He(Art) of the Metre: Poetry in the "Vernacular"

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Summary

The historical rise of African literature in Europhone languages, particularly English and French, as a social and disciplinary practice directed at the recuperation of the fractured African persona and world view following centuries of (mis)representation in Western-authored texts, has conferred on it an adversarial tone that is generally viewed as the archetypal character of African literature that is productive of other categories of ethnic/national literatures including those in the indigenous languages of Africa. Protest (commitment) or agit(ation) prop(aganda) as this category of literature is variously called is more often than not seen as the hallmark of African literature irrespective of its linguistic orientation. Framed against the broad backdrop of the counter-hegemonic claims of postcolonial theorisation, this article discusses theme in *Ironu Akewi* [Thoughts of a Poet] and *Emi in mi Emi in re* [My Love Your Love] respectively by Olanrewaju Adepoju and Olatunbosun Oladapo, arguably two of the most prominent of contemporary Yoruba poets. Implicit in the article's explorative concerns is the repudiation of the displacement (marginalisation) of African-language literatures, their denigration in the academy and consignment to a second-order cadre vis-à-vis African literature in European languages. Such writing "back to the Empire", such reinscription of the indigenous and questioning of a master discourse conforms with the postmodernist blurring of the space between the "high" and the "low", the global and the local – indeed the written and the oral. The article makes the point that the overtly political preoccupation of African literature – English and French – is neither a given of contemporary African literature nor was it the originary character of the literatures, particularly poetry, of pre-colonial Africa.

Opsomming

Die historiese opkoms van Afrikaliteratuur in die Eurofoniese tale, veral Engels en Frans, as 'n sosiale en dissiplinêre praktyk wat gerig is op die herstel van die gebroke Afrikapersona en -wêreldbeskouing wat eeue se wanvoorstelling in Westersgeouteerde tekste volg, het 'n antagonistiese klank daaraan toegeken wat oor die algemeen as die argetipekarakter van Afrikaliteratuur beskou word wat produktief van ander kategorieë van etniese/nasionale literature is, insluitende dié wat in die inheemse tale van Afrika geskryf is. Protes (toewyding) of agi(tasie) prop(aganda), soos wat hierdie kategorie dikwels genoem word, word as die waarmerk van Afrikaliteratuur gesien, ongeag sy linguistiese oriëntasie. Teen die breë agtergrond van die kontrahegemoniese aansprake op postkoloniale teoretisering, bespreek hierdie

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artikel dié tema in *Ironu Akewi* [Gedagtes van 'n digter] en *mi in mi Emi in re* [My liefde jou liefde] deur onderskeidelik Olanrewaju Adepoju en Olatunbosun Oladapo, wat stellig twee van die mees prominente kontemporêre Yoruba-digters is. Implisiet in die artikel se ontdekkende aard is die ontkenning van die ontheemdheid (marginalisasie) van Afrikaliteratuur, hulle verguising in die akademie en oorlewering as 'n tweedeorde kader vis-à-vis Afrikaliteratuur in Europese tale. Sulke skryfwerk "terug na die empire" – sulke herinskrywing van die inheemse en die bevraagtekening van 'n meesterdiskoers konformeer met die postmodernistiese siening wat die ruimte verdof tussen die "hoog" en die "laag", die globale en die plaaslike – inderdaad tussen die geskrewe en die verbale. Hierdie artikel voer aan dat die openlik politiese preokkupasie van Afrikaliteratuur in Engels en Frans nie 'n gegewe van kontemporêre Afrikaliteratuur of die oorspronklike karakter van die literature, veral digkuns van pre-koloniale Afrika, is nie.

