YORUBA FICTION, ORATURE, AND CULTURE
YORUBA Fiction, Orature, and Culture

OYEKAN OWOMOYELA
AND AFRICAN LITERATURE & THE YORUBA EXPERIENCE

Edited by
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Proverb is the horse of thought; when thought is lost, it is to proverb one turns for its recovery.
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Preface and Acknowledgements

For over forty years, the late Professor Oyekan Owomoyela dedicated his career to various aspects of Yoruba literature, most notably to proverbs and orality. But his work transcends the field of literature, encompassing other aspects of Yoruba culture and identity. It was in order to honor his contributions to advancing Yoruba scholarship that this book was conceived. This twenty-seven chapter volume of original essays is the product of this effort. The volume examines salient elements of Yoruba culture including literature, language, linguistics, religion, history, and jurisprudence, thus covering a wide aspect of Yoruba Studies. The authors, drawn from three continents—Africa, North America, and Europe—represent different disciplines; hence, the interdisciplinary framework of this book.

A work of this magnitude could not have been completed without the assistance of many people. We would like to thank the contributors who promptly heeded the call for a befitting festchrift to honor a leader, friend, and mentor. It has been over three years since the request for essays was made. We thank the contributors for their patience in the course of editing the volume, and for putting up with our numerous requests regarding editorial matters. We also want to thank Dr. Matt Schumann for copy-editing the manuscript. Our publisher, Mr. Kassahun Checole, deserves our gratitude for his interest in the work and his patience in the course of the three years of the making of the book. Lastly, Adebayo Oyebade thanks the Department of History at Tennessee State University for granting him course release time during the final stages of editing the book.

Adebayo Oyebade & Toyin Falola

May 2010
Introduction

Adebayo Oyebade and Toyin Falola

Eurocentric paradigms of constructing knowledge dominated for a long time the universe of scholarship. The discipline of African Studies, whether in its components of history, religion, art, language, science, or literature, suffered greatly from hegemonic Western modes of intellectual inquiry and explanation of phenomena. In this framework, the reality of pre-colonial African literature, like other contiguous disciplines, was challenged. Oral literature, unwritten as it were, was thus not considered as serious literature; at any rate, not as a subject of academic study.

Oyekan Owomoyela, the late Ryan Professor of African Literatures at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, in whose honor this festschrift is produced, was well aware of the Western domination of the way knowledge has been conceptualized as well as its lopsided perception of African phenomena, especially the literature of pre-literate peoples. He once submitted that “...colonialist-authored texts dominated, indeed almost monopolized, the library of information on Africa until the beginning of the decolonization era.”

It can safely be concluded that the presentation of the body of knowledge about Africa, including its literary traditions, has since been largely extricated from the Western historiographical stranglehold. Owomoyela was a prominent voice in this agenda of establishing an authentic Africa-centered perspective of knowledge. Indeed, his scholarly work, complementing those of other vanguards, is a major contribution to the effort to reconstruct knowledge about Africa, a task which began in the last half of the last century. He was particularly instrumental to the establishment of the oral genres as a core component of African literature. Indeed, his career, spanning over 40 years, was dedicated to various aspects of Yorùbá literature, most notably to proverbs and orature. His preeminence in proverb studies is without question or debate. His Yorùbá Proverbs, the most comprehensive work to date on that subject, is a clear indication.
Akin to Samuel Johnson’s classic, *The History of the Yorubas,* this singular compendium, an assembly and analysis of over 5,000 proverbs, is a definitive work on Yoruba proverbs.

The scores of encomiums, especially from academia, that greeted the passing of Professor Oyekan Owomoyela in October 2007, underscored the high esteem in which he was held in the academy. He was lauded for his significant contribution to the development of authentic African literature through research, writing, and teaching. Capturing the scholarly spirit of this widely-acclaimed intellectual was the poetic eulogy by Adebayo Oyebade, titled, “Homage,” originally posted on the *USA Africa Dialogue Series,* and reproduced below:

```
For a brimful season
He reigned in regal splendor
A doyen in the terrain of learned legends

He knew the dialect of our culture
The narrative of our ancient being
And so he danced the royal steps
In the forest of rare gems

He carved lengthy wisdom
Built towers of wise words
And engraved tall knowledge
Across the horizon of college campuses
From Ibadan to Nebraska

Now
The warrior’s season is expired
The forest has recalled the chieftain of masquerades
The horse has galloped home triumphantly
The dance of the dainty don is ended
The Chair is empty
The world is depopulated!
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Owomoyela left an enduring legacy in African literary scholarship. His numerous scholarly publications, the product of original research; and his stimulating creative writings, offer an intellectual critique of the age-old foreign ownership of African literature. His work, in essence, is a major contributing force in the confirmation of traditional African literature as an integral constituent of modern literature.
**Organization of the Book**

This *festschrift* is a collection of twenty-seven essays which offers wide-ranging perspectives on the subject of Yorùbá literature; oral and contemporary, as well as salient aspects of Yorùbá culture. The volume is organized into three parts, each dealing with interrelated themes.

**Orature as Literature**

The first part of the volume comprises eleven essays which address varied elements of traditional oral literature, a subject central to Owomoyela’s work and on which he wrote copiously. The Yorùbá, particularly, have an extensive and complex corpus of oral or traditional literature. Orature, as this genre of literature is also sometimes called, consists of unwritten traditional literary forms such as proverbs, folklores, riddles, poetry, and narratives. As synonym of traditional or oral literature, orature is defined by M.W. Payne thus:

> It is traditional in the sense that it has been handed down from one generation to another; oral in that it is a form of communication which is transmitted verbally; and literature in the sense that it involves a highly evolved artistic use of words.\(^5\)

Orature, it could be concluded, constitutes an important and necessary component of pre-literate Yorùbá literature and, of course, is indispensable to the development of contemporary written literature.

Kicking off the discourse on orature is Akintúnde Akínyemi’s chapter on traditional forms of Yorùbá praise singing (oriki). The chapter uses the works of selected Nigerian writers whose writings were influenced by oral tradition. This is followed by Tunde Adegbola, who in chapter 2 examines a number of Yorùbá oral texts. Adegbola argues that many such texts reveal deep and complex scientific thoughts, thus constituting an avenue of transmission of scientific knowledge in the pre-literate Yorùbá culture.

Olawole Famule argues in chapter 3 the indispensability of orality in the reconstruction of the cultural and historical reality of pre-literate Yorùbá society, using art and ritual, praise poetry and oral histories associated with the masquerade, *Abidogun*. In the next chapter, the role of the oral poet in political society is examined by Abdul-Rasheed Na’Allah, himself also a poet. Na’Allah discusses political praise songs and some of the controversial political performances of Odolaye Aremu, the widely-known partisan poet of Nigeria’s Second Republic.

In the absence of written sources with which to study pre-colonial Yorùbá dress forms, the scholar must rely to a large extent on oral sources. Tunde Akin-
wumi uses selected myths, chants, and recitals in chapter 5 to reconstruct the characteristic dress associated with four Yorùbá political heroes of the early era of Ife history. Next, Ademola Dasylva explores the enduring legacies of Yorùbá orature, employing aspects of Lagos ethnography and the ancestral-cult ritual festival, Adamu-Orisa.

The last five essays in this section discuss proverbs within the framework of Yorùbá literary discourse. In his chapter, Bernth Lindfors explores verbal ebullience in Yorùbá proverbs, and posits that it was a characteristic of Yorùbá expressive culture. Another perspective to proverbs is offered by Rachael Béllò in chapter 8. Béllò examines the ways in which proverbs reinforce condolences beyond their usual utility in speeches. In the next chapter, Adélékè Adéé․kó․ offers a critical and compelling exposition of the character of the Yorùbá proverb as agent of culture, thought, and tradition. Adéé․kó․ argues for the recognition of the indispensability of the cultural foundation of the proverb if its essence is to be fully comprehended. In chapter 10, in his own study of proverbs, Harrison Adéníyí discusses Yorùbá names expressed as proverbs. His analysis focuses specifically on abíso, a genre of personal names which is also expressed as proverbs. In the final chapter of this section, Aderemi Raji-Oyelade provides an assessment of Owomoyela’s contributions to the scholarly study of Yorùbá proverbs by focusing, in particular, on the dynamic disposition of Yorùbá proverbs.

Language, Texts, and Translation

Professor Owomoyela’s scholarship is wide, encompassing how oral literature relates to language use, construction of literary texts, and translation. The eight essays in Part Two of this book deal with these areas of Owomoyela’s work.

In chapter 12, Lérè Adéyẹmí discusses the intersections of proverbs and politics in the Nigerian context, paying particular attention to the works of two major Yorùbá novelists, Afo labí Olábíímántân and Olú Owólábí. In chapter 13, Arinpe Adejumo employs selected Yorùbá literary texts to examine, from the prism of satire, the interface between oral and written literary genres. What follows in the next chapter is a discourse on translation by Olayinka Agbetuyi. Using the works of noted Yorùbá novelists, D.O. Fagunwa and Adebayo Fateti, Agbetuyi examines the dynamics of translating a Yorùbá text into English. Following Agbetuyi’s enunciation of the utility of translation in the literary field is Pamela J. Olúbùnmi Smith’s chapter on the problem of translatability. Smith’s focus is on loss of humor and laughter in translation from Yorùbá into English. The author uses Akinwùmí Ìsòlá’s short story “Won Pè Mi Jerii,” as case study, to articulate the propensity of translated works to lose cultural specificity.

With particular reference to Orísun FM radio station located at Ilé-Ife, Adeola Faleye in Chapter 16 discusses the possibility of using the electronic media as an important agent in the promotion of Yorùbá language which, as
Introduction

some have argued, may be endangered. Next, in chapter 17, Julius Adekunle offers a discourse on *ààló* (folklore) as an essential element in Yorùbá tradition and a dynamic expression of the richness of its culture. In Chapter 18, Yiwọlà Awóyalé discusses the role of proverbs and idioms in Yorùbá dictionary-making, arguing that they constitute unique strategies of language preservation. In the final chapter of this section, Aaron Reynolds provides a critique of Toyin Falola’s acclaimed memoir, *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt*. Reynolds examines the poetic, prose format of the work; an approach which he considers as providing a unique dimension to historical scholarship and which, in particular, pushes the frontiers of historical narratives. Reynolds sees in this book a demonstration of the blurring of lines between the disciplines of history and literature.

