

AFRICAN ORAL POETRY AND PERFORMANCE: A STUDY OF THE SPOKEN VERSE

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ABSTRACT

The article defines poetry and situates the genre within an African context, with justifications on why it relies on a performative enactment for the realisation of its full import. The focus is on the fact that much of what is characteristically categorised as “poetry” in African oral literature is intended to be performed in a musical setting, where the melodic and vocal components are mutually dependent on representation. The leading concern, therefore, is the observation that poetry in a traditional African society derives its classification from the perception of the society for which it is performed, and need not be limited to the Western construal or perspective. The article employs poetic verses from the Ham and Hausa of Nigeria, the Ewe and Akan of Ghana, and the Ocoli of Uganda to exemplify the position that an enactment reveals the core of the communicative act in an orally-recited poetry.

Keywords: African orality; communicative acts; enactment; performance; poetry; tradition

INTRODUCTION

The dialogue regarding what constitutes poetry in Africa has generated many debates in the academic world, but what remains is that the nature of poetry and how people



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perceive it differs from society to society. The opinion, however, is that when closely examined, poetry, in most cultures, is often viewed as the deliberate, careful, and ordered strings of thoughts seldom rendered in speech form, but in songs or rhythm normally delivered in a language characterised by the use of symbolism to create meaning that is often deeper than the surface or lexical interpretation. Given the above explanation, this article undertakes to define poetry and situates it within the African context with a substantiation of how it depends on performance for its full realisation.

The point to be noted is that much of what is usually classified as poetry in African oral literature is aimed to be performed in a musical setting, with the spoken constituent reliant on the performative skills of the artist. Our principal focus, therefore, is to examine how poetry, as rendered in a traditional African society, is not restricted to western construal or perception. Besides, there is widespread consensus that such texts found in the poetry of Homer in western classics were first rendered verbally before being translated into the written form through the agency of memorisation. Apart from the view that regards a verbalised recurrent recital such as songs or verse from “non-literate” peoples as poetry, it takes a cultural understanding of the context of its artistic exemplification to admit the assertion of oral poetry, especially when one is from a tradition where nearly everything is in written form. Although perceptions remain contested, it is adequate to proclaim that from the researchers’ point of view a vast store of traditional African expressions, verses and storytelling forms, to this day, are in unwritten form, yet there are long-term versions communally held in the shared memory of the people.

The previous outlook, undoubtedly, authenticates the reason Finnegan (2007, 1), a renowned European scholar with an extensive research experience in the oral tradition of Africa, concludes that Africa is an “oral continent per excellence” (Also, see, Gunner 2008, 1). Spoken and aural arts such as a song, folktales, proverbs, incantations and oral history are therefore, exceptionally valued, and are some of the enduring heritages that have been passed on for generations unknown. Attendant to this, Gunner (2008, 1) indexes that it was through “orality”—that is, the source of the texts in this study that “Africa has made its existence, its history, long before the colonial and imperial presence of the west...” What is more, Thomason (2015) emphasises the place of orality and pronounces that songs [oral poetry in this context] could give expression to the profundity of the past and the culture of society.

WHAT THEN IS POETRY?

The word “poetry” is a Western idea; hence it is derived from a non-indigenous African language. Meanwhile, some indigenous African people are said to have in their idioms equivalents of what Western literary scholarship may regard as “poetic,” but this is not the subject of the current discussion. Such an assertion is a subject of further research. Poetic language is flowery and is riddled with imagery, symbolism, repetition, metaphors

and sometimes makes use of exaggeration to express the African cosmology, belief and the understanding of the world. The problem in this discourse, however, seems to be the difficulty of articulating African thoughts using a language other than an indigenous African language. Even so, in the quest for clarity, and because this study deals with poetry, not as a “private venture,” as is the case with “literate” societies, it is essential to have working definitions of the terms, “poetry” and “performance.”

The conception of poetry without doubt, eludes simple definition because it comes in various forms and qualities—even more so that our view of poetry gives particularity to African oral poetry. Poetry, in the African context, Clark (n.d.) does not depend on some celebrated system of calligraphic known as the alphabet—rather, it is “delivered by mouth and aimed at the ear to move the whole.” Clark (n.d) further admits that “African oral poetry characteristically relies on performance and memory for its transmission and preservation.” The above assertion suggests that African poetry has its roots in the tradition of the African people. Therefore, the authors seek to identify the features of poetry in Africa, instead of providing what may be termed “a concise definition”; for there seems to be none.