Introduction

When in 2008 the literary world celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Chinua Achebe's groundbreaking novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), many naturally saw the event as the celebration of the rise of African literature (Okunoye 2008). Although Achebe was not the first black African or even Nigerian to write in the assumedly non-indigenous tradition of extended prose narrative, his novel charted a course that has proven epochal in the definition of African literature within the pool of world literatures. The rise of the African novel, indeed African literature in the colonial languages, in the fin de siecle years of colonialism marked a turning point in African politics. Coextensive with the nationalist movement for the independence of Africa, the development of African literature in Western languages has largely followed a template with its moorings in African politics. So-called African novels/prose fiction have been essentially anthropological and racist representations of Africans in fictive narratives by European writers and travellers prior to the emergence of *Things Fall Apart* and other works in the Onitsha Market Tradition (see Darah 1988). A veritable "mythical beast" as Soyinka referred to it, African literature – just about five decades old – (Fasan 2010) is so young that as late as the mid-1970s, Soyinka could still report its non-recognition in the high citadel of British intellectual academy, Cambridge University, where he had been assigned to the Social Anthropology rather than the Literature Department while there as a fellow (Soyinka 1976).

The first Africans to write, motivated by the misrepresentations of Africans in European works, had the immediate task of at once recuperating and resuming the lost voice of Africa while interrogating the scriptural imprimatur of colonialist representation of Africans. Chinua Achebe's career took off on the need to correct the smudged picture of Nigeria/Africa painted in Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* (Jeyifo 1985), bringing forth *Things Fall Apart*, with its emic representation of Africa prior to the aggravating advent of colonialism. The rise of modern African literature in the highly exciting

and even more excitable ferment of the nationalist movement; the misery of devastated Europe to which Africans immigrated in the aftermath of the Second World War and the decayed infrastructure of post-War Britain that was fast losing its vice grip on its empire, gave African literature an overtly political and acerbic tone that was operationalised in the cultural and artistic philosophy of negritude and the so-called protest/commitment/agitation literature of that period (Nnolim 2008).

It is a measure of the enduring legacy of its troubled nativity that African literature has, to date, been defined by its largely political preoccupations: a functionalist orientation (which has led to the creation of what some have pejoratively labelled sociological/anthropological as opposed to artistically accomplished literature (Chinweizu, Jemie & Maduike 1980; Ngwaba 1986), concerns for issues of quotidian survival as opposed to purely aesthetic and artistic concerns. The genre-blurring literature, including (auto)biographical works/memoirs and poetic outpourings, of this generation of writers which constituted the first wave of Africans "writing back to the Empire", embraced such popular mediums as newspapers and pamphleteering and was alike open to professional writers as well as politicians (see Obiechina 2008) and so-called agitators. It was in this context that many leaders of the nationalist movements across Africa such as the first president of independent Senegal and a leader of the Negritude Movement, Leopold Sedar Senghor, the nationalist leader and first indigenous president of Nigeria, Nnamdi Azikiwe (*My Odyssey*) and Dennis Osadebey (*Africa Sings* and *Poems of a Nationalist*) wrote. Others were Nelson Mandela (*Long Walk to Freedom*), Kenneth Kaunda (*Zambia Shall Be Free*) and Jomo Kenyatta (*Facing Mount Kenya*) among several other nationalist leaders and writers that were on Heinemann's African Writers Series, the pre-eminent literary series that produced many of the leading texts of African literature in the 1960s. The literature of this period had a truculent, excoriating edge and the halo of messianism that has given African literary creativity something of a missionary enterprise in which writers were either viewed or viewed themselves as prophets or teachers (Achebe 1975; Yerima 2008; Ezeliora 2008), people with a special message to deliver and a mission to accomplish. Given this state of affairs, African literature has been defined through the years in terms of parameters distilled from this tradition of protest literature with its overtly political preoccupations. However, a cursory look at the far older oral and indigenous-languages literatures of Africa that predated literature in the colonial languages gives a different picture.