Perspectives on Culture

For the Yorùbá, and, indeed, for any people, traditional literary forms constitute only a component part of their culture. The performance of oral literature, be it folklore or epic, is necessarily interrelated with, and in some instances, governed by other cultural values and norms. Beyond his major field of literature, Owomoyela’s scholarship also explored the larger dimension of Yorùbá culture. Particularly, he wrote on the interplay of orature and various facets of Yorùbá culture, be it religion, philosophy, or other characteristics. Part III of this book is thus devoted to analyses of these aspects of Yorùbá culture.

Adebayo Oyebade opens the section with an analysis of Yorùbá cultural reclamation and identity in contemporary America. He focuses on elements of Yorùbá culture including fashion, name, dance, music, language, and religious practices, as well as the emergence of Yorùbá communities (*ìles*) in black America. He also examines the impact of nascent Nigerian Yorùbá on American social and cultural life.

In chapter 21, Danoye Oguntola-Laguda examines the mutual relationship between art and traditional Yorùbá religion. The author argues that the case of the Yorùbá expresses the reality that art has a definite utility in the expression of religious beliefs, rituals, and worship. He also seeks to demystify art motifs in Yorùbá religion depicted as idolatry, a notion popular in Western and Christian tradition. This attempt to deconstruct the Eurocentric perspective of African culture is further addressed in chapter 22 by Jubril Adesegun Dosumu. Using the Agemo Festival in Ijebuland, Dosumu examines the nature and purpose of African ritual festivals, which Western constructs have often misconstrued as uncivilized.

Chapter 23 by Ibigbolade Aderibigbe and A.O. Johnson-Bashua continues the discourse on traditional religion, this time by focusing on the concept of spirit possession and veneration associated with Yorùbá deities (Orìsà). In the chapter, the “Elegun Sango,” the assumed possessor of the spirit of the Yorùbá
god of thunder, Sango, provides the framework to highlight the veneration of the deity. The authors see in the possessed person a vehicle for the unification of the physical and cosmic worlds.

While the caste system is very well known among some African groups, notably the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria, the practice is rarely associated with the Yorùbá. In chapter 24, Ilesanmi Akanmidu Paul considers this practice among the Okun of northeast Yorùbáland, where he notes that it is prevalent. The chapter explores the nature of the practice, and questions why in the modern period no legislation has been enacted to outlaw it.

In chapter 25, Deji Medubi analyses the dynamics of the folksong, Agbelege, peculiar to the Kaba Yorùbá, but which shares common features with other Yorùbá poetic genres such as Ìjálá. Medubi examines the dynamics of this complex verbal art and focuses attention on its performance, the artists who perform it, their instruments, and the religious and ritual components of its performance.

In chapter 26, Idowu William takes on the controversy over the relationship between law and morality which has often been at the core of debates in modern jurisprudence. William addresses this controversy from the prism of Yorùbá legal thought, and concludes that Yorùbá culture, with a fundamental moral foundation, precludes a separation of law from morality.

Closely related to William’s subject is the issue of social justice in Yorùbá culture. Moses Òkè provides in chapter 27 a critique of cross-examination, a long-standing feature in Yorùbá legal practice and an important and effective tool in the administration of justice. William concludes that the traditional Yorùbá process of cross-examination is in no way less effective in judicial administration than modern, Western constructs, and indeed, given its contextual advantages, should be incorporated into the legal system in contemporary Yorùbá society.

Notes


Part I

ORATURE AS LITERATURE
Chapter 1

NGERIAN CONTEMPORARY DRAMATISTS AND THE ART OF COURT PRAISE SINGING

Akintúnde Akinyemi

INTRODUCTION

Court praise singing is one of the most developed oral poetic genres in Africa.¹ These are ambitious praises composed and recited by professional bards attached to the courts of paramount rulers.² This chapter accordingly discusses the relationship between this form of oral literature and modern African literature. In doing this, we focus on the role of the traditional form of Yorùbá court praise singing in the works of selected Nigerian writers whose writings represent the extent to which creative writers have been influenced by oral tradition. The chapter concludes that the functions performed by such literary materials in oral society are still sustained in modern literary productions into which they have been transferred.

Yoruba Court Poets and their Production

The most formal state praises of the Yorùbá people are usually rendered by the official male bards known by various appellations, such as: akiğbe ọba (the-ones-who-acclaim-kings), akéwi ọba (the kings’ poets), apohùn ọba (the-kings’ bards), onírárá/asunrárá ọba (the kings’ praise singers), arókin ọba (the chroniclers of kings’ genealogies), onisẹkere ọba (the-ones-who-chant-to-the-
accompaniment-of-gourd-rattles-for-kings), or *alaro ọba* (the-ones-who-chant-to-the-accompaniment-of-metal-clavicles-for-kings). In pre-colonial Yorùbá society, all court bards were “kept in royal service” and “well supported” by their patrons and, in return, the bards “repeat daily in songs the genealogy of the kings, the principal events of their lives, and other notable events in the history of the Yorùbá society.”

Today, however, no Yorùbá royal palace can lay claim any longer to the monopoly of the court bards. According to Farias, the bards now “combine their hereditary calling with other professions,” although if summoned to the palace by the king, “every other activity is dropped...even if they should be required to play in the ààfin (palace) for several consecutive days.”

Apart from the royal bards that recount the deeds of past kings whenever the incumbent appears in public, there are also among the Yorùbá people a band of court drummers and horn-blowers, specially appointed as part of the rulers’ formal entourage. On state occasions, these drummers also use their drumbeats or horn notes to provide both music and drum-poems, which are interpreted in actual words, praising the rulers and their predecessors and commemorating the glorious victories of the past. Such performances are an essential part of state occasions, be it at a state reception (in or out of the palace), during a procession to sacred groves for religious rites, at national festivals, during royal funerals, or at political functions, like installation of new chiefs or the swearing of oaths of allegiance by these chiefs.

One other traditional occasion for royal bards’ recitation of their poetry is in the early morning praises of their patrons. Formal praises are also delivered by the bards on ceremonial and public occasions when they recite a whole series of eulogies in honor of their patrons, starting with the famous praises of the patrons’ ancestors before shifting to the exaltation of the incumbent. This form of poetry, according to Finnegan, “seems to go with a particular ethos, a stress on royal or aristocratic power and an administration for military achievement.” Finnegan seems to have been impressed by the activities of Yorùbá royal singers when she writes in her groundbreaking work on African oral literature:

> drummers at a king’s gate play not only the king’s praise names, but [they also] announce and honour important guests by drumming or piping their names as they enter the palace [...] Any sort of public event [...] may be the occasion for praises by official bards [...] The ruler’s position is commented on and recognised by the stress laid both in the dignity of the office and, more explicitly on the achievements of its present incumbent. Periodic praises are often obligatory. Among the Yorùbá, the praises of the king, with the complete list of his predecessors and their praises must be recited once a year in the public.
As I have mentioned elsewhere,9 the ruling monarchs themselves and their ancestors are glorified in the poems, while real and ideal deeds are attributed to them in lofty and elusive language as well as in highly figurative forms of expression. In all these areas, the rulers are elevated as the center and ideal of Yorùbá society. Even though what we always come back to in the production of Yorùbá court poets may be more of adulatory and political propaganda, this social responsibility does not prevent the bards from criticizing their patrons. The poetry provides its authors with concealing tricks that transmit explosive messages in the guise of metaphor or words with multiple meanings. Rather than lashing out directly at their patrons, court bards are fond of presenting criticism with allusions and idiomatic expressions, an approach that helps mitigate the direct impact of their criticism on those rulers who are directly implicated and whom the bards often mention by name. It is for this reason that Yorùbá court poets are officially acknowledged as a group of individuals holding privileged positions in the society. Not just because they take charge of the preservation of the dynastic poems whose main objective is to exalt the king and other members of the royal family, but more importantly, because as watchdogs of the public morality in the society, the bards also make the moral welfare of their patrons an important aspect of their production.

Thus, a substantial part of Yorùbá court poetry is made up of oríkì (praise names). Oríkì in general are equivalents to names, which are seen as being in some way the key to a subject’s essential nature. According to Barber,

By uttering a subject’s oríkì, one is calling upon or unlocking hidden powers; the activity of naming is thought of as being effectual. Human subjects react to the utterance of their oríkì with deep gratification and with an enhancement of their aura which is sometimes actually visible in their physical behaviour [...] Oríkì are - or are made up of - a number of separate units, accumulated over time and referring to qualities or events associated with the subject but usually otherwise unrelated. In the case of an individual’s oríkì, the units are accumulated over a time [...] New ones can be created, by drummers [...] at wide intervals as new topics arise, and these will then be added to the already existing collection [...] The units of oríkì are separate not only because they were separately composed to refer to unrelated events but also because each unit may make a different kind of reference. Since oríkì are characteristically cryptic and obscure, the hearer, to understand them, needs to know the separate background story of each one.10
NIGERIAN DRAMATISTS AND COURT PRAISE SINGING

Court poetry remains a living tradition in contemporary Yorùbá society, not only in the palaces of paramount rulers, but also in the literary creation of many Nigerian dramatists who draw inspiration from this aspect of oral tradition when crafting royal institutions in their creative writing. The dramatists are conscious of the fact that Yorùbá court poets have different appellations, and they reflect this in their writing. For instance, while the court poet in Ola Rotimi’s famous play, *The Gods are Not to Blame*, is simply referred to as ‘royal bard’, the one in his second drama, *Kúrunmí*, is addressed as ‘asunrárì’. Akinwumi Isola on his part refers to the court poet in his *Efúnsetán Aniówùrù: Ìyálóde Ìbàdàn* as ‘alágbe’, which Pamela Smith translated as ‘praise singer.’ Two other writers that used the same appellation, ‘praise singer,’ for the court poets in their dramas are Wole Soyinka in his *Kongi’s Harvest* and *Death and the King’s Horseman* and Obotunde Ijimere in *Born with the Red Fire on His Head*.

The most popular praises in honor of Yorùbá paramount rulers are made by male royal bards who acclaim their patrons in long solo eulogies. The production of male royal bards is delivered in a much faster and higher tone than in any other oral poetic genre. Court bards pour forth the praises of their patrons at the top of their voices, with occasional but limited pauses for breath. Simultaneously, the poets make dramatic gestures as they proceed with their oral delivery. A good example of this is in the excerpt below rendered by the court poet in Obotunde Ijimere’s *Born with the Red Fire on His Head* in honor of Aláàfin Aólè Arógangan:

Praise Singer:

Fire in the eye,
Fire in the mouth,
Fire in the roof!
Aláàfin Aólè is the death
That drips gently
Like indigo from the cloth.