However, it is evident, that poetry in Africa is strikingly different; both in its form, content, purpose, and mode of transmission from what it is perceived to be in Western academe. Besides, another definition of poetry that is relevant to this study, and could be asserted to fit the African definition of what is considered “poetic” is the definition that regards poetry as “a unique and specialised form of self-expression having some artistic features” (Akporobaro 2008, 2). The above definition is applicable in the African context when one considers that in Africa the ability to use language imaginatively to stir the emotions of an audience is a great asset to every talented speaker or poet.

Similarly, Abrams and Harpham (2014, 264–65) capture what could be regarded as the striking element of poetry and performance when they posit that:

Oral poetry, or “formulaic oral poetry,” is composed and transmitted by singers or reciters; from an early period, the recitations were, and are, sometimes accompanied by a harp or a drum, or by other musical instruments. Its origins are prehistoric.... Oral narratives include both narrative forms (see epic and ballad) and lyric forms... There is no fixed version of an oral composition, since each performer tends to render it differently, and sometimes introduces differences between one performer and the next.

The above assertion found in literature is quoted in length because it reveals that poetry, in societies where it is not meant to be read but enacted, privileges its complete realisation on a performative event—a case that the article argues. In theory, the existence of “oral poetry” is probably unknown to most people raised in a literary culture; such as those in contemporary Europe, which emphasises literateness, with a long-standing tradition of written forms. To the contrary, for *oral* societies, poetic renditions are primarily spoken and communicated through a performance before an audience.

Consequently, the theoretical framework, which situates oral poetry in this study principally follows a non-canonical conceptualisation of literature observed in western

literary criticism (Finnegan 2012, 1–5, Baldick 2015). As a result, the article theorises verbal linguistic creations with a blend of rhythmic and dramatic elements of the oral verse anchored in Africa’s conception of the skill of an oral artist as “poetry.” The view that the oral artist is a poet is adopted; since Africa is considered an “oral continent per excellence” (Finnegan 2007, 1; Gunner 2008, 1). Further, “oral poetry” is linked to the idea of an “unwritten” creation and communication of linguistic imagination, which conforms to the contemporary observation of poetry as a mien of excellent diction, rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, and assonance.

In pursuit of a universally-recognised theory, the article conceptualises oral poetry as distinguished from the written verse since “orality” was the mainspring against which Africa fashioned its being and history long before the advent of literacy (Gunner (2008, 1). The influence of performance in African oral poetry, on the other hand, goes beyond a matter of description (Finnegan 2012, 5). Apart from the proclamation that the nature of the enactment could substantially contribute to the effect of the poetry being performed, lyrics alone epitomise merely a part of the actualisation of oral poetry as an artistic experience for the poet/performer and audience. Similarly, the nuances and figurative connotations of words and expressions, the actual performance of a poem; spoken or written, represent the emotional state of the performer. For instance, the tone of voice, sobs, praise, invectives, and facial expression all form part of the performance. Consequently, we posit that African oral poetry or songs (as the word “poetry” is hardly found in most African languages) depended on performance for the realisation of its full meaning and is the manifestation of the intensity of the spoken linguistic skill.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “PERFORMANCE”?

For a society that is predominantly oral and mostly non-literate, poetry as a written text has little impact on the life of the public. The word “performance” implies the entire act as well as the context or the environment for the delivery of oral literature; and this involves issues such as the role of music, the audience, and movement of the body, primarily to give life to the narration. Performances may also be referred to as “aesthetic practices- patterns of behaviour, ways of speaking, (...), whose repetitions position actors in time and space, configuring individual group identities” (Kapchan 1995). The above view connotes that performances are based on repetitions, voice modulation, where lines learnt; for instance, gestures imitated, or discourses re-iterated become generic means of tradition making. The aforementioned expounds why Okpewho and many literary experts from Africa have argued that African oral poetry is formulaic.

Kofi Anyidoho, a scholar who conducted extensive research on dramatic performance in Africa with particular reference to the Ewe-speaking people of Volta Region in Ghana, asserts that “The concept and practice of performance are central to artistic expression and involvement in African tradition” (Anyidoho 1992 as quoted in Olaniyan and Quayson 2007, 383). Anyidoho further states that in the Ewe culture,

for instance, the equivalent word for “poetry” or “the poet” basically carries the same import for “poetry and music,” occurring as a combined art form. The idea suggests that the difficulty in articulating the discourse of poetry may be attributed to the fact that the English word “poetry” does not have an equivalent in the African languages. Similarly, Kunene, (as quoted by Anyidoho 1992, 383), affirms the above assertion by declaring that “Zulu poetry, being communal, requires a special method of presentation.” As such, “the poet does not just recite his poetry but acts it out, using a variation of pitch....”