African Literature in the Indigenous Languages

The higher status and prestige accorded the colonial languages relative to their indigenous counterparts cast a denigrating shadow over the indigenous languages and the literatures from them. Indeed the very notion of

indigenous-language literature is limited to a few African languages that have become written languages. In Nigeria this applies to but a couple of languages such as Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo. Although spoken by tens of millions of Nigerians, none of these languages rank as high as English on the social ladder nor is any of them used as a lingua franca besides Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba that are conferred official status, meaning they can and are used in official domains. No African language is as widely spoken as the colonial languages, especially English that has become a global language whose native speakers are far outnumbered by non-native speakers in a 2-to-1 ratio (McArthur 1992). Competence in the colonial languages was more or less the sole measure of intelligence and yardstick of preferment in the colonial world (Fanon 1967; Wa Thiong'o 1986). The limited spread of the indigenous-languages on the other hand means that their use is limited to but a few domains of interaction.

While the precedent character of African literature in the indigenous languages can no longer be denied, recognition of this fact has often taken the oblique form of a search for continuities and discontinuities between the written and the oral (Julien 1992). The privileging of the scribal and modern (literature in the colonial languages) over and above the oral and traditional or local, as African-languages literatures, are conceived as nothing more than a prejudice of the Eurocentric academy. Such privileging that describes indigenous language literatures which are the literatures most familiar to the majority of Africans (Wali 2009; Barber 2009) as vernacular (or folk) literature (Folorunso 1997) has in certain instances tended to link the origin of African literature to the inauguration of African literature in the colonial languages sometimes, specifically the publication of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (Mpe 1999). Yet, the point needs to be made that African literature in the indigenous languages has a far longer provenance than literature in the colonial languages. It has been suggested that literature in Hausa and Yoruba, to take two examples, had been published as early as the 17th century by writers using Arabic script or a combination of Arabic and the indigenous languages (Falola 1988; Yahaya 1988). Chinua Achebe may arguably be Africa's most reputed novelist, and the eloquence of his portrayal of the Igbo society may be second to none, his was not the first published narrative fiction by an Igbo to say nothing of the rest of Nigeria. While Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* was published in 1958, Pita Nwana's *Omenuko*, the first novel in Igbo, was published in 1933, a clear quarter of a century before the publication of *Things Fall Apart*. The first novels in Hausa, selections from a literary competition, were also published in the 1930s. First serialised in a newspaper, *Akede Omo*, in 1929, Isaac B. Thomas's *Itan Emi Segilola Eleyinjuege Elegberun Oko Laiye*, the first novel in Yoruba, was published in 1930 (Isola 1988). Daniel Olorunfemi Fagunwa, writer of what can easily pass as the most famous work of Yoruba fiction, *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale*, started publishing in the 1930s, well before Amos Tutuola,

another Yoruba, published *Palmwine Drinkard* (1952) written in vernacularised English and generally regarded as the first Nigerian novel.

The anteriority of indigenous-languages literature is even more pronounced when attention is shifted to the poetic genre. While it was not impossible that Hausa and Yoruba writers wrote poetry as far back as the 17th century, the first Yoruba poems in the modern era were published by Henry Townsend in 1848. Moses Lijadu published *Kekere Iwe Orin Aribiloso* in 1886. As mentioned in a previous section, African literature in English, French or Portuguese did not begin with any significance until the 1950s. Wherein then lies justification for the current practice of consigning contemporary indigenous-languages literatures to a second-order status as an appendage of literatures in the colonial languages? It is in realisation of this that some have argued that authentic African literature is that which has its origin and is either written or performed in the indigenous languages of Africa (Wali 2009; Wa Thiong'o, 1986; cf. Awoonor 1974; Uka 1980 among others). The Kenyan writer, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, has in this context, led by personal example, been adopting his native Gikuyu for his writings after decades of using English, which he now uses but in translation. Emenyonu (1988) and Sekoni (1988) have insisted on locating the origin of modern Nigerian literature in its oral counterpart. As Emenyonu (1988: 34) puts it, "An authentic study of Nigerian literature must … begin by examining and appreciating the origins and development of literatures in Nigerian indigenous languages". Appreciating the oral and by that definition indigenous origin of Nigerian, indeed African literature, is the challenge before practitioners of African literature and others. Where such appreciaiation has come, it has been through the grudging, palimpsest path of seeking vestiges or traces of orality in colonial-languages literatures, thereby creating unnecessary dichotomy between the oral and the written and naturalising that dichotomy as inherent to both modes of African literature.