Aólè is the leopard whose tail wags playfully
While he tears his victim apart.
Every time he opens his mouth
He swallows a hero!
Every time he sets down his foot
He crushes a hero.
Where the elephant walks
The grass will not grow again.
Where thunder strikes
The master and the slave tremble alike.
Aláàfin Aólè,  
Twin brother of death,  
Child of wrath,  
Grandchild of thunder!  
Arise  
And let the world be dizzy  
When it is your height.\(^{11}\)

Oral tradition and available literatures on Old Oyo history confirmed that the tenure of Aláàfin Aólè, who ruled in Old Oyo between 1789 and 1796, was retrogressive and crisis-ridden, and that as a result, his subjects moved to seek refuge elsewhere in the southern part of Yorùbáland. The climax of the crises was the misunderstanding that the Aláàfin had with his Chief of Army Staff, Àfonjá, which led to Aólè’s suicide.\(^{12}\)

But, there is another form of court poetry known as Yùngbà, found mainly in the palace of the king of Oyo. The performance of yùngbà is reserved exclusively for the wives of the incumbent Aláàfin and his predecessors (ayaba),\(^{13}\) and those of the other princes (ayọmọ).\(^{14}\) Although yùngbà chant is confined to the palace of the Aláàfin, it is not uncommon for its chanters to perform occasionally for the king in public. Instances of such special occasions are during the coronation of a new Aláàfin, when performing royal funeral rites, or at the annual Odùduwà and Ìfá festivals; but never as a form of regular social music for entertaining the general public.\(^{15}\) The delivery of yùngbà is performed to the accompaniment of calabash beating (ìgbá títí). The performance involves at least two female performers or group of performers whose performance have an overlapping structure like the following excerpt recreated by Adebayo Faleti in his drama titled Basorun Gaa during the installation of Aláàfin Abíodún:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ìyá Ilé Orí:} & \quad \text{Adégoólú ọkọ ayaba} \\
\text{Ègbè:} & \quad \text{Ọúnjẹ ló n ságba i dèwe o} \\
\text{Ìyá Ilé Orí:} & \quad \text{Adégoólú ọkọ ayaba} \\
\text{Ègbè:} & \quad \text{Ọúnjẹ ló n ságba i dèwe o} \\
\text{Ìyá Ilé Orí:} & \quad \text{Ọ joun pó máa já} \\
\text{Ègbè:} & \quad \text{Abíodún} \\
\text{Ìyá Ilé Orí:} & \quad \text{Ọ joun pó máa já} \\
\text{Ègbè:} & \quad \text{Adégoólú} \\
\text{Ìyá Ilé Orí:} & \quad \text{Ọ joun pó máa já} \\
\text{Gbogbo:} & \quad \text{Kókòrò n je ọ látẹsẹ – wúyẹ, wúye, Ọ joun pó máa já Kókòrò n je ọ látẹsẹ – wúyẹ, wúye, Ọ joun pó máa já o o o o ...} \\
\text{Ìyá Ilé Orí:} & \quad \text{Adégoólú Sinkin-nmi-ni-} \\
\text{Ègbè:} & \quad \text{Afàìmọni kòni mọra} \\
\text{Ìyá Ilé Orí:} & \quad \text{Adégoólú Sinkin-nmi-ni-}
\end{align*}
\]
Ègbè: Afàìmọni kóni mọra...
Ìyá Ilé Orí: Bérin je, erin a pagbo o
Ègbè: Bérin je, erin a pagbo o
Ìyá Ilé Orí: Adégoólú dide o fọba hàn
Ègbè: Bérin je, erin a pagbo o
Ìyá Ilé Orí: Ayànfe ará Oyo, baba ó si fọba hàn
Ègbè: Bérin je, erin a pagbo o
Ìyá Ilé Orí: Àyànfẹ ará Oyo, baba ó si fọba hàn
Ègbè: Bérin je, erin a pagbo o
Ìyá Ilé Orí: Adégoólú laré òní ye o
Ègbè: Èrò yà wá wò ó ò!
Ìyá Ilé Orí: Abíôdún laré òní ye o
Ègbè: Èrò yà wá wò ó ò!
Ìyá Ilé Orí: Adégoólú kýún dé o
Ègbè: Àtàngá kýún dé o, oge róhun so
Ìyá Ilé Orí: Adégoólú kýún dé o
Ègbè: Àtàngá kýún dé o, oge róhun so
Ìyá Ilé Orí: Bí mo r’Àtàngá
Ègbè: Òró mi a dà bí oyin
Ìyá Ilé Orí: Bí mo r’Àtàngá
Ègbè: Òró mi a dà bí oyin.¹⁶

Ìyá Ilé Orí: Adégoólú, lord over the queens
Ègbè: Good food makes the old young
Ìyá Ilé Orí: Adégoólú, lord over the queens
Ègbè: Good food makes the old young
Ìyá Ilé Orí: It seems he’s ready to dance
Ègbè: Abíôdún
Ìyá Ilé Orí: It seems he’s ready to dance
Ègbè: Adégoólú
Ìyá Ilé Orí: It seems he’s ready to dance
All: Your legs are hitching already,
Ègbè: Your legs are hitching already,
Ègbè: It seems he’s ready to dance ...
Ìyá Ilé Orí: Adégoólú, is hospitable
Ègbè: He welcomes even strangers
Ìyá Ilé Orí: Adégoólú, is hospitable
Ègbè: He welcomes even strangers...
Ìyá Ilé Orí: The elephant eats in circle
Ègbè: The elephant eats in circle
Ìyá Ilé Orí: Adégoólú, show your royal power
Ègbè: The elephant eats in circle
Ìyá Ilé Orí: The favorite of Oyo, my lord is ready to show
Ègbè: his royal power
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Ègbè: The elephant eats in circle
Ìyá Ilé Orí: The mighty one who reigns over Oyo, my lord is ready to show his royal power
Ègbè: The elephant eats in circle
Ìyá Ilé Orí: This performance is meant to honor Adégoólú
Ègbè: Everyone should stop by to watch it!
Ìyá Ilé Orí: This performance is meant to honor Abíôdún
Ègbè: Everyone should stop by to watch it!
Ìyá Ilé Orí: Adégoólú has brought iyùn beads
Ègbè: Àtàndá has brought iyùn bead, the ladies have something to tie
Ìyá Ilé Orí: Adégoólú has brought iyùn bead, the ladies have something to tie
Ègbè: Àtàndá has brought iyùn bead, the ladies have something to tie
Ìyá Ilé Orí: Whenever I see Àtàndá
Ègbè: My problems are resolved instantly
Ìyá Ilé Orí: Whenever I see Àtàndá
Ègbè: My problems are resolved instantly)

The beauty of yüngbà chant, I stated elsewhere, is in its overlapping structure, where the delivery of one group of chanters overlaps that of the other. The overlapping structure of yüngbà chant is well demonstrated in the above excerpt, where the production of the two chanters overlaps one another. The first chanter makes an incomplete sentence, which the second chanter takes over from her. She then builds on the incomplete sentence to make it complete and meaningful. The first chanter takes over again from the second chanter, on and on like that. The beauty in this unique structure of yüngbà chant is better described by the verb denoting the act of its performance. The verb is ‘kùn’, and it literally means ‘to buzz’ or ‘to hum’, while the act of performing the chant itself is denoted by yüngbà kíkùn, meaning ‘intoning yüngbà.’ The term yüngbà itself is descriptive of the performance contour, in which the chanting drags on leisurely in a pleasing manner as of leisurely buzzing or humming. Hence, yüngbà chanters are referred to as akùnyüngbà, meaning literally ‘those who hum melodiously.’

The difference in the production of Yorùbá royal poetry notwithstanding, the genre is characterized by certain features that differentiate it from other forms of verbal art. These features, as I discussed extensively in another work, are citation of names, predominant use of kinship terminology, references to epithets, historical allusions, and lineage oríkì. I will now proceed to discuss how contemporary Nigerian dramatists incorporate these features of the genre into their recreation of court poetry in their writings. Citation of personal names of kings is the most prominent feature of Yorùbá royal poetry. The Yorùbá people
believe that a man or woman’s name affects and dictates his or her fortunes in life. This accounts for the great care that is taken before a child is named in the society, since the name is meant to reflect the circumstances of conception and birth of the child, the child’s family history, fortunes, misfortunes, or the family’s hopes and fears. These names are known as orúko ábíso19 (personal names) or oríkì ábísọ20 (personal praise names). This class of names is predominantly given at birth to underscore the significance of names among the Yorùbá “because the total meaning of the constituent morphemes is taken into consideration.”21 In Yorùbá society, it is common for a child to have as many as four or five names. The reason for this occurrence is because apart from the parents or relations that give names to a new child, other well-wishers also shower names on the child to show their happiness. This phenomenon accounts for royal bards’ acclamation of their patrons through citation of the subject’s numerous personal names. For instance, in Akínwùmí Ìsòlá’s Efíìṣẹ́tàn Aníwúrà: Iyalóde Ìbádàn, the object of praise, Àjáí, a war general, is addressed by six of his personal names—Àjáí, Òlòsùndé, Ìgbàró-ọlá, Ìbíkúnlé, Oníwèèpò, and Arínlewołá:

Alágbe:

Àjáí! Ògíídí-Olú
Ò-gb-órí-efón-sá-filàfilà
Ò-rí-má-délé-wí
Dára-nijà
Àjáí yára m’Ódù
K’Ódù kò yì sigbó
Yára m’Esà
K’Ésà túibiá
Lásán lewúrè n gbójú
Ewúrè kò lè paátà je
Lásán lágùtàn n pônjú mòmò
Kò le ba irelé lèrù
Lásán ni sigidi Àjáí rogbokú
Tò gbómo löwó tó fehin
Kò ni mènikan
Èni tí yóó jeun kó màa jeun
Ọnjẹ́ Àjáí kò lájegbè
Èni tí n jeun nilé Gbóříefon
Nísále Ọsun
Oríta ọrun ni ó gbé n jeun
Bèniyàn n mu ṣe Òibó
Nilé Gbóříefon
Nísále Ọsun
Èjè èniyàn ní n mu sùn
Bèniyàn n rí Gbóříefon ní sòokún aďe
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Tí sì n rí Ìyápọ ní sòokùn àárọ
Ògún ni olúwarẹ ñ so nígbò nígbà gbogbo
Igbó tènikan kò sán rí
Elejú tènikan kò gbọdọ wọ;
Àjáí b’Ògèdèngbé wogbó náá, yinbon ëṣẹta
A-rí-koro-ko-mo-lesé-kan alóngó
A rágada pa éyí tí kò sín baba Òsun re
Ọlọsuǹèdè a bojú agada bí iná, bí iná
Duuru, duùrukú
Abòògùn gbòògùn pón
Ìgbàró-olá kí lo gbé pón
Láise ọmọlángidi?