The fact which needs re-stating, as pointed by Anyidoho above, is that African artistic tradition seeks to incorporate diverse art forms. It correspondingly links the artist, the audience, and artistic forms with one unifying experience (Olaniyan and Quayson 2007, 383). The aforesaid is the case when the audience is described as “active,” for they are part of the performance, where their instantaneous criticisms or applause and ululation further accentuate the great excitement needed for the sustenance of the presentation. Also, Okpewho (1990, 85) quoting Tokin, an anthropologist studying Liberia’s societies, acknowledges that while African narratives may not be treated as “sung poems” in the conventional sense, “they are nonetheless conveyed as skilled performances.” The above assertion implies that when one considers the nature of enactment in African oral literature as the distinguishing feature of poetry and other genres, it becomes even more challenging to arrive at a uniform conclusion, bearing in mind their integral elements, as reasoned by Anyidoho (1992).

Researchers who support the centrality of performance in African oral art forms call for the provision of notation for printed oral material to be “framed by oral cues in ways that a knowledgeable listener can interpret” (Tokin, as quoted by Okpewho 1990, 85). The argument presented above suggests that poetry exists in almost all aspects of oral art in Africa; and as earlier specified, the performative element is the leading medium for the grasp of poetry in Africa. The previous assertion further validates the role of performance in the rendition of not just poetry, as the case may be in Africa—but also validates the presence of the core of the poetic element in storytelling, epics, legends, myths, dirges, work songs, lullaby, and other nameless oral narratives in African societies. For the African, the art of oratory, which borders on the careful choice of words otherwise known as “diction” in literature; the creation of imagery, symbolism and in fact rhythm is measured as a mark of excellence in speech delivered differently from everyday conversation; as poetry is rendered before a given audience and in a particular context.

Since in a performance performers act out for effect—be it in a story, a dirge, a chant, or a recited poetic verse, it would be pragmatic that such performances be considered within the appropriate context, against the background of the society for which the performance emanates. Besides, the role of the audience is of particular importance in Africa. Bauman (1975) affirms the significance of the audience and the relevance of poetry as a dramatic experience. To him, performance enhances the experience through the enjoyment of intrinsic qualities of expression. Members of the audience in Africa

will probably not applaud a bad performance, but out of politeness may just mumble, or worse still, walk away quietly. This scenario puts high expectations on the performer to be creative.

ANALYSIS OF POETRY AND PERFORMANCE IN AFRICA

The analysis of poetry in Africa provides evidence on how the “poetic license” could be exploited to insult, ridicule and above all, negotiate for political, economic, as well as social functions. One of the economic benefits of poetry, often delivered in the form of a song in Africa, is that of verses sung in traditional organised bargain markets. In the said context, the songs are customarily persuasive and appeal to customers to purchase the merchandises or use services being offered by the vendor. Similarly, it should be emphasised that poetic songs play an essential role in collective work. The idea is that songs and music, in this case, will keep the manual worker entertained, while labouring cohesively. Besides, song poetry, we argue, provokes the restoration and conservation of history—hence, the need for palace courtiers, who serve both as historians, as well as critics of the King or Chief in most African cultures. The underlying assumption of the study seems to be that pre-literate societies, through song or poetry, as some would refer to it, compel to memory information deemed essential for preservation, which was then recollected and handed down to generations to come.

[Hums]¹

Do not be imprudent (silly) to dare the Ham, my sister;
you'd evoke the wrath of a united people

[Hums]

When you irresponsibly taunt a Ham lady,
Your folly will earn you agonising pains

[Hums]

Whoever deceived you to test me
go report I'm unconquerable

1 “Bat We Nanggwang” -“Dare a Leopard’s Cub” is a song/poem delivered by Mike Aribi Maida, a leading oral poet from the Ham culture, a minority group in Northern Nigeria. From research evidence, none of the poetic verses of Maida, popularly known by the name ‘Fisshaa’ (‘Wipe Away Tears’) are written. All oral performances are now available on Compact Discs and Videos.

The above lines were taken from a long poem, which we have engaged to demonstrate the wealth of linguistic configurations among the Ham of Nigeria, integrated with performance. The lyrics reveal two polemics: the unspoken and the articulated. From a cultural awareness of the Ham society, the “spoken” insult is not as abhorrent as the tacit one. *Hmmm* [Khwep—a hum] has a broad range of meanings and its piercing weight depends exclusively on the context in which it is expressed. For instance, when there is a death in the family “hmmm” could denote the deep emotive state of grief for the departed. Again, if things are fine in a given affiliation, say between friends, “hmmm” might suggest that the speaker recollects a past that evokes emotion (positively or negatively). Nevertheless, if *hmmm*, an expression which could also designate approval in the culture is stated as a result of a disagreement, then the implication of the unspoken could suggest a serious threat.

