements that control the performance of the oral poem (the situation, audience and the text) are highly variable. For instance, the setting of a performance may change and this change will affect the actualisation of the performance even if the basic text remains the same. If the setting of the performance remains constant, the socio-economic and political situation in which the poem was performed may have changed and this may also have an effect on the performance. If the audience also changes, there will be differences in audience participation. In fact where the audience remains the same, if

the performance is repeated, there might be differences in audience participation. Variability in any of the elements affecting the performance produces a 'new' performance. Olajubu's position is similar to Albert Lord's (1965) who claims that an oral poem is composed in performance.

Nevertheless, Olajubu admits that the composition and performance of oral poetry is learned. Although he argues that the artist does not learn by 'rote method' he agrees that the text of the artist is already set. According to him;

*The oral artist supplements his verbal efforts with dramatic actions, gestures, charming voices, facial expression, dramatic uses of pauses and rhythms and receptivity of the reactions of the audience. These are all integral parts of the composition process. Those non-verbal actions described above together with the costume of the artist and the prevailing mood at the moment of performance all add to the meaning of the oral poem. Therefore, in a way, the performing of the Yoruba oral poem is much more than mere verbal creation. (82)*

In our own view, the composition of the oral poem must have been undertaken by a poet-artist at a particular point in time. The exact manner and time of composition cannot be easily determined because it is an oral form. Most oral forms are not exact because there would have been additions and alteration over a long period of time. The original artist must have assembled the material of his poem from the community's traditional lore that is proverbs, history, stories, riddles, songs, maxims among others. It is as a result of this that some critics argue that oral poems belong to the community at large.

However, nobody creates in a vacuum. Like oral artists, poets of the written mode also assemble their materials from the language resource of the society. Writers like Niyi Osundare and Kofi Awoonor make use of a lot of translations and transliterations from their cultural loric materials. Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe



make use of African idioms, proverbs, folksongs, and stories in their writings. Yet those writers are credited with the authorship of their writings. In our opinion, it appears that it is because many oral poets in the past were not conscious of authorial rights that their compositions are credited to the community at large.

In recent times, there have been attempts to indigenise written/modern African poetry. As a result of this, many written poems are performed. In addition, more features of oral poetry are introduced into the written mode in order to add local 'flavour'. In such poems, there is a greater degree of musicality such that the poems can be set to music and its performance is made a public event like those of oral poetry. Tanure Ojaide (1995:5) observes that modern (written) African poetry which hitherto was condemned as elitist, intellectual, difficult and obscure is now enjoying new popularity. This is, according to the critic, due to the "possibility of some aesthetic strength hitherto unrealised in written African poetry in the new works which have successfully adapted oral poetic techniques into the written form."

Furthermore, Ojaide (1995:16) identifies two significant changes in recent poetic practice and the use of oral elements; repetition and musicality. Also, it is common now to find code mixing, code-switching and ideophmic elements in written African poetry in English.

Similarly, Aderemi Bamikunle (1995:31) and Ezenwa Ohaeto (1996:81) attempt to identify the oral poetic techniques in the works of by some modern African poets. Kofi Anyidoho's *Earthchild* (1985) and Niyi Osundare's *The Eye of the Earth* (1986), are good illustrations of such oral adaptations. The writers include, among other things, oral features like, high degree of musicality, translations and transliterations from the poet's mother tongue, and actualization of their poetry through performance.

The integration of oral poetic features into the written mode supports Finnegan's (1992:29) assertion that oral poetry and written poetry share a common boundary, and are very similar such that a clear line of demarcation may not likely differentiate them. According to the critic, "Oral poetry like written poetry possesses a verbal text."