Àjáí gbókè Òtìn
Lòwó Wùkùwùkù
Ó gbókè Òtìn,
Ó gbé Wáláà jóná
Bí a bá mú t’Ibikúnlé Olókè kúró
Balógún bí Ògbóri-Efòn di àgírase
Irinwó efòn, egerín iwo
Ògún Fúláá, ìyà bátá
Ògídiolú kò wehin
Tò fi l’Ádálọ lúgbẹ A-tú-yagba sí won lésè odi olódi
A-tú-yagba sí won ni yára ọlọtẹ
A bínú dojú alágbára délẹ
A sòfin aghára
Kí won má sọ miíran mọ lááláí
Edidi kò mọ Àjáí,
E pé kò bí Òdù léérè wò
Ekùn! Òdígba-digbá wò
Ekùn! Òdígba-digbá n dokà
Kò wehin tò fi l’Ádálọ lúgbẹ
Ikú tí i s’Agodi kánrin
Oniweépó! Arínléwọlá
Ótítì-barati korán!
A bínú le koko
Bí ẹhin ọmọ ẹlómírin. 22

Praise Singer:

Àjáí! Ògídí-Olú
Beheaded Efòn ran swift-footed;
The one unmoved by great feats
Warrior magnificient
Àjáí swiftly set upon Òdù
Òdù ran scampering into the bush
He set upon Esà
Esà quaked and surrendered without a fight
A goat may bleat threats
But threats cannot kill Ifá
A ram may come charging menacingly,
It cannot terrify ìrèlè
Àjàí’s sigidi may lie reclined,
Baby in arms and with
Teeth bared in a menacing smile
It would harm no-one
The emboldened one who desires may have his fill,
Let him know Àjàí’s hospitality is not without a price
Whoever dines at Ògbóríéfon’s house
In Ìsále-Ọsun district,
Does so at his own risk
To drink the white man’s wine
At Ògbóríéfon’s house
In Ìsále-Ọsun district
Is to nightcap on human blood.
To see Gbóríéfon at dusk
And chance encounter iyápo at dawn
Is to head-butt war constantly
A virgin forest untouched, untamed,
A dense grove never once treaded by human feet,
Into this Àjàí chased Ògèdèngbé with pistol blazing.
Quick wielding the kóró stick you lasso your enemies and capture them.
With a large machete you slaughter Ọsun’s detractors
Ọlọsùndé, sword that strikes swiftly, cleanly with lightning speed
So formidable, so unfathomable!
A stockpile of charms, mounted back-to-back, side-to-side
Ìgbàró-ọlá, what is strapped to your back
Like a wooden doll charm?
Àjàí seized Ọtìn hill
From the Wúkùwúkù
You captured Ọtìn hill
And set the people’s Koranic slates on fire
Deprived of a fire to cook his meals
The farmer can subsist only on bananas
With the exception of Ibíkúnlé Olókè’s
All other war chief’s valor pales beside Ògbóríéfon’s
Four hundred buffalo, eight hundred horns,
Twenty Fulani captives, forty sandals, his bounty
Ògidí-Ọlú did not look back
Until he had chased Adálọ into the bush.
You fanned out your foot soldiers around the city wall,
Positioning them in the deep trenches of the enemy riled, you make
the powerful bite the dust
Maker of tough laws,
Incontestable, irrevocable, ever!
Èdìdì has not heard about Àjàí’s prowess,
He ought to ask Òdù
Tiger! Spoiler at idòkà
Did not turn back until he had sent Adàlọ scampering into the bush!
You, the death which laid waste Agodi
Oniwèépò! Arinléwọlá!
Epitome of muscular manliness,
With rippling abdominals, firm and flab-less
Like the dorsals.
(From Smith’s translation of Efúnsetán Aniwúrà, 120-121.)

Another feature of Yorùbá royal poetry is the predominant use of kinship terms. In Yorùbá society, the size of a man’s family is an indicator of his achievements and greatness. This accounts for the regular use of kinship terms in Yorùbá royal poetry to link paramount rulers to their relations and forebears when royal bards are chanting in their praises. This feature is common to Yorùbá oríkì in general and not necessarily restricted to the praises in honor of the royal people alone.23 The preponderant use of kinship terms gives the royal poets the opportunity to highlight some of the qualities of greatness and achievements of the kings. The longer a Yorùbá man is able to keep his large family together, the more his administrative acumen and greatness are recognized and appreciated in the society. The most common kinship terms used in royal poetry to link paramount rulers to their families are ọmọ (child of or offspring of), baba (father of), and ọkọ (husband of) as shown in these two excerpts:

Royal Bard:

An Eagle does not go to the market place
Unless there is something there
Ọdẹwálé, king, *father* of us all
W ent to the town today to see his sick people...
Make way, I pray, let my greetings also touch *your wife.*
Ojúọlá, Queen, *daughter* of Oyèníkẹẹ,
You and *your husband,* two parts of the same calabash split equal
by the gods
Indeed, what is the difference between the right ear of a horse
And the left ear of the same horse?
Nothing.24
Onírárà:

Onírárà:

Onírárà:

Onírárà:

Onírárà:

Kinship terms that link the king to his forebears in Yorùbá royal poetry are meant to confirm the right of the person concerned (the addressee) to the throne, and also to challenge him to achieve the greatness of his forebears. Whereas those kinship terms that connect the king to his wives and children, who are considered to be marks of his greatness in the society, are meant to confirm the right of the incumbent’s children to the throne.

A substantial part of royal poetry of the Yorùbá people is further dominated by epithets of the kings, which are often presented in figurative or obscure terms. Most of these epithets are phrases that emphasize the physical or emotional make-up of the kings, or phrases that underscore their greatness. When the oríkì of any Yorùbá king is performed, his characteristic behaviors are usually encapsulated in the epithets by court bards. For instance, the fame acquired by
the ruler and war leader of Ìbàdàn, Ààrẹ Látòósà, during his reign (1871-1885) formed the basis of the praise names coined for him by the royal bard in Àkín-wùmí Òsòlá’s Efùnsetàn Ànìwúrà: Íyálóde Ìbàdàn:

Alágbé:

Àgbákú olópòó àyán,
Asúbíaró agegedígúdú.
Oluòde èkùtà, a bòkè diè soógún
Kò mú kò wàlé, ókọ Osùnbùnmì,
Kò pa kò bọ, ókọ ibeji;
Àjánàkù Morinólá
Erin tí i mu omi pòkànpòkàn,
A-gbè-igi-ílà-so-kò
Ó tẹ ròkò fidà rý;
B'Àrẹ n se o, ó máa bOsun
Èràn kò kò kan tòòsà;
Ó bàà bòrísà
Ó bàà bObátáldá
Asúbíaró ní seni kànrin
Bi yìò bá o já, a yan lọ bí Òdè
A kùsáátà bí Ìwò,
Kò tó dè, ènì ti yìò jà a gbàgbé
Ènì ti yìò lájá a sùn lọ
Pa sílé, pa sòjá
Pa sídii ọgedé, pa sídii ọrombó
Pa sí kòtò, pa sí gegele
Òndùgbọyé omo Òkè Bàdàn
A bi inú ụfụ
Tíi bi ni lèèrè èràn egberin ọdún,
Bi ogo èlegbáá
A múra sile doyè
Onígombó wúrà, ókọ Osùnbùnmì
Gbàngbàn bí ôkọ
Adá firi sòkùnrin
Ìrán gangan jìgan
Ara gbogho kiki oogün wonkoko
A yán ná ódí fèni ti kò gbò
Asúbíaró baba kókó irin.26

Àgbákú, Kingpost of Àyán
Dark-as-indigo-dye,
From your rocky courtyard, you proffer magic charms
Accomplisher of Herculean proportion, husband of Osùnbùnmì ...
Bounty hunter par excellence, husband of ibeji;
Elephantine son of Mórìnólá
Elephant who thirstily gulps down the river,
Uprooter of giant trees
Who bends the bows of the massive irókò
To hang up his sword
When Ààrẹ is inclined to vanquish a foe
Endless sacrifices to gods,
And sacrifices to Ọsun or Ọbàtálá
Faze not the dark-as-indigo warrior
Until that foe is fully vanquished
To do battle with the enemy, he strides fifty miles to Edẹ and back to
intimidate his adversary
For his battle alert, a mere thirty-mile warm-up stride to and from Iwó
By his return, the unwary foe has let down his guard,
And the peacemakers are themselves stretched out in deep slumber,
wearied from waiting
Your enemies are laid waste, their bodies flung far and wide
In homesteads and in the marketplace
In the banana grove, in the orange orchard
They lie in ditches, strewn about the hillsides
Ọndùgboyè, veritable son of ỌkèBàdàn
The unforgiving, relentless man
Who nurses a grudge a thousand years hence
Your gates are strong and massive
Massive like Èsù's cudgel
Suave one, bedecked, who prepares for a chieftaincy title long before
it is proclaimed
His gombo facial-marks, radiant, handsome;
Husband of Ọsúnbùnmi
Straight and steely as a spear
Rugged stalwart, his machete handle his might portrays
Awesome warrior, paroxysm of fear
His body framed with potent charms from head to toe
Trouble monger for the reckless, the unwary
Dark-as-indigo-dye, steely like thunderbolts.27

This praise-appellation of Látòósà, chief and general of the belligerent Ịbàdàn, is action-packed. Lines 2-29 allude to Látòósà’s essential nature and glorify his prowess and *modus operandi*. The eulogy chronicles movement, tension, and suspense. It evokes figures of speech to describe his zeal for combat, his belligerency, his restless energy, and the terror Latòósà induces in his enemies as he brings them to their knees by pure psychological advantage. Though mortal, the formidable general is larger than life, “elephantine” in bearing. The sheer power of the presence of his person spells conquest and
subjugation for man and nature (he bends the boughs of the notoriously tall and massive hardwood *irókò* tree to hang up his sword). The sense of vividness, action, and urgency is embedded in choice similes; the atmosphere is charged with energy and tension. The general, “Elephant, son of Mọrinọlá,” who routs the enemy completely and never returns home without bounty, is appropriately evoked in prodigious terms. Even a simple mortal act of drinking water must be performed as befits his might: noisily, like an elephant; in heavy, loud gulps. In essence, the chant of the Yorùbá royal bards is dominated by personal *oríkì* of their patrons; made up of separate units accumulated over time and referring to qualities or events associated with the subjects but usually otherwise unrelated. Some of these units refer to qualities of character, which are highly specific. They refer to incidents in the subjects’ life, often apparently trivial and occasionally even scandalous, as in the above example.