The question that a person not conversant with the Ham communal life may ask is “where is the ‘performance’ in the cited lines?” By way of a summary, the narrative in the poetry negotiates the identity of the Ham against the “Other”—and from what we have gathered, in the past, the poetry was performed in preparation for war. Even if the association to war is not entirely accurate, the proclamation “when you irresponsibly taunt a Ham lady” addresses a perceived “enemy,” which plausibly supports the view that the insult was directed at a non-kin. Consequently, the proclamation has the propensity to be associated with contempt and sarcasm, the two being discursive elements, which could elicit instantaneous laughter from the audience.

Correspondingly, the “halo poetry” or song, which is said to be a medium for satire or direct abuse, according to Awoonor (1974), is used for social sanction and serves as an avenue for “dissipating animosity and other hostilities that may endanger group solidarity” among the Ewe of the Volta region in Ghana. One fascinating aspect is that the poetry is put into a song, using exaggeration as a way of ‘eliciting a response from the audience. It should be noted that the presence of an audience makes *halo* a dramatic performance. The role of the spectators as judges, who decide who may be seen as “an expert” depends on the ability of the performer to construct expressions, which elicit the reactions of the audience imaginatively. Other elements of *halo* that need mentioning are the humorous and comic aspects. These aspects could merely be achieved when the performer uses a suitable and loud voice, verbal skill, excellent drumming and amusing dancing steps. Our understanding here is that these elements aid the performer to draw the complete attention of the audience, and may sometimes be engaged as a skill to construct the next line of abuse; depending on the tempo generated. Next is an extract from a *halo* poem, which we interpret exploiting the context to construe its meaning:

Hm hm hm. Beware!
I will place a load on *Kodzo*’s head
Nugbeza informed me that
It is the women of *Tsiame*

Who goaded *Kodzo* into my song?
 Questioners, this becomes the evil firewood
 he'd gathered: his hands decayed.
 his feet decayed.
 I am a poet; I am not afraid of you
Kodzo winding in the air, his anus-agape
 his face long and curved
 like a lagoon egrets beak
 Call him here; I say, call him here
 and let me see his face (Awoonor 1974)

The above excerpt demonstrates how *addressive* African poetry is. "*Hm hm hm. Beware!*" suggests that the performer speaks to an audience. The above element is undoubtedly one of the many strategies employed in poetry, which has its legitimacy in communality. To this end, the performer engages a style that is tied to mutual responsibility, where he/she says that it was the women of *Tsiame* who goaded *Kodzo* into his song. The performance strategy outlined above shows that the performer has a responsibility towards the audience. It is the poet, as understood by society, who should reprimand the erring *Kodzo* for going against the norms of the society. "Bring him here... let me see his face", is deployed to indicate the need for *Kodzo* to be present during the performance, while the audience assumes its role in serving as judges as well. The modulation of voice, mimicry, and facial expressions and gestures by the performer to demonstrate how pitiable *Kodzo's* case is would undoubtedly elicit laughter, applause or murmur.

The below verse, taken from a poem by Okot p'Bitek is one such an example of the link between poetry and performance in Africa. In a dirge taken from the Ocoli of Uganda, p'Bitek employs a repetitive structure and phraseology as part of the formulaic organisation of African poetry to portray how verbal performance supports the fate of the poor.

Ee, my aunt,
 The death of the poor
 My aunt, was she strangled?
 What death has killed my aunt?
 The poor woman died on the roadside;
 The poor thing died suddenly;
 Who has strangled my aunt?
 The death of the poor is sudden.

The above poem transmits an African lyricism. Besides, if one takes another dirge from another African society, a similar allusion and rhetorical question such as "who has...?" becomes a potential manifestation. However, what is absent from a text of this nature

is the voice quality, the context, and the mood of a loved one during the burial, lying in the cold hands of death, waiting to be gathered to join the ancestors, which heightens the tone, gesture and indeed the pain associated with the loss. Despite the elements cited, p'Bitek can transport the imagination of an African who is reading the poem to picture a grief-stricken relative logically questioning the essence of life on earth, as well as the futility of life's struggles, which tragically come to an end at the point of death.

