African Oral Poetry and Performance: a study of the spoken verse

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**Abstract**

The article attempts to define poetry and locates it within an African context with validations how it fundamentally relies upon a performative representation for the realisation of its full import. The focus is, as noted by Finnegan (2012), and manifestly, so that much of what is characteristically categorised as poetry in African oral literature is intended to be performed in a musical setting, where the musical and vocal components are mutually dependent during the enactment. The foremost concern, therefore, is the view that poetry in a traditional African society derives its classification from the perception of the society it is performed and must not limit to the western interpretation or perspective of ‘poetry.’ The article engages poetic verses from the Ham of Nigeria, the Ewe and Akan of Ghana, the Ocoli of Uganda, and the Hausa of Nigeria to validate points by which an enactment elucidates the communicative acts integral in an orally chanted verse.

**Keywords:** Poetry, African oral poetry, enactment, performance, tradition, communicative acts

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**Introduction**

The debate as to what constitute poetry in Africa has generated a lot of discussions in scholarship for some time, but the case remains that the understanding and the nature of poetry differs from society to society. The opinion, nonetheless, is that when closely examined, poetry, in most cultures of the world, tend to be viewed as the deliberate, careful and ordered string of thoughts seldom rendered in speech form, but in songs or rhythm normally delivered in a language characterized by use of symbolism to create meaning often deeper than the surface or lexical interpretation. In view of the above, this article attempts to define poetry to locate it within the African context with a substantiation of how it depends on upon performance for its full realisation. The point to be noted is that a significant volume 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 obtained in a traditional African society, is not restricted to western construal or perception.

The universal consensus is that such texts, as the poetry of Homer of western classics, were first verbally rendered before they were written through the agency of memorization. Aside from the respectful view of regarding 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 practice to admit the claim of oral poetry, especially, when one comes from a tradition where almost everything is obtainable in writing. Although perceptions remain a contested, it is adequate to proclaim that from the researcher’s observed awareness, a large store of traditional African expressions, verses, and storytelling forms, until these days, occur as unwritten, 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, folktale, proverbs, incantations, oral history, therefore, are exceptionally valued, prized and 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’ - 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] are a possibility for the expression of the profundity of the past and culture of society.

**What then is Poetry?**

The word ‘Poetry’ is a Western idea since it is derived from a non-indigenous African language. Meanwhile, some African societies are said to have in their idioms the equivalent of what Western literary scholarship may term as “poetic”, but this is not the concern of the writer. Such a venture is a subject of research on its. In poetry, the use of language is flowery and full of embellishments, 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 seeming problem in this discourse, however, is the challenge of articulating African thoughts using a language other than one belonging to Africa. Even so, for the purpose of want of clarity and because this study deals with poetry not as a ‘private venture’ as is the case of ‘literate’ societies, a working definition of the terms, ‘poetry’ and ‘performance’ is essential.

It suffices to note once again that the nature of poetry eludes simple definition because poetry comes in various forms and qualities, but we have chosen to look at it with specificity to Africa and its people. Poetry in African society, according to Clark, “does not depend on some celebrated system of calligraphic known as the alphabet,” rather, it is poetry that is “delivered by mouth and aimed at the ear to move the whole” (Transition No.25). Clark Further identifies what arguably is the major characteristic of poetry in Africa as he posits that “in place of paper, poetry in Africa relies on its transmission and preservation of performance and memory.” This point reveals the fact that African poetry has its roots in the African peoples’ tradition. The contention the writer makes here is to identify the features of poetry in Africa instead of providing what may be termed ‘a concise definition’ for there seems to be none, we hazard to say. However, it is evident, poetry in Africa is strikingly different both in its form, content, purpose and mode of transmission from what may be seen as poetry in Western scholarship.

One other definition of poetry relevant to this study, and could be asserted to fit African perception of what is considered ‘poetic,’ is the one which sees poetry as “a unique and specialized form of self-expression having some artistic features” (Akporobaro 2008:2) and this definition becomes even more relevant when we consider how in Africa the ability to use language imaginatively to fire the emotions of an audience is a great asset to every skilful speaker or poet.

In*A Glossary of Literary Terms,* Abrams (2005) captures, what could be said to be, it seems, the striking element of poetry and performance as he posits 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 material is quoted in length because though written by a European, who may not be sufficiently aware of the terrain of poetry and performance and society in Africa, yet it reveals that poetry in societies where it is not meant to be read by one individual in isolation, performance remains the vehicle or medium which brings about its total realization and this is the case the article makes.

**What do we mean by ‘Performance’?**

For a society that is predominantly oral and largely non-literate, poetry as a written text has limited possibilities for making any desired impact on the public. The term ‘performance’ is implied as 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, audience, and movement of the body primarily to give life to the narration. Performances may also be referred to “aesthetic practices- patterns of behaviour, ways of speaking, (…), whose repetitions situate actors in time and space, structuring individual group identities” (Kapchan 1995). The above connotes that performances are based on repetitions, voice modulation, where lines learned, for instance, gestures imitated, or discourses re-iterated become generic means of tradition making. This aforesaid expounds why Okpewho and many literary experts have argued that African oral poetry is formulaic.