Another feature of Yorùbá royal poetry is the documentation of major historical events associated with the tenure of the king being praised by the poet. Scholars of Yorùbá history have always found information supplied by royal bards useful for historical reconstruction. In the following excerpt, the royal poet in Ola Rotimi’s *Kúrunmí* gives some salient historical information on the uncompromising attitude of Ààrẹ Kúrunmí with Alààfin Adélù:

Asunrárà:

*Iwin were tí jorí*  
*Òko Mosádomí*  
*Arówọreta ako ehín Ògún*  
*Lásori okọ yanba*  
*Àgbásògun gboromgborom*  
*Ilá tiiri kó*  
*Ikán tiiri wẹwù eje*  
*Ikúnkósó tiiri peku*  
*Iwo tiiri peja*  
*Òkè tiiri má wọ o*  
*Eégún tiiri má reyiín*  
*Afá tiiri kán*  
*Ógiri tiiri wó*  
*Òkàà-bàbà tiiri wo olóko lójú*  
*Bomodé bá n bágbá jeun*  
*Tittyiri ni tiiri*

Asunrárà:

Impish demon, gobbler of heads  
Sole husband of Mosadiwin
Have you ever lacked money for gunpowder? 
You bulwark of the army’s attack-power 
Husband-in-chief among husbands 
Take away your grits, and a battle dulls down 
The okro stiffens with age 
The garden egg toughens as it ripens 
A trap stiffens in tension to kill a rat 
Hook and line tense tautly to catch a fish 
A mountain, stiffly erect above ground 
A towering masquerade, a frozen grin on its face 
A ram in a grim duel, the neck stiffening before brutal butt 
A high wall, daring a fall 
Tall millet stalk peering into the eyes of the farmer himself 
The child would eat with an elder, but fear wouldn’t let him 
And so instead of eating, child stiffens.29

The history behind the above excerpt states that, when Prince Olújídé Adélù was proclaimed and crowned as the new Aláàfin in 1859, his authority as the king was acknowledged by all except Kúrunmí of Ìjàyè, the Ààrẹ-ọnà-kakanfọ of Ọyọ, who was against attempts to perpetuate the lineage of Àtibà on the throne of Ọyọ. Therefore, Kúrunmí refused to recognize Adélù as a lawful successor to Aláàfin Àtibà. He also insisted that Adélù, being the immediate past Àrẹmọ (Crown Prince), should die with his father, Aláàfin Àtibà, in accordance with the custom and tradition of Ọyọ. This tradition was evolved in Old Ọyọ to serve as a deterrent to overzealous Crown Princes, who usually assert power and authority with impunity. Kúrunmí argued that Adélù’s case should not be an exception because he also perpetrated evil during his tenure as the Crown Prince of Aláàfin Àtibà.30

Kúrunmí refused to send congratulatory message to Adélù as the new Aláàfin; he also decided not to pay homage to him as required by custom and tradition. Instead, he was seeking another candidate of the older line from the royal families at the refugee towns of Sakí, Ìgbòho and Kiss. He seems to have reached the conclusion that if there were no capable candidates from the ruling houses of the Aláàfin in Old Ọyọ, he would support a candidate from the Ọjà lineage that Àtibà met on ground at Àgó. Hence, with the support of Kúrunmí, the lineage of Ọjà in Ọyọ protested against the enthronement of Adélù. The protest nearly resulted in a civil war, but the resistance mounted by Ìbàdàn war-lords and members of Ọyomèsì, on behalf of the Aláàfin, reduced its effectiveness.

Aláàfin Adélù made several reconciliatory moves towards Kúrunmí within the first few months of his enthronement, but Kúrunmí proved ‘irreconcilable’ and remained ‘obdurate and insolent’.31 When it became evident that Kúrunmí’s disobedience might lead to a full-fledged war, Aláàfin Adélù resorted to
other means to avert a war situation. Matters came to a crisis when Kúrunmí, in defiance to Adélù, sent his men to kidnap citizens of Oyo and sell them into slavery. He further organized the raiding of Oyo farms for loot and slaves. The straw that broke the camel’s back was the incident that happened in early 1860 when some citizens of Oyo, who were forcefully arrested by Kúrunmí’s army, were denied freedom despite several appeals by Aláàfin Adélù. Aláàfin Adélù formally declared war against Kúrunmí when the matter could not be resolved peacefully. Òrányàn was worshipped, and on April 10, 1860, ‘the standard of war was borne out once more.’ With Basọrun Ògúnmọ lá’s destruction of Kúrunmí’s military base of Ìwàwun (Ìwàrun) and the killing of Kúrunmí’s five sons in the siege of that town, Kúrunmí received his death warrant. Realizing that everything was lost as a result of the defeat that he suffered on the battlefield, Kúrunmí died of a broken heart in June 1861.

The last feature of Yorùbá royal poetry to be discussed is its brief references to oriki orílẹ̀ (lineage oriki) of the kings. Oriki orílẹ̀ is the descriptive poetry of the place of origin of its bearers. It is all about the place of origin and the distinctive attributes of the place and its people. Oriki orílẹ̀ is one of the principal means by which groups of people who regard themselves as kin recognize each other and assert their unity. It alludes to illustrious men and women among the ancestors of the group, but these allusions are attached only to the notion of the town of origin. According to Barber, ‘oriki orílẹ̀ do not trace genealogies, nor do they revolve around the notion of a lineage founder; rather they tell each individual where he or she belongs in the community: they establish the individual on the social map, and give him or her a background without which he or she would scarcely exist as a social being.’ Barber argues further that orílẹ̀ have a dual claim on people’s emotional loyalties: they relate them to their source and through that to large numbers of people all over Yorùbá land and they place them in an immediate, concrete social context within their own town. Hence, assigning them a social place and body of people to whom they belong, and who belong to them. Barber provides us with a concise description of the subject matter when she writes:

people from the same place of origin, the same orílẹ̀, say, “we are one.” When they meet […] they recognise an obligation to help each other, and observe a prohibition on intermarriage. They have a number of things in common. They share certain food taboos, special funeral custom, a particular orisà or a specialised occupation […], all of which are traced back to the town of origin. But the most important thing they have in common is the oriki orílẹ̀ themselves. Therefore, the incorporation of oriki orílẹ̀ of a Yorùbá paramount ruler into his praises is meant to affirm the right of that particular ruler to the position which he held through his descent, from those predecessors whose great deeds were
commemorated. References to oriki orile of Yoruba kings in royal poetry are often very brief. The bards lay more emphasis on the personal oriki of the kings at the expense of their oriki orile so as to project the image of the personality who occupies the kingship position. This is so because succession to kingship position in Yoruba society rotates among a traditionally fixed and limited number of families within the same lineage group. These families are, in each case, the descendants of the earliest occupant of the throne in the form in which it has come down to the present generation. Such an occupant, according to Fadipe:

whether the actual founder of his kingdom or a usurper, would be succeeded by his eldest son, and on the latter’s death, in all probability, by his next surviving brother and, thereafter, by the descendants of these brothers in rotation.36

In the excerpt below in Duro Ladiipo’s drama titled Mòrèmi, specific reference is made to the Ife lineage oriki (oriki Olúfe) by the court poet while chanting in honor of the king of Ife, the Òoni:

Emeṣẹ: Aláiyémọrẹ
We bow down to you, a dark man clothed in honour
When you enter the house, the house is filled with honour
When you awake in the night, you sound like the bass drum
My father, who shines in the darkness!
When the new moon rises, the critic says: ’imperfect’
But dare he reach up to mend it
Who would dare to greet you standing up?
You, father of Ife; you big-bellied father?
Shining blackness is your dress of honour
Heavy club, that grows from a slender stick.
When death kills us, let it meet us in festive robes...
Travelers to Òkin, a long river rushing along winding its way
From the garden of heavenly wife and down to the earth.
Those who bear the pelé mark on their face must not drink from it
Those who bear the abajà mark on their face must not drink from it
But those whose face are scarred may drink the river dry
Aláiyémọrẹ, our father
Your drum sounds like thunder
A drum carved from an elephant’s ear
A drum stretched with the leopard’s hide
Those who bear the pelé mark on their face must not dance to the drum
Those who bear the abajà mark on their face must not sway to its rhythm!
But those whose faces are not scarred may dance to your drum until it bursts...37
Generally, lineage oríkì is more stable than other types of oríkì, hence easier for the bards to memorize and recite. It has a core set of images and references which are considered to be unchanging. Lineage poetry holds a pride of place in almost all Yorùbá chants. It forms the basic building blocks in the eclectic and flexible performances that draw also on personal oríkì, prayers, blessings, proverbs, and topical comments. There is no doubt that oríkì orílè is still highly valued by the Yorùbá people even today, when they no longer live in traditional compounds. Because of this popularity, collections of oríkì orílẹ are published; they also feature prominently in print and electronic obituary advertisements. Consequent upon this, several contemporary Yorùbá royal bards now rely heavily on oríkì orílẹ for their production, in honor of the traditional rulers. Because of their over-dependence on lineage oríkì, such recent productions are devoid of citation of names of past kings and allusions to achievements and historical facts associated with the reign of such kings. What we usually have instead are brief references that are made to names and personal oríkì of the incumbent kings. Lineage oríkì now constitutes a greater percentage of the composition of contemporary Yorùbá royal bards when compared to the production of the traditional bards usually made up of chronological listing of names of past kings. It seems, therefore, that most Yorùbá royal bards have now abandoned that traditional duty which earned them the appellation ‘chroniclers of the king’s genealogy.’

**Conclusion**

This chapter reiterates one of the ways in which oral literary forms are employed in the works of contemporary writers. This obviously implies a determination on the part of the writers to sustain the communicativeness of oral literature in the written medium thereby making the oral literary material so transferred reach out beyond the limitation of its written quality to speak as the oral text does to the audience. As revealed in this discussion, the revitalization of oral tradition, particularly with the works of dramatists discussed, does not arise from a nostalgic longing for local folklore color. They rather reintroduce the oral literary form of court praise singing to create a popular poetic language that can be preserved and shared by the generations yet unborn.