Thus African-languages literature is conceived as vernacular literature with the implication that it is undeveloped and simple, even simplistic, and is to be found among a largely illiterate and unsophisticated people. Moreover, the literature is seen as traditional, in the sense that it is fixed (as if written in stone – quite ironical for a verbal art form), as opposed to literature in the colonial languages which is perceived as written in prestigious codes, modern and, of course, dynamic. Such invidious paradigm which is fast creeping over into indigenous-languages literatures with the division into oral and literate poets, as we shall see shortly with regards to practitioners of Yoruba poetry, has elsewhere been described as impoverished (Julien 1992).

Ewi Iwoyi: Yoruba Neotraditional Poetry and Poets – Olanrewaju Adepoju and Olatunbosun Oladapo

Yoruba poetry is generally divided into the two major groups of oral and written or literary poetry or poets (Olatunji 1979; Folorunso 2006). Following the set pattern of separating African literature in the colonial languages from literature in the indigenous languages, the oral poets are described as non-literate and their poetry is defined by its vocal performance. Relative to African literature in the colonial languages, indigenous-languages literature, the so-called vernacular literature, is often seen as oral and traditional, with the implication that it is fixed in nature. But contrary to this typology, Yoruba oral poetry, subject always to the influence of the audience before whom it is performed, is highly variable with each performance yielding a "new" poem as the moment of composition, ala Albert Lord's composition-in-performance theory, is coterminous with the moment of performance. Poetry of the so-called Yoruba literate poet, necessarily written, is on the other hand seen as fixed and intended only to be read by equally literate people except when read aloud before an audience (Olatunji 1979: 1).

Contrary to the rigid oral/written typology, there is yet a third space, an interstice between the purely oral and written, that is occupied by the Yoruba poet. This is the realm of the *akewi* (chanter of poetry) or so-called neotraditional poets whose practice blurs the line between oral and literate poetry. In this category belong the two poets, Olanrewaju Adepoju and Olatunbosun Oladapo, whose respective works (*Ironu Akewi* 1975) and (*Emi in mi, Emi in re* ([1979]2006)) are analysed in this article. While the former collection is the poet's first book of poems, the latter work was originally released as a long-playing record in 1979 before its publication as written text in 2006, a proof if no other of the "interdiscursivity" of Yoruba poetry. A highly intertextual discourse, the art of the *akewi* is an admixture of genres, verbal and scriptural resources that call forth interpretative strategies that go beyond the bland dichotomisation into oral and literate poetic templates as Nnodim (2005: 251) makes clear. This interface, the "dialogicity of utterance" (a polyphony of voices) in Bakhtinian discourse, between the semi-oral and the semi-written, as is evidenced in *ewi* first became prominent in the practice of Yoruba neotraditional poets, *akewi iwoyi*, who had their written poems transmitted, read, via the radio. This was pioneered by Bosun Sowande in the 1950s to be shortly followed by Adebayo Faleti on both radio and television (Folorunso 2006: 20; see also Olatunji 1979). Even when published as printed text, the poetry of Yoruba indigenous poets is oriented to a poetics of orality and is often intended to be reoralised alike by its composers and others (Nnodim 2005). The broadcast of poems on the electronic media would eventually lead to their being recorded and transmitted on discs, a development that was pioneered by Olanrewaju Adepoju, one of the poets under review. As Nnodim (2005:

250) rightly notes, both Olanrewaju Adepoju and Olatunbosun Oladapo who have produced numerous poems over the radio, long-playing records, cassettes (and now compact discs), besides printed texts, are arguably the most prolific of Yoruba neotraditional poets.