Kofi Anyidoho, one writer who has researched extensively on dramatic performance in Africa with particular reference to the Ewe-speaking people of Volta Region of Ghana, says, “The concept and practice of performance are central to artistic expression and experience in African tradition” (Anyidoho 1992 in Olaniyan and Quayson 2007:383). Anyidoho further states that in Ewe, 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 point suggests that the discourse of poetry as it is in Africa may be the difficulty of drawing equivalence with the English word ‘poetry’. Mazizi Kunene, quoted in (Anyidoho 1992:383), affirms the above point is 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, uses a variation of pitch….”

The view to reiterate, as pointed out by Anyidoho, is that African artistic tradition seeks to integrate several art forms. It also incorporates the artist, the audience, and the artistic forms of the society the act is performed with one unifying experience (Olaniyan & 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 imposing excitement needed for the sustenance of the presentation.Also, Tokin, an anthropologist studying a society in Liberia, acknowledges that while African narratives may not be treated as ‘sung poems’ in the conventional sense, ‘they are nonetheless conveyed as skilled performances.’ The implication of the above assertion is that when we consider 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 uniformed conclusion bearing in mind their integral elements as reasoned by Anyidoho, cited above.

The scholars, 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, cited in Okpewho 1990:85). The previous debate is a pointer to the component that poetry exists in almost all aspects of oral art in Africa, and as earlier indicated, the performative element is the main medium for the grasp of poetry in Africa. The previous argument further demonstrates the function of performance in the rendition of not just poetry, as the case may be, in Africa; it further validates the presence of the core of the poetic element in storytelling, epics, legends, myths, dirges, work songs, lullaby, and other nameless oral narratives of African societies. For the African, the art of oratory which bothers on careful choice of words otherwise known as ‘diction’in literature; the creation of imagery, symbolism and, in fact, rhythm is measured a mark of excellence in speech delivery different from everyday conversation, commonplace speech, because poetry is rendered before a given audience and in a certain context.

Since performance is to carry out an action into effect, be it a story, a dirge, a chant, or a recited poetic verse, it would be pragmatic that such be observed within the appropriate context against the background of the society in which it is performed. Besides, the role of the audience of performance is of particular interest in Africa. Bauman’s “Verbal arts and performance” (1975) affirms the centrality 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. The members of an audience in Africa will probably not applaud a bad performance, but out of politeness may just mumble or, worse still, walk away quietly. This places a greater demand for creativity by the performer.

**Analysis of Poetry and Performance in Africa**

The analysis of the poetry of Africa demonstrates how the poetic license could be exploited to insult, ridicule and, above all, to negotiate for political, economic, as well as for social functions. One of the economic utility of poetry, often delivered in the form of a song in Africa, is that of verses sung in traditional organised bargain markets in communities. In the above context, the songs are customarily influential to appeal to shoppers to patronise the merchandises or services been offered by a vendor. Correspondingly, it is to be emphasised that highly poetic songs play an essential role during collective work. The thinking is that songs and music, in this case, are meant to motivate or facilitate how the manual worker is regaled while they labour cohesively. Apart from these, songs poetry, we argue, provoke 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 of the African cultures. The basic opinion, the study seems to make, is that preliterate societies, through the medium of the song or poetry, as some love to call it, explored it to compel to memory information deemed essential for preservation which then was recollected and handed down to generations to come.

[Hums][[3]](#footnote-3)

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

The above lines are 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’ slur is not as abhorrent as the tacit one. *Hmmm* [Khwep – a hum] has a broad range of meanings and its piercing weight is contingent exclusively on the context in which it is expressed. For instance, when there is a loss in a household ‘hmmm’ could denote the profound emotive state of grief for the departed. Yet again, if everything was all right in a given affiliation, say between friends, ‘hmmm’ might suggest the speaker recollects the past that is touching (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 which a person not conversant about Ham social 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 readiness for war. Even if the association to a war is not entirely precise, 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, thus, 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 of Ghana. One fascinating aspect is that the poetry is put into a song using exaggeration as a hallmark of heightening the effect on the audience and one such poetry may be directed at. It should be noted here that the presence of an audience makes *halo* a dramatic performance and also the function of the spectators as judges as to who may be seen as ‘an expert’ depends on the ability of the performer to construct words which elicit the emotions of the audience imaginatively. Another element of halo that needs mentioning is the humorous and comic aspects. These could easily be achieved using a good and loud voice, verbal skill, excellent drumming and amusing dancing steps by the performer. Our understanding here is, these elements aid the performer to draw the complete attention of the audience and may sometimes be used as a skill to construct the next line of abuse depending on the tempo generated. Below is an extract of halo poem which this study shall hazard an interpretation of using the context to generate 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 here that the performer addresses an audience. The above element is no doubt, one of the many formulae of poetry which have its legitimacy in communality. The performer uses a style that is tied to mutual responsibility where he says it was the women of Tsiame who goaded Kodzo into his song. The above as a performance strategy shows the responsibility of the performer to the audience. It is the poet, as understood by society, who should reprimand the erring Kodzo for going against the norm of the society he comes from. “Bring him here…let me see his face” is used to indicate the need for Kodzo to be present during the performance while the audience assumes its role of 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 definitely elicit laughter, applause or murmuring.