**Notes**

1. The culture of court praise singing cuts across Africa. For instance the royal poetry of the southern Bantu cluster peoples in South Africa (the Zulu, Xhosa, Swazi, Ngoni, Lovedu, and Tswana) is the most documented and well researched by African scholars. Similar documentation has also been made with respect to the Bantu people of East Africa, (see Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa*, (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1970). The most famous royal bards in these
regions are the official male bards attached to the court of every paramount ruler. Known as *imbongi* among the Zulus, *mmóki* among the Tswana, and *umúsízí w'Umwáni* in Rwanda, the bards are expected to recite the praises of previous rulers and compose new ones to commemorate the achievements and qualities of the incumbent king. Court poetry is also common in different parts of West Africa. For instance, royal bards are attached to the various Hausa Emirs’ courts, where male poets are known as *maroka*, and the female as *marokiya*. There are also the *Kwadwumfo* official court singers among the Ashanti people of present day Ghana. In each of these societies, the ruling monarchs and their ancestors are glorified in praise poems and their deeds are also recorded in lofty and effusive language.

2. The Yorùbá nation exhibits a highly developed aristocratic system of governance based on a set of traditional hierarchical structure that holds the king as the nation’s head. By the 17th century, the Old Oyo empire, under the sovereignty of the Aláàfin was the largest and most powerful political unit in Yorùbá land. The empire developed a political organization that entrenched the authority of the Aláàfin in all the entire towns and villages under his sovereignty. With the fall of the empire in 1835 and the political developments that followed, the extent of authority and power of the Aláàfin reduced considerably. However, court bards have held an important place in reconstructing the history Oyo because they have been documenting the regime changes in the oral productions that they create in honor of each succeeding Aláàfin.


5. Finnegan observes that the style of court praising in Africa varies between the unaccompanied forms which characterized the Southern Bantu praise singing, to the Eastern Bantu minimal accompaniment of stringed instruments, and those in which the accompaniment is stressed which are often found in West Africa. According to her, the pattern of royal poetry in West Africa is more complicated than in other parts of Africa because a whole band of specialists is involved in court praising in the region, with each person demonstrating his/her competence in what s/he knows best. see Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa*, 116-117. Among the Hausa of northern Nigeria, for instance, a team of the Emirs’ official bards known as the *maroka* consists of several drummers, eulogists, pipers, and horn-blowers. However, the amount or type of musical accompaniment to the court bards’ production is clearly laid down for the praises of each grade of Emir in the hierarchy. While a wooden gong may not be used as accompaniment to praise any Emir below a certain grade level, there are other musical instruments that can only be used for praising first class Emirs and leading vassals. So important are these accompaniments to the West African peoples that they are also employed in court praising amongst bards of other parts of the region, such as those of southern Benin Republic, Ghana, and Nigeria. In each of these areas, it
is possible for the whole praise in honor of paramount rulers to take place on the
drum or on horns without the use of the human voice in any form. A case in point
is the use of the dùndún talking drum among the Yorùbá people of south-western
Nigeria.
8. Ibid., 118-20.
9. Akintúnde Akinyemi, “Yorùbá Royal Bards: Their Work and Relevance in the
1967), 75.
13. This is a descriptive noun formed from aya (wife) and ọba (king), meaning ‘the
king’s wives.’
14. Another descriptive noun formed form aya (wife) and ọmọ (child), meaning
‘wives of king’s children (princes).’
15. Also, in pre-colonial times, yùngbà chanters used to perform during the royal
Bẹẹrẹ and Bẹbẹ festivals, in the official residence of the Crown Prince (Aremọ) and
in the house of the leader of the Council of Princes and Princesses (Baba Iyajì).
See S.O. Babayemi, ‘Bẹẹrẹ Festival in Oyo’ *Journal of Historical Society of Nigeria*
18. Akintúnde Akinyemi *Yoruba Royal Poetry: A Socio-historical Exposition and
Annotated Translation*, Bayreuth University (Germany), Bayreuth, Bayreuth
19. There are different categories of personal names among the Yorùbá people. Some
of them are combinations of information on the occupation, status, or religious
beliefs of the child’s descendants, and circumstance(s) surrounding the birth of
the child. Examples are: Adéfúnmkẹ, meaning ‘the crown has given me this one
to pet;’ usually given to a female child born into a royal family, and Oderínkdé,
meaning ‘the hunter has returned’ usually given to a male child born into a family
of hunters or warriors shortly after the death of the child’s grandfather. Some
Yorùbá children are believed to have been ‘born along with their personal names’
because their names, in whole, reveal their position in the sequence of siblings
or posture at birth. For example, the first born of a set of twins is called Táyéwọ̀
meaning ‘have a taste of the world and see how good,’ while the second born is
called Khindé, meaning ‘one who arrives last.’ A child conceived in the absence
of the mother’s menstruation is named Ilọ̀rì, while a male child born with the
umbilical cord twisted around his neck is named Òjọ́.
20. Male personal praise name suggests heroic qualities, but in female, it suggests praise, tender, care, and endearment. For instance, Àjámú - ‘one that we fight to take possession of’ - is a male personal oríkì usually given to a male child conceived after much disagreement between parents, while Àníkẹ - ‘one whom we own to pet’ - is a female personal praise name.


31. Ibid., 331.

32. Ibid., 331-333.

33. Ibid.


35. Ibid.


38. The outcome of my recent collection of data on royal poetry in Yorùbá towns of South-western Nigeria showed that today less than 20% of such collections is devoted to documentation of information about the tenure of past and present occupants of Yorùbá kingship institutions. The majority of contemporary royal poets could only sing in praise of the present occupants of the kingship institutions. Such praises, if they consist of the incumbent kings’ epithets and acclamations, will usually include allusion to specific historical incidents associated with their tenure. However, contemporary royal poets who adopt the lineage *oríkì* of their patrons in their production are in the majority (about 80%) and they have very little or no information about the tenure of the kings documented in their production.
Chapter 2

TRANSMISSION OF SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE IN YORUBA ORAL LITERATURE

Tunde Adegbola

INTRODUCTION

Within the framework of the evolution of the human mind, the need to understand and control the forces at play in both the material and non-material environments remains one of the fundamental quests of both individuals and societies. People continually strive to understand the forces of nature so that these forces can be put to work towards the overall improvement of individual and social wellbeing. In human history, this quest for the understanding and control of the forces at play in the environment has been exercised through the creation of diverse knowledge systems and various approaches to its documentation.

A study of the diversity of these knowledge systems from a historical point of view reveals a general trend from mysticism and religion to philosophical and subsequently scientific approaches. This trend, however, does not present any clear boundary lines between the stages of development. In fact, some of the core positions of each developmental stage remain acceptable and continue to complement some of the valuable insights acquired at other stages in the developmental process. Ultimately, however, a fundamental character of the developmental process is that knowledge derived from feelings and suppositions
generally yield to knowledge derived from objective empirical observations. Be that as it may, feelings and suppositions still remain valid and potent tools of knowledge generation, even in the present age of advanced science.

From the point of view of various knowledge documentation approaches, we can identify two major approaches of oral and written literatures. Oral literature describes a body of texts which include prose, verse, proverbs and riddles through which the collective knowledge of a people is documented and communicated by memorisation and recitation. Written literature on the other hand describes a body of texts which are very much like the various genres of their oral counterparts, but documented and communicated by writing and reading. These texts, both oral and written, serve the purposes of entertainment, instruction, commemoration and many other social functions that require the documentation and communication of information and knowledge. Scholars like Macluhan, Ong and Havelock have studied the comparative psychological, social and cultural effects of orality and literacy. Their works indicate that the documentation and communication of information and knowledge within oral or written traditions influence both the nature and the level of the impact of knowledge on societies.

The Yoruba have depended heavily on oral texts for the documentation and organisation of knowledge. Not much is known of any elaborate writing traditions among the Yoruba before the introduction of Islam around the nineteenth century and Christianity in twentieth century, but there is overwhelming evidence that the Yoruba transmitted their values, history, mores and lores and all other information and knowledge products orally using a plethora of verbal art forms in which they as a race have distinguished themselves. Examples of some of these verbal arts include ọfọ / ọyájọ; incantations, ijála; hunters’ chants and ọwe; proverbs, as well as ạlọ-àpagbè; tales and ạlọ-àpamọ; riddles. Other examples include oríkì (praise poetry); ọwúre (blessings); ọbà (acknowledgment or homage); and orin-aremo (lullaby); to name just a few.

While oral literatures offer a veritable medium for the arts and other creative endeavors, the level of exactitude demanded by science is much better met by written literature. According to Hountondji, “scientific knowledge, precarious as long as it remains individual, can only be preserved and transmitted as the permanent heritage of humanity (or at any rate of a given society) if it takes the form of written documents.” However, an examination of many Yoruba oral texts reveal deep and complex scientific thought and thereby offers evidences that the Yoruba managed to achieve intra-generational and inter-generational exchange of bodies of scientific knowledge before the introduction of the writing traditions that accompanied Arabic and European proselytism.

This chapter examines a few of these oral texts in order to assess the depths of the scientific knowledge they harbour. In addition, an attempt is made to relate ways of knowing and the associated methods of documentation and in the process
to examine the scope of oral literature in the transmission of scientific knowledge. Finally, based on an assumption that the existence of a substantial body of scientific knowledge should have provided incentives for the development of a writing system, an attempt is also made to identify corresponding disincentives and thereby offer an explanation as to why the Yoruba did not develop a writing system with sufficient complexity to capture the levels of exactitude required for the transmission of scientific knowledge within and between generations.

**SCIENCE AND LITERATURE**

Science refers to a systematic knowledge or practice based on dispassionate observation and accurate documentation of natural phenomena as facts and the laws that connect them. It describes both a body of knowledge and the system by which such knowledge is generated and managed.

A product of the quest for understanding and control of the human environment, science as a relatively recent way of knowing forms a continuum with earlier ways of knowing based on purely suppositional and mystical influences of the heavens on human existence. There are many watersheds and breakthroughs in the development of science and scientific thought, one of the major ones being the Galilean/Cartesian introduction of systematic verification through planned experiments. Pre-Galilean science depended mainly on deductive reasoning and quantitative representation of phenomena according to the Platonic school. This was complemented with inductive reasoning and qualitative description as stressed by the Aristotelian school. Galileo Galilei, however, introduced the approach of systematic verification through planned experiments which laid the foundation for a rigor-based scientific understanding of the human environment. This enabled the true influences of natural forces to be disentangled from the purely suppositional and mystical influences of the heavens.