Contrary to the impression that has been perpetuated by the better-known arm of African literature in foreign languages, its hallmarks, i.e. the fixation on political themes and the vituperative language, do not feature in African-languages literature. Nnodim (p. 250) speaks to the issue: "*Ewi* tends to formulate moralistic-didactic concerns, at times voicing social criticism through the template of the moral; *ewi* may praise, but *may also voice harsh socio-political criticism* ..." (2005: 250; my italics). Thus, while literature or, in this instance, poetry in the indigenous languages may explore socio-political themes (and it often does), neither such themes nor the harsh language in which they are poeticised is the defining character of the poetry. The art of the Yoruba poet is not necessarily oriented to the political, nor does the language reside in the harsh or adversarial. Particular attention is paid to aesthetic considerations, especially linguistic felicity and profundity of thought, irrespective of the subject of discourse: this is the core consideration, the very (he)art of Yoruba versification. Even when the socio-political is examined, it is done through the twin lens of the aesthetic and profound. Indeed, as Olatunbosun Oladapo who goes by the sobriquet "Aiyekooto" (the Yoruba word for parrot, literally meaning "The World Rejects Truth") puts it in the prefatory note to his book under analysis, "Oro eebu ati epe nikan ko lewi/ A lee fewi soro ijinle/ To je mo ti ife ijinle [Poetry is not all about abusive language and curses/it can be employed to communicate profound thoughts//Even those connected to deep love]. Olanrewaju Adepoju makes more or less the same point in the emphasis he places on the aesthetic in his definition of who a poet is in the preface to *Ironu Akewi*:

> Tani akewi? Akewi je enikan ti o maa nfi arojinle gbe oro jade l'ona ti o dun l'eti. Akewi ni o maa nfi ekun rere laakaye ara re yi oro ti o burewa pada si eyi ti o rewa l'enu ati l'eti nipa idurowoye ati arogun. Iru awon oro bee ni a si npe ni ewi.
>
> [Who is a poet? He is someone who with deep thought speaks in a way that is pleasing to the ear. A poet is the one who with wisdom transforms a word that is not pleasing to one that is beautiful in the mouth and to the ear in terms of depth and logic. It's such words we call poetry.]
>
> (Oladapo [1979]2006: Preface)

Thus while socio-political commentary and criticism may not constitute the central theme of poetry in Yoruba as it is in African literature in Europhone languages, it is nevertheless a rich site of poetic engagement for the poets. A point of relevance here is that both poets under review have written and performed poetry preoccupied with themes that straddle other aspects of

workaday existence, especially sociocultural issues, besides politics and political commentary. This being so, Olanrewaju Adepoju has in recent years tended to dwell more on themes related to politics and cognate matters. Thus he has been described as "Oselu akewi, akewi oselu" ("The politician-poet, the political poet"; where the former is described as a politician who composes poetry and the latter as a poet who dwells on political issues) (Folorunso 1997: 92). Olatunbosun Oladapo has, on the other hand, been more preoccupied with the sociocultural: matters of morality and the promotion of Yoruba values – language, good behaviour in the home, love and relationships between the sexes, especially between husband and wife and the upbringing of children in the family (Folorunsho 2006: 20).

Olanrewaju Adepoju: *Ironu Akewi* [Thoughts of a Poet]

The foregoing observation is borne out by the fact that of the 18 odd poems in *Ironu Akewi* not one centres on the subject of politics, either directly or indirectly. Reflecting Yoruba folk wisdom and belief, the poems dwell on a variety of subjects that are more or less explained in their titles: "Kadara" [Destiny], "Igba L'aiye" [The World Is a Stage], "Igba Lo De" [Changing Fashion], "Enia L'aso Mi" [Human Beings Are My Clothes], "Awon Oninakuna" [The Prodigals], "Bukaata Eda" [Human Responsibilities], "Oro Obinrin" [Women Matters], "Iwa Okunrin" [The Character of Men], through "Moto Aremu" [Aremu's Motor Car], "Baaluu t'oja-bo" [The Aeroplane That Crashed], to "Oriki Ojo"[Ojo's Praises], "Ogun jija"[Fighting a War] and "Kiniun Oloola Iju" [Lion King of the Forest], etc. What is immediately obvious from these is that poetry can dwell on any and every subject, especially those commonplace experiences that typically characterise human existence. No subject is too great or unimportant to capture a poet's attention. With higher sensitivity and imagination, the poet weaves these experiences into the elevated and euphonious language of poetry. This is the primary task of a poet, a point well made in the title poem, "Ironu Akewi" [Thoughts of a Poet], which in a sense sets the tone for the poet's approach in this collection. Given the wide latitude of a poet's duty as defined by the poetic voice, virtually all of the themes treated in the collection have been broached in the title poem in which the poetic voice defines who a poet is and what constitutes poetry, emphasising in the process the importance of deep reflection to the poetic enterprise:

> Ojoojumo l'akewi i ronu
> Tironu-tironu l'akewi i rin
> Adan n'iyekan oobe
> Ma-ya-mi l'alabaro ode ninu oko
> Ironu l'ore akewi ni yewu

[Daily does a poet think
Every step of the way a poet is wrapped in thought
Adan [the bat] is a relation of oobe [a species of the bat]
The pouch is the companion of the hunter in the wild
Thoughts are the companion of a poet in the room]

(Adepojo 1975: 1)[1]

The poet here underlines the importance of reflection in the creation of poetry. Just as a bat cannot do without the company of other bats or a hunter do without the pouch in which he stores important objects on his hunting expedition, so can a poet not do without reflection. Without deep thought a poet cannot effectively execute the intellectual task of composing meaningful poetry as opposed to mere noise-making. In other words, poetry is not for the garrulous, the noisy fellow who confuses his meaningless chatter for poetry:

Ijinle oro, l'enu akewi ni i wa.
Yato si t'eni t'o ntuto s'aiye loju
T'o jo 'ra re loju
T'o nsoro sofo, tin won nro p'ewi l'o nke
T'o npariwo lasan …

[Deep thoughts belong in the mouth of the poet
Unlike the person spitting nonsense in the face of the world
Who is too arrogant
Who wastes words, pretending it is poetry
Who makes mere noises …]

(p. 1)

The poet-persona goes on to admonish, "Gbogbo oro ko ni nwon npe l'ewi [It's not every word that is poetry]." There are but few accomplished poets, the poet says, but many are the pretenders to the title of poet. For this poet, a true poet will not appropriate, virtually steal poems from other poets. Rather he [sic] is a deep thinker with a way with words and can turn a good phrase. Thus when a poet sits quiet, all wrapped in thought or walks with eyes virtually shut, not acknowledging greetings from others, it is not out of a desire to be contrary. He may be deep in thought, reflecting on how best to phrase the thoughts running through his mind. The process of composition and delivery is not different from that of a woman in labour and about to deliver. Consequently the loss of a poem is, for the poet, no different from when a parent loses a child:

B'ologbon ba nrobi ogbon lowo,
A ma ape k'ogbon o to se i bi

1. Subsequent references to *Ironu Akewi* are indicated by page number(s) only.

B'omoran bam be l'ori ikunle ero,
A-ti soro le ma rorun ….
Eni omo ku fun, t'o f'owo leran,
Ko yato si k'ewi o sonu lowo enia

[When the wise groans in deep thought
It takes a while to give birth to wisdom
When the knowledgeable labours in deep thought
It is often difficult to talk …
The bereaved who sits in sorrow
Is nowhere different from a poet who loses a poem]

(p. 2)

In "Kadara" [Destiny], the poet focuses on the question of destiny, drawing upon a fundamental belief of the Yoruba that human destiny cannot be altered. Whatever human beings do on earth, the belief goes, is the result of personal choices made in heaven. That two people, even twins, were born by the same parents is no assurance that they would both turn out successful. The destiny of one is different from the other's. What may seem ironical in this is the acknowledgment of human agency in the failure of man. While the poem agrees that human beings can impede the progress or success of others, they cannot alter their destiny which is not subject to human manipulation. Which point, stretched a little, might be an oblique way of saying that success or failure in life comes from personal choices – neither the gods nor those malevolent forces of Yoruba belief system such as witches and evil spirits (Abimbola 1997) have control over human fate; there are neither witches nor wizards anywhere that can make a failure of someone determined to be successful. The only problem confronting man is ignorance of the workings of destiny:

Aja gbo, gbo, gbo l'oko
Igbe won ko de le
Edumare seto ayanmo, oba ko fi han 'nia
Bi a ba mo di kadara,
Kedere l'a ba r'ile ohun t'o nse 'ni,
Ai mo 'na ero ni i je o sonu l'ajo…

[Dogs bark, bark, bark on the farm
But their growls do not get to the homestead
God planned destiny, the king showed no one
If we knew the root of destiny,
Clearly would we see the bottom of our travails
Ignorance of the way is the reason the traveller gets lost on the journey …]

(p. 3)

The Yoruba believe in the overriding power of the personality soul, *ori*, in deciding the outcome of an individual's earthly journey. This the poet

admits in the fifth stanza to the effect that "[b]'ori eda ba buru l'aiye,/ Ori ohun buru bo lat'orun ni/ Ko si 'nia ti i pa didun iyo da" [When a person is afflicted with a bad destiny on earth/ Such destiny has been so afflicted from heaven/ Nobody can alter the sweetness of salt]. It is such apparently easy matters of everyday concerns and beliefs that are to be encountered in these poems as opposed to the grimly serious subject of politics and its even grimmer language that preoccupy indigenous-language poets. Other themes explored in the poems in *Ironu Akewi* include those centring on the praises of the gods and even animals as we see in "Die ninu oriki Sango" [Some of the Praises of Sango], the Yoruba god of thunder and "Kiniun Oloola Iju" [Lion King of the Forest] which celebrates the strength and eminence of the lion in the animal kingdom. For the poet, these subjects are as important and worthy of poetic intervention as any other, such as "Oro Obinrin" [Women's Matters] and "Iwa Okunrin" [Character of the Men] which explore the perennially intriguing theme of romance and the relationship between the sexes, a theme fully handled in the next book, *Emi in mi, Emi in re*.

Olatunbosun Oladapo: *Emi in mi, Emi in re* [My Love, Your Love]

Thematically Oladapo's *Emi in mi, Emi in re* [My Love, Your Love] is not different from *Ironu Akewi* in its exploration of the apolitical theme of love and everyday relationships between men and women. The entire collection is dedicated to the poet's female friends from his youth, women with whom he shared neither sexual nor romantic intimacy but whose friendship he remembers with fondness. Structurally, it is composed of 21 narrative poems that are independent of each other but united by the common theme of love, romance and sex. The analysis that follows centres on the title poem which is by far the longest poem in the entire collection and explores the theme of love in a sexually suggestive, even sexist, language that nevertheless stays within the bounds of decency. Not too much is left to the imagination as the poet piles one erotic image upon another in an orchestral-like performance that leads the reader up the ladder of eroticism to a climax that pulsates with borrowings from diverse media and genres of Yoruba poetry. Indeed the other poems are to a lesser or greater degree expansions of the themes and subthemes explored in this poem which is the first in the collection. The sensuality of the themes, the electricity of the lines and the helpless longing of the poetic voice cannot be missed, even from the opening stanzas:

> Emii mi emii re: Emi ti tan laye,
> Wale o wa doyin si mi ninu ola nla
> Iwo oloburo mi,
>
> ...
>
> Fowo mu mi,

Je a fara kinra ko dire: omo
Emii mi emii re: Emi ti tan nle alaaye.
...
Je a fori kori:
Je a fenu kenu:
Je a gbera lera wa,
Je a faya kanya-Oburo mi,
Ko o je a mu' kunlukun.

[My love, your love: Love has ceased to live on earth
Come home and add sweetness to great wealth
You my beloved,
...
Hold me
Let's rub bodies together to bring forth goodness: a child
My love, your love: Love has ceased to live on earth
...
Let's rub heads together:
Let's rub lips together:
Let's lie on each other,
Let's rub chests together – My beloved,
Come let's rub bellies together.]