Apaē, a poetry recited for the Akan Chief in Ghana sitting in state on occasions of community celebration (Yankah 1983), is said to be a dramatic appellation performance that makes use of gestures, mimes, and facial expressions to praise or even taunt the Chief or his ancestry in metaphorical and hyperbolic terms. The end of every stanza in *apaē* is followed by drumming and the blowing of horns. The reciter may dance, holding a sword, while he formulates his thoughts for the next line or awaits another poet or *obrafo* to take his turn. It is evident here that the call-and-response technique comes into play. Below is one example from an *apaē*:

That's him!
 Who is it!
 Who is it!
 Is it not *Osei Tutu*?
Osei Tutu Amponyamoa the Mother Earth, who when he
 finds a treasure
 He gives to his *obrafo* (Yankah 1983)

The above verse is a short appellation performed by a poet who uses his wit to trick or cajole the King into giving him a gift. It should be noted that the performance is carried out before an audience, where the Chief is the most noticeable. As noted earlier, the artistry of the poet has the potential to move the Chief into giving him an instant gift after the occasion and indeed, the kind of gift that the performer ultimately gets would depend on his skilful performance—that is if his performance captivated the attention of the audience, generating loud applause or ululation:

That's him!
*Akosa*² the enslaver whose bells are sounding in twos, and
 threes towards the battlefield,
*Odokoropagyan Aku Amanfo*³ whose bells are ringing;
 The sharpener-stone *Akuampon* on which weapons are sharp-
 ened to perform brave deeds;
 The sharpener stone *Sakyi*⁴ that feeds on iron;
 The hidden rock that disfigures iron (Yankah 1983).

2 A praise appellation likening the Chief to dreaded slave master.

3 Another attributive quality associated with being a great and feared warrior.

4 A metaphor comparing the Chief with a beast which eats iron.

The point that we are trying to drive home is that if the pieces of poems quoted above are read silently in an enclosure without the costume the *obrafo*⁵ uses, with no sword to brandish around, no body movement, and above all, the presence of an audience, the performance may generate little or no impact because it is not performed in context.

POETRY EXPRESSING LOVE

The Hausa language is spoken in some West African countries such as Nigeria, Niger, Ghana, and other pockets of places around the African continent, where the Hausa people might have migrated and settled. The language is rich in orature, and one of the poems, which we discuss below demonstrates the poetic performative nature of the language.

“*Barin Zuma*”⁶

Sannu sannu zan bi gabobinka dai bayan dai

Amma sai nai maka barin zuma

Sannan harshe na ya bika da lasa

Tun daga sama har kasa

Ba inda zan bari sai na cimma burina

Sai ka narke gumin jikinka

Ya kashe min kishi.

“Honey Comb”

limbs one after another”

“After I’ve covered you in honey”

“My tongue shall roll over you”

“Up and down”

“I’d leave out no portion of you until your entire body is caressed”,

“I will drink from your sweat”

“To quench my thirst.”

The above poem demonstrates the incredible love the poet, probably a lady has for her lover and reflects a broad sense of affection and admiration. However, reading the poem in the absence of a performative action renders the lines nearly passive. The actions exemplified in the poem and the presence of an audience further accentuate the place of love in society, especially between lovers. Moreover, the poem contains content that is hardly discussed in public; that is passionate sexuality. Words such as “I’ll go down your limbs” vividly describes the fecundity of the diction the poet employs. Also, “my tongue shall roll over you” gives the depiction of a saturated mood of love and esteem. The crowning of the poem is when the persona expresses how he/she would “leave no portion of” the addressee, which leads us to the submission that she/he could “devour” the lover’s sweat to quench the thirst of affection as a way of expressing his/her love.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we have tried to describe what is considered “poetry” within the African worldview and validated its existence in society, drawing the connection between a

5 An Akan Chief’s palace chronicler.

6 The text of the poetry was taken from <http://www.africanwriter.com/hausa-love-poems-written-translated-by-ismail-bala/> (accessed April 5, 2017) with some modifications to the original translation to suit the context of the analysis.

“poem” and a “song.” We also explained the reason performative act is fundamental to poetic realisation in Africa, linked to the people’s collective nature of everyday life. Performance has been noted to be, as Bauman puts it, the “responsibility to an audience for display of communicative competence.” To this end, we have maintained that enactment makes African oral “poetry” unique. However, we do not claim to have exhausted the debate; but hope to provide a basis for further research in the direction of the art of African peoples from their standpoint. After surveying a sample of verses from West Africa to East Africa, with a fleeting reference from the Zulu of Southern Africa, we conclude that African poetry, as Clark (n.d) notes, relies on performance and memory for its dissemination and preservation—since it is delivered by word of mouth, and is aimed for the ear, with the intention of moving the whole body.

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