Some sciences could be described as fact-finding while some others are essentially law-finding. The formal documentation of factual events in a structured manner in the humanities constitutes fact-finding science. In the pure sciences however, the quest is more in the direction of law-finding. The physicist for example, seeks to discover and document universal physical laws which hold everywhere at all times. To achieve such an objective, the subject of physics and most other law-finding sciences define the environment of their study precisely and thereby restrict it to a level that enables them to produce laws with high levels of reliability within this restricted environment. Some other subjects of study however, investigate phenomena whose environments are not so easily specified and restricted. Hence, the nature of observations within such fields of study tends to limit their exploits, more toward descriptive rather than prescriptive and predictive objectives. Sometimes, such fields of study address
phenomena in which knowledge can be derived using mostly analytic, critical or speculative rather than empirical methods as used in the natural and social sciences. The exploits of science in producing verifiable knowledge, based on the standard principles of verifiability and refutability derives from the fact that certain types of sciences addresses limited domains of applications in which such verifiable and refutable knowledge predominate.

The earliest known writing systems date back to about 3300 BC. This suggests that for a period in human history, most of the available knowledge had to be stored in human memory. Even though humans are known to have great capacity for long-term memory, studies in cognitive psychology have shown that the short-term memory used by humans in analysing data and information for the purpose of producing knowledge is limited to approximately seven units. This puts a cognitive limitation on the use of orality, because the extra-mental memory required for processing and storage of temporary results may not be available. In this light, even though mental arithmetic is practiced, a mental approach to algebra, calculus, geometry or some other formal sciences for that matter will be exceedingly challenging. Secondly, humans can only visualise in three dimensions and are therefore at a disadvantage in visualising phenomena that have more than three dimensions. Yet, many phenomena that demand scientific analysis often manifest in far more than three dimensions. For example, string theory, by which scientists seek to develop a theoretical framework for a unified description of all known physical forces—gravity and electromagnetism, as well as the strong and weak nuclear forces—suggests a ten dimensional super-space. By this theory, everything in the universe including elementary particles, forces, space and time consists of strings. However, in order to avoid the inconsistent implications of phenomena that may turn out to be faster than light, or particles produced with negative probability, the strings must be vibrating and spinning in a ten dimensional super-space. Visualising in ten dimensions is far beyond human capability and hence, it would be almost impossible to engage such a theory without the use of facilities offered by literacy.

Literacy offers the extra-mental memory facilities required to overcome these limitations, hence, without the support of writing, human capacity for analysis may be limited to the amount of antecedent data and information that can be manipulated within the limited short-term memory. We may conclude therefore that there may be some limitations in the development of law-finding science within societies that depend mainly on oral traditions.

Despite these limitations of oral literature and the various advantages of the written word, such as information storage efficiency and portability, the preferred mode of human communication is still speech. Even in this age of literacy, speech still plays a very important role in the generation of scientific knowledge and the management of the scientific literature. Symposia, work-
shops and indeed physical conferences constitute some of the most important mechanisms for scientific knowledge generation and management, and each of these depends on the oral exchange of ideas.

Examining the historical trend from mystical to scientific ways of knowing, it is observed that the benchmark of certain knowledge systems is the level of narrative satisfaction provided by an attempt at explanation. Scientific knowledge on the other hand is benchmarked by the factuality of an observation and the predictive capacity of its explanation. Oral traditions, of which creative license is a feature may be able to provide the narrative satisfaction demanded by certain ways of knowing, but in science, creativity is only a tool in the service of factuality and predictability. A compounding of the concepts of license and creativity is fundamentally antithetical to repeatability which is one of the guiding principles of science.

Brevity is another feature of oral literature that may not augur well for law-finding science. Brevity in oral literature serves the purpose of efficient use of available mental resources. This feature is easily observable in the compactness and density of proverbs. Proverbs usually express propositions about concepts and this is a fundamental basis of law-finding science. However, the brevity of oral literature as demonstrated in proverbs does not provide sufficient scope for the level of details that science demands most of the time. Another oral tradition that promotes analytical thinking is riddles. Riddles are based on analogy and so demand analytical thought. They present conundrums and enigmas, thereby providing the sort of mental exercises that shape the scientific mind. In addition, they demand exactitude, since only one answer usually resolves a given riddle. Despite these characteristics that support the course of law-finding science, however, brevity in riddles does not offer sufficient scope anymore than proverbs do, for the level of detail that science demands.

From the foregoing, it may be easy to seek fact-based science in oral literature, but the extent to which oral literature can document and transmit law-finding science needs to be investigated. Segments of Yoruba oral literature have been found to harbour not only factual aspects but also law-bound aspects of science, and we shall examine some relevant texts in the following section.

**Some Elements of Scientific Knowledge in Yoruba Oral Literature**

One of the basic tasks in the practice of science is the documentation of observations. Yoruba verbal arts are known to fulfill didactic, aesthetic and ritual roles. Spiritual forces are usually attributed to the efficacy of potent speech forms such as ọfọ, àyájọ, èpè and iweìre. However, many Yoruba proverbs and other literary devices fulfill the basic task of documenting observations as scientific facts.
For example, the Yoruba proverb; *lálá tó ròkè ilê ló ríbò*, which may be equated to the English saying “what goes up must come down”, is a simple expression of the ubiquity of gravitational force. The careful choice of the concept of *lálá* even offers some deeper meaning. A direct translation of the proverb is “the *lálá* that goes up will end up down.” The word *lálá* is ideophonic and Yoruba ideophones maintain a significant level of correlation between their phonology and semantics. In other words, the meanings of Yoruba ideophones are usually deducible from their sounds. For example, Yoruba monotonic ideophones that bear the high tone more often than not imply smallness and lightness while those that bear the low tone usually imply bigness or heaviness. For example, idiophones such as *bíńtín, kóńkó, pínísín* and many others all describe small objects. On the other hand, idiophones such as *gàdàgbà, gbàgàbà jímọ `wò* and many others describe big and heavy objects. In this regard, Awoyale confirms that human language can be activated ideophonically. Hence, the proverb *lálá tó ròkè ilê ló ríbò* says more than what goes up must come down, rather it goes further to say that even the small and light objects that go up will ultimately fall back to the ground no matter how long it takes.

Scientific knowledge maintains that gravitational force is not only ubiquitous around the earth’s surface, it also has a measurable value and its effects on rising objects are predictable, given knowledge of the relative effects of other prevailing physical forces. Due to the brevity of oral literature, however, we may not be able to determine the extent to which this proverb expresses scientific details such as the constancy and measurability of gravitational acceleration.

Another statement in Yoruba oral literature that documents a scientific observation is the expression of the concept of buoyancy in *Ojú oró níí lékè omi, òsibátà níí lékè odò*. This is a statement about another physical force, the force of buoyancy, which acts in an opposite direction to the force of gravity. These two forces complement each other to determine the position of any object in a fluid. This statement is from the *Èjì-ògbè* verses of *Odù Ifá*. According to Abimbola, such statements which are opening sentences of *Ifá* verses are usually cognomens of a senior Babaláwo. The statement therefore might have originated from a Babaláwo whose knowledge of the law of buoyancy in physics earned him the cognomen. The observation recorded in this statement is one that Archimedes of Syracuse (287-212 BC), the preeminent Greek mathematician and inventor, turned around in his mind over and over again before he got the inspiration that led him to proclaiming one of his most famous eureka; “I have found it” statements.

For a Babaláwo to be nicknamed based on this scientific principle, he might have propounded theories about buoyancy, and it might have been his profound knowledge of the physics of density and specific gravity that earned him this nickname. Of course there are metaphorical significances to the state-
ment *Ojúoró níí lèkè omi, ọsibátà níí lèkè odò* that could have equally motivated this cognomen. These positions can only be mere suppositions, but if the full import of the statement of the buoyancy principle in *ojúoró níí lèkè omi* remains speculative, the insights provided by the simple statement *èpé lafií wèpé* surely sheds light on the density of the scientific thought expressed in simple sentences in oral literature.

Literally, *èpé* is curse, so the literal meaning of this statement is that a curse is the antidote to a curse. In other words, the way to neutralise a curse is to curse it. In context however, the concept of *èpé* may not necessarily be restricted to that of a curse but can be generalised to express the concept of negativity.

The importance of negative forces in nature is demonstrated in Newton’s second law of motion which states that “To every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.” The existence of such equal and opposite force is one of the fundamental basis of order in nature as they play the role of an equilibrating force that makes most of nature behave predictably.

A rather condensed statement, *èpé lafií wèpé* expresses the self neutralising capacity of negative forces or the auto-contradiction of negativity. On the other hand, though silently so, it also expresses the self reinforcing capacity of positive forces. This principle of auto-contradiction of negativity is the basis of the mathematical technique in which the magnitude of negative number is extracted by squaring the negative number and finding the square root of the result. Squaring a negative number is to multiply such a number by itself. Since the multiplication of two negative numbers inevitably yields a positive number, by multiplying a negative number by itself, the obtained square is inevitably positive. Hence, the square root of this result is the positive number which is the magnitude of the initial negative number. The subject of statistics depends fundamentally on this technique.

Even though we did not get much access to penetrate the two earlier statements; *láá lá tó ròkè ilè ló ńbọ* and *Ojúoró níí lèkè omi, ọsibátà níí lèkè odò* sufficiently deeply to see how much scientific knowledge they document, the level of confidence with which members of the *sómìnò* cult apply the seemingly counterintuitive principle of *èpé lafií wèpé* is a testimony to a much deeper understanding of its much wider implications.

One of the steps in the initiation process into membership of certain Yoruba cults is the making of a set of incisions called *gbéré* on the body of the initiate. When *gbéré* incisions are made, some substance is rubbed into the incision, introducing certain active ingredients into the person’s blood stream. In the *sómìnò* cult, the substance that is robbed into the incisions is derived from infected bodies and so must contain attenuated small pox virus as is the practice in modern medicine today. Hence, cult outsiders may see this initiation rite as
a religious ritual, while knowledgeable members of the cult understand it as a scientific routine aimed at immunizing the initiate against smallpox infection.

It is not difficult to conceive that members of the sọnpọnọ cult know about the principles of inoculation; after all, they would have observed that survivors of the infection exhibit long-term immunity to the disease. Hence, if the curse of smallpox can be anticipated with the same curse in a controlled dose, immunity to the infection can be achieved. Indeed, in the case of smallpox and other diseases that yield to inoculation, èpè lafií wèpè, curses do neutralise themselves and this scientific knowledge is part of the sọnpọnọ cult insiders’ knowledge base.