(Oladapo [1979]2006: 7)[2]

While staying out of the circle of prurient details, the images in the above lines cannot be more vivid. With a mildness of language that belies the passion of its desire, the poetic voice probes the dimensions of erotic love and physical intimacy all leading to the making of new life – children. With a deft appropriation of the praise form (*oriki*) mode, the poet celebrates the charming beauty of his female interest, her physical features and the desires, continually mounting, that these inspire. Not much is said of "internal" beauty, the character side of love that Yoruba culture so much celebrates. Rather, in a constantly transitive performance that breaches generic limits and polyphonic voices that are dialogically constituted (see Nnodim 2005), the poet sublimates physical love and sex in details that might in certain instances be unsettling for the priggish and bashful, unfamiliar with Yoruba oral poetry:

Emi nikoko iwo nigbin oo
Ikoko mi si fee de o mole,
Yoo katise ma-a lo.
Iwo nitakun, emi si lokere, oo
Ale oni ni n to o latopin [dori igi]:
Iwo nirawo, emi losupa ale o,

---

2. Subsequent references to *Emi in mi, Emi in ri* are indicated by page number(s) only.

Ale oni, ma mu o de gberi orun,
Nibi tina ti i juna lo:
Aranmoju losu o si ran bo' rawo.

[I am the [earthen] pot you are the snail
My pot wants to cover you up,
To halt your escape.
You are the branch, I am the squirrel,
Tonight I shall trail you to the top [of the tree]:
You are the star, I am the moon that glows at night,
Tonight I shall lead you to the centre of the skies
Where light is greater than light:
Till dawn shall the moon outshine the star.]

(p. 8)

The imagery is even more graphic and suggestive in another stanza:

...
...
Fowo mu mi na,
Bi iti atitakun ti i fowo kora won,
Laarin odan.
Fowo mu mi na Oburo,
Bi ato atase ti i fowo mura won nikun,
Ko le baa domo tuntun:
...

...
...
[Hold me for a moment,
Like tree trunks and branches cling to one another
In the forest.
Hold me for a moment my Love,
Like sperm and egg cling together in the womb
To bring forth a newborn child:
....]

(p. 10)

Such attention to sexually detailed description has proven too much for certain investigators who have proceeded to cut them out of oral poems collected from the field. This practice, destructive of both the integrity and spirit of the poetry, has been rightly questioned by other scholars (Olatunji 1979). Yoruba oral poetry prides decency highly but so too does it celebrate physical love and sex when it has to. This is not necessarily limited to those festive occasions when performers tend to exercise what might equate to poetic licence of some sort and thus operate outside the usual latitude of poetic practice (see Ogundeji 1991; Fasan 2009 among others).

Characteristic of the panegyric form that is *oriki*, there is a surfeit of nominal items and kinship terms in the poems, especially *Emi in mi Emi in re*. Common to the poems in both collections is the trope of the "talking book" elucidated by Henry Gates Jr (1988 cited in Nnodim 2005). This derives from the orality of Yoruba indigenous poetry, its being multigeneric and the quotability of this, a quality that has been appropriated in these books to create an interface between voice and performance, the oral and the written. What thus emerges is a *metissage* of the poetic voice, drum language, songs, dance and its corollary of audience participation, across genres and media to fashion a performance-based Alter/Native poetics (see Fasan 2009) that has even been identified with certain currents of African poetry in the colonial languages (Aiyejina 1988).

Conclusion

The widespread impression that African literature is essentially adversarial and political, and thus locatable in the protest tradition, is a conceit of the Europhonic academy that both oversimplifies and overgeneralises actual practices in the field. Contrary to the foregoing impression, African literature in the indigenous languages presents a far more versatile and fluid picture. It engages the political and employs, where necessary, the acerbic and combative language of agitation. But as the example of Yoruba oral poets demonstrates, indigenous-languages literature in Africa goes beyond the protest/agitation paradigm of African literature of European expression and dwells also on such personal and clearly apolitical matters of love, sex, relationships and other questions of everyday concerns. While taking note of this, studies in African literature and criticism should be extended to this marginalised realm of indigenous-languages literature in order to produce a more nuanced and enriched description of the literatures of Africa.

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