Various attempts have been made to classify oral poetry into sub-generic forms. Finnegan (1992:13) identifies the following genres of oral poetry: epic, ballad, panegyric, odes and lyric poetry. Nevertheless, she states, "one has to accept that the whole idea of a genre is relative and ambiguous, dependent on culturally accepted canons of differentiation rather than a universal criteria." Previous classifications of African oral poetry by critics like Ebenezer Olukoju (1978), O. Olatunji (1984), Oludare Olajubu (1981), A. A. Kolawole (1990) and Bayo Ogunjimi and Abudl Rasheed Na'allah (1994) have often been based on the following criteria: structure, content, language and musical accompaniment. For instance, Ogunjimi and N'allah (1994) classify African oral poetry according to themes. This classification is based on the content. They identify religious poetry, incantatory poetry, salutation or praise poetry, funeral poetry, occupation poetry, heroic poetry, topical poetry, lullaby and occasional poetry. Each genre is further classified into sub genres. This classification is facile, ambiguous and overlaps. For instance "incantatory poetry" is religious in nature. Similarly, "heroic poetry" is essentially or primarily praise poetry, neither is "topical poetry" well defined, Olukoju (1978:83) attempts to re-classify categories of Yoruba oral poetry. He identifies three modes of discourse in Yoruba oral poetry. These include (1) *speech mode* (2) *chant mode* (3) *song mode*. Under the "speech mode" is the drum verse. Olukoju observes that previous researchers have based their classification of Yoruba oral poetry on the following criteria:

The group of people to which the reciter belongs and the technique of recitation;  
Stylistic devices employed in the recitals and the mode in which each genre should sound in performance; The manner of voice production employed and the internal structure in addition to the mode of chanting; The subject matter dealt with (reference to oral texts in general).

On the other hand, A.A. Kolawole (1990) bases his categorisation on the theme or content of the poem. The following are the sub-genres of Yoruba poetic forms according to him; *Iyere Ifa (Ifa divination chant)*, *Esu Pipe (Esu invocatory chant)*, *Sango Pipe (Sango invocatory chant)*, *Oya Pipe (Oya Invocatory chant)*, *Esu Egungun (Masquerade (ancestral) chant)*, *Ijala (Hunter's chant)*, *Ire Moje (Hunter's funeral dirge)*, *Oku Pipe (Funeral dirge)*, *Ekun Iyawo (Nuptial chant)*, *Oriki Orile (Lineage praise chant)*, *Rara (Praise chant)*, *Ofo (Incantation)*, *Etigeri (Satirical chant)*.

This categorisation, we observe, is characterized by ambiguity and overlaps. Besides, it is not exhaustive. For instance there are other deities like *Obatala* who is not listed here. These other gods have their own invocatory and praise chants. Furthermore, in some of the sub genres the basic difference is that of mode and not so much with content. *Oriki orile* (lineage praise chants) and *Rara* (praise chants) can be differentiated mainly by mode and not content. It has been observed that western critical methods which are uncritically adapted to African oral literature are unsuitable and inappropriate. At present, indigenous theories of African oral literature are still evolving. An “alter-Native” theory is being proposed. Various African oral literature scholars like Olabiyi Yai, Oludare Olajubu, Isidore Okpewo, Abiola Irele and Ademola Dasyuva are involved in the home grown theory. “alter-Native” is a term coined to suggest home grown ideas, concepts, theories which typically African and

which take cognizance of all informing cultural and sociological imperatives. (Dasylva 1999:39). The critic further summarizes the principles of the “alter-Native” theory;

Hagher Iyorwuese (1981:44) classifies Tiv oral poetry into (i) ritualistic performance, (ii) sung poetry and (iii) religious poetry. His classification is based on the occasion of performance. Again, Iyorwuese’s classification is problematic. Sung poetry occurs in religious poetry. Ritualistic poetry and religious poetry are essentially the same, what is ritual is religious.

Similarly, Samuel Akpabot (1981:7) suggests that Efik /Ibibio oral poetry exists in two major categories: ritual poetry and non-ritual poetry. According to him, most examples of Efik /Ibibio oral poetry are functional. This categorization, we observe, does not cater, among other things, for the formal attributes of the poetry.

From our examination of African traditional poetry therefore, the following fundamental features are identified: It is transmitted through oral means, and actualized in performance. Further more, it is realized in any of the three modes – speech, chant and song. In addition, audience participation is an integral aspect of the performance. Besides, scholars have used the following criteria to classify it: content, theme, structure, function and mode of delivery. Finally it is a communal property because of the contributions of various artists over time although a poet/composer must have composed it at a point in time.

Our position is that the whole idea of generic categorization in oral poetry is relative because the genres do not possess rigid boundaries. Therefore, a single method of categorization is insufficient. As such, we propose a plurality of classificatory paradigms with room for more than one choice of method. The chosen method of categorization should be determined by the purpose of the study.

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