Okot p’Bitek’s poetry is one of such examples of poetry and performance. In a dirge taken from the Acoli of East Africa, p’Bitek employs the repetitive structure and diction as part of the formulaic structure of African poetry to capture the sauciness of verbal performance to affirm the fate of the poor thus

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 carries an African lyricism. Moreover, if we take another dirge poem from another African society a similar allusion and rhetorical questioning such as ‘who has…?’ is a possible manifestation. However, what is absent reading from a text of this nature is the voice quality, the context, and the atmosphere of a loved one lying cold in the hands waiting to be gathered to join ancestors which heighten the tone, gesture and indeed the pain of loss. In spite of these, p’Bitek is able to transport the imagination of an African who reads this poem to picture a grief- stricken relative philosophically questioning the essence of life on earth and of the futility of life’s struggles which tragically comes to an end at the point of death.

*Apae,* a poetry recited for the Akan Chief of Ghana as he sits in state on occasions of community celebration(Yankah 1983), is said to be a dramatic appellation performance that makes use of gestures, mimes, facial expressions to praise or even taunt the chief or his ancestry in metaphorical and hyperbolic terms. The end of every stanza in *apae* is followed by drumming and blowing of horns. The reciter may dance displaying with 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. Here is one of such examples from an *apae*

That’s him!

Who is it!

Who is it!

Is it not *Osei Tutu*?

*Osei Tutu Amponyinamoa* the Mother Earth, who when he

finds a treasure

He gives to his *obrafo* (Yankah 1983)

The above, being a short appellation, is performed by a poet who uses his wit to trick or cajole the King into giving him a gift. It is to be noted that this performance is carried out before an audience of which the King is prominent. As earlier noted, the artistry of the poet may move the chief into giving him an instant gift or after the occasion and certainly, whatever form of a gift to be given would depend on a skilful performance and how such an act must have generated the attention of the audience which resonates in loud applause or ululation.

That’s him!

*Akosa[[4]](#footnote-4)* the enslaver whose bells are sounding in twos, and

threes towards the battle front,

*Odokoropagyan Aku Amanfo[[5]](#footnote-5)* whose bells are ringing;

The sharpener-stone *Akuampon* on which weapons are sharp-

ened to perform brave deeds;

The sharpener stone *Sakyi[[6]](#footnote-6)* that feeds on iron;

The hidden rock that disfigures iron (Yankah 1983).

If the above-quoted pieces of poems are read silently in an enclosure without the costume the *obrafo[[7]](#footnote-7)* uses, with no sword to brandish around, no body movement, and, above all, the presence of an audience, it may generate little or no impact because it is not performed in context.

**Poetry Expressing Love**

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

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| “Barin Zuma”[[8]](#footnote-8)  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**”**  Slowly I’ll go down your 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 sensational love the poet, perhaps a lady has for her lover and reflects a deep sense of love and admiration. However, the poem, when reading without a performative action, renders the lines nearly passive. The actions exemplified in the poem and the presence of an audience further accentuates the place of love in society, especially between lovers. Moreover, the poem is one of those whose content, a passionate sexuality, is hardly ever talked about in public. Such words as “I’ll go down your limbs’ vividly describes the fecundity of the diction the poet utilises. In addition, “my tongue shall roll over you” gives the depiction of a saturated mood of love and esteem. The climax of the poem is when the persona expresses how he would “leave no portion of” of the addressee which leads us to the suggestion that she/he could ‘devour” the lover’s sweat in order to quench the thirst of affection as a way of expression of the persona’s love.

**Conclusion**

In this article, we have tried to define what is considered as ‘poetry’ within the African worldview and validated its existence in society, drawing the connection between the ‘poem’ and a ‘song’ and why performative act is fundamental to poetic realisation in Africa because of the people’s collective nature of everyday life. Performance has been noted to be, as Bauman puts it, “responsibility to an audience for display of communicative competence.” To this end, enactment, we have maintained gives African oral ‘poetry’ a uniqueness different from other poetry. However, the article does not claim to have exhausted the debate but hopes to serve as a motivation for further research in the direction of the art of African peoples from their standpoint. The articles after surveying a sample of verses from West Africa to East Africa with a fleeting example from the Zulu of Southern Africa, concludes that noticeably, in terms of form and context of presentation, African poetry, as Clark notes, relies, for its dissemination and preservation, on performance and recollection since it is a poetry which is delivered by word of mouth and aimed at the ear to move the whole body.

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2. Prof M. W. Visser teaches African languages at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “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 are oral performances with a record nowadays available on Compact Discs and Videos. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A praise appellation liking the Chief to dreaded slave master [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Another attributive quality associated with being a great and feared warrior [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A metaphor comparing the Chief with a beast which eats iron. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. An Akan Chief’s palace chronicler [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The text of the poetry was taken from <http://www.africanwriter.com/hausa-love-poems-written-translated-by-ismail-bala/> (accessed 5 April 2017) with some modifications to the original translation to suit the context the analysis in this article. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)