Immunisation against smallpox infection prepared members of the sọnpọnọ cult for the very important public health roles they played in traditional Yoruba communities. The responsibility of controlling the spread of smallpox in the community by deliberate isolation and disposal of the belongings of smallpox victims in a controlled manner and thereby reducing contact with contaminated objects falls upon them. Their ability to carry out this responsibility is certainly based on the scientific knowledge that the curse of smallpox can be cursed out of their circumstances.

Another oral text that expresses significant scientific method and meaning is the opening statement often recited by Ifá priests before a divination process. It is not unusual for an Ifá priest to verbalise the statement; Máfi ire pe ibi, máfi ibi pe ire, ma múú òmúlùmù, máfi òlòlò fòhùn as a prelude to a divination session. This statement can be translated as an admonition to the divination system not to mislead the priest by passing positive as negative, passing negative as positive, producing ambiguity or equivocating. However, we can look at the frequent verbalisation of this statement by the Babaláwo from the point of view that in oral literature, referencing is achieved by performance. We would then see the verbalisation process not as admonition to the divination system but as a consultation of the relevant literature, which define the scope and limitations of the divination system. Since the system is known to be efficacious, the priest’s admonition based on his own desire is not likely to affect the outcomes. Hence it is more reasonable to understand the priest’s verbalisation of this statement as recalling the assumptions that underlie the mechanism so that interpretation of the results can be undertaken within the context of its scope and limitations.

Acknowledgment of the admissibility of errors and the careful analysis and categorisation of the types of admissible errors is a fundamental scientific principle, which establishes the scope and limits of a scientific investigation. In the context of the Ifá divination system, it demonstrates a deep level of objectivity in the divination system and an awareness and acknowledgment of the limitations of the system on the part of its priests.

This is akin to the awareness expressed by statisticians in hypothesis testing, of a Type I error in which a true hypothesis is erroneously rejected, and a Type
II error in which a false hypothesis is erroneously not rejected. It is noteworthy that the Type I and Type II errors as defined in statistics concern random events. Similarly, in the Ifá oracular system, randomness is introduced in order to remove any bias that may arise from the priest’s preconceptions. This is achieved by use of a divination chain by Ifá priests to choose the appropriate odù for a given situation. The divination chain consists of eight disc-like seeds of the ọpẹlẹ tree, held together by a string, each having two distinctly differentiable sides. The divination chain is cast by gently swinging and then throwing it onto a flat surface. The gentle swing randomizes the arrangement of the discs, so that when the chain is thrown to the ground, a random pattern manifests. Because the divination chain has eight disks that can manifest dichotomously, it works as an eight bit random number generator with the capacity of generating 256 distinct patterns. Each pattern corresponds to an odu, each of which describes key social circumstances and various prescriptions relevant to each circumstance.

The underlying process and methods of Ifá divination share many similarities with the processes of simulation in the field of operations research in mathematics. Essentially, both processes model real life situations in a virtual world of numbers. Unlike some other approaches to mathematical modeling which are deterministic in their assumptions and results, simulation captures the essentially stochastic nature of real life and is therefore capable of modeling real life without any unfounded assumptions of determinism. In a similar way, the Ifá oracular system models the random nature of various life events by introducing a probability distribution defined by the divination chain. Houndonougbo demonstrates the stochasticity of the Fà divination system of coastal Benin, a system that shares significant similarities with Ifá divination system. Evidences such as the vocabulary of both systems show that Fà and Ifá are actually derivatives, one of the other.

Having transmitted knowledge of the Ifá divination over many generations within oral traditions, we conjecture that some of its scientific essence might have been lost in the process of transmission in oral literature. However, the level of similarities of the Ifá divination system to modern sciences of statistics, operations research and computer science that still subsist point to the fact that the Yoruba have managed to use oral literature in the intergenerational transmission of scientific information, knowledge and thought.

Another example of the use of oral literature in the transmission of scientific knowledge is found in oríkì Òfà, which is essentially a story of the sharing of an inheritance between the children of a deceased. The father dies and leaves an inheritance of the worth of 2000 units of wealth. This inheritance is to be divided into three perfectly equal parts among his three children. A mathematics problem of the division of 2000 into three equal parts is posed in the oríkì. The problem is solved by the application of a recursive algorithm
as described and actually implemented in the oríkì, thereby rendering the oríkì both a description and an implementation of the recursive algorithm in orature. A version of the text is available in Babalola.7

To start with, the oríkì provides some information that can be used to date the recorded event it recounts as one version of the oríkì names one of the contending branches of the family as ọba sàlámàlékùn. In the context of a Yoruba polygamous family, an ọba kan is a step sibling and sàlámàlékùn, is derived from the Arabic language greeting As-Salam Alaikun. By reference to a sàlámàlékùn branch of the family, the suggestion is that the incident happened after the introduction of Islam to Yoruba land towards the beginning of the 19th century. Hence, this passage in oral literature has embedded in it a historical fact of scientific value.

More importantly however, the oral passage touches upon the concept of limits in mathematics, which describes the behavior of a mathematical expression as its value gets closer to a point which it continues to approach but will never reach. The subject of calculus is built around this concept. The concept of limits is one that confounded many generations of mathematicians because of the seeming paradox that an infinite value is contained within a finite value. The great German mathematician, Georg Cantor (1845-1918) devoted a lot of his mathematics career to this problem and the consternation experienced in the process may not be unconnected with his poor mental health which greatly disturbed his mathematical career and ultimately contributed to his death.8

Dividing 2000 by 3, gives 600 with a remainder of 200, dividing 200 by 3 gives 60 with a remainder of 20, dividing 20 by 3 gives 6 with a remainder of 2 and so on ad infinitum. Even though the result is decreasing in ratios of tens, the remainder remains indivisible equally. The mathematics problem posed in the oríkì therefore is how to ensure equality in the three parts into which the 2000 units of inheritance is to be divided. No matter how long the remainder is divided, the three numbers 2, 3 and 6 keep recurring thereby making it impossible to conclude the division process. Even though the remainder gets smaller at each stage of division, it recurs ad infinitum.

Oríkì Òfà addresses this mathematical concept orally. Not only does it record knowledge of the problem of recurrence in the mathematics of division, it also offers a way of dealing with the problem: adopting a numerical solution based on the algorithmic approach.9 In fact, the whole passage is an oral implementation of the recursive algorithm of solving the problem of dividing 2000 into 3 equal parts. First of all, the passage is an oral implementation of an algorithm because it is a verbal implementation of a repeated use of simple computation to solve a problem and the process is guaranteed to terminate. Secondly, the algorithm is recursive because it is self calling, thereby establishing a recurrence relationship with itself. Finally, a recurrent procedure can only be described as
an algorithm only if there is an out clause to guarantee its termination. In oriki Òṣa, the out clause for the termination of the recurrence is provided for by the counsel of the council of Òṣa sages, that the recurring 2 should be spent in the purchase of a three-lobed atuare (alligator pepper) to be shared equally among the three equal share-holding contenders to the inheritance.

The consistency with which all the conditions required for the success of a recursive algorithm are met in the passage is a demonstration that the necessary mathematical knowledge was available. Not only is this knowledge available, it is also expressible and can thereby be transmitted orally.

**Written Tradition and the Yoruba**

Having suggested above that the Yoruba generated and managed a substantial body of scientific knowledge, it is valid to wonder why the volume of such scientific knowledge did not serve as impetus for the Yoruba to develop a complex writing system. After all, the need for accurate documentation of these scientific facts and laws should have impelled them to develop more accurate ways of documenting the scientific knowledge generated.

There is evidence that the Yoruba are aware that science demands a high level of exactitude. The statement sà á bí olóògún instructs anyone that is required to implement a prescribed procedure to keep strictly to the prescriptions. Olóògún here refers to the source of the prescription while sà á bí literally means to do it as prescribed. The whole statement therefore means “do it according to the prescriptions from the source”, in other words to adhere strictly to instructions.

Síṣa oògún (that is to sa oògún) is the totality of a procedure which seeks to activate an intervention that exploits knowledge of material or non-material natural forces, a typical example being prophylactic or remedial medicine. Because such procedures are documented orally, síṣa oògún inevitably involves speaking the process into activation. A medicine for example has to be spoken into activation because the recipe is memorized rather than written. Oral literature is strongly tied to performance and knowledge embedded in oral literature can only be shared in the performance mode. Hence, activating an orally documented medicinal procedure demands speaking the procedure and this explains why the process of control of natural forces in Yoruba indigenous knowledge systems often involves verbal pronouncements.

To be able to sa oògún, there is a necessary stage at which one needs to kọ̀ oògún, or to learn the procedure. The methods of kikó oògún (the learning of the procedure) is also impacted by the fact that the scientific literature which documents the procedure is oral. Hence the learning process too is a process of memorisation and recitation, which also involves performance.
With the introduction of writing in the 19th century, the phenomenon of *kikọ ọógùn* (the writing of the procedure) was introduced into Yoruba culture. On one hand, procedures that were hitherto memorised and recited got to be written, usually by lettered children and wards of the custodians of such procedures. On the other hand, with the introduction of western medicine, when a person visits a doctor in the hospital, the doctor writes out the appropriate prescriptions for the ailment that the patient complains about. Hence, the thought of writing medicine became a parallel to the thought of speaking medicine into activation. When a person visits a hospital, one of the queries that sympathisers make is “ṣé wón ko ọógùn fún un?” meaning, were medicines prescribed for him/her? But the word translated as prescribed here is actually “written.” Hence the transliteration of the query is “were medicines written for him/her?” The implication here is that a certain part of the remediation process in which the medicine was spoken into activation based on oral documentation of the procedure has been replaced by the writing of the medicine into activation based on written documentation of the procedure. This is why a sympathiser is relieved when he/she learns that an ill friend has now got past the stage of getting the appropriate prescriptions written. To a large extent, therefore, a part of the speaking of the procedure only satisfies the documentation need. Hence, an important component of *sísa ọógùn* as the totality of the procedure which seeks to activate an intervention that exploits knowledge of material or non-material natural forces is the documentation of the procedure. *Sísa ọógùn* therefore includes the documentation of the procedure in oral literature.

It is apparent that the process of *sísa ọógùn* is non-trivial. The admonition *sà á bí olóógùn* indicates that the need for total recall and accurate implementation of the procedure is of prime importance. This importance is underscored by the development of *ọógùn isọyè*, a procedure that helps to vitalise the metal faculty. The need for *ọógùn isọyè* reiterates two important points. On one hand, it acknowledges the limitations of the human faculty as a mechanism for accurate recall and on the other hand, it acknowledges the importance of exactitude in the procedures.

One question that remains yet to be addressed, however, is: why did the Yoruba not feel impelled to develop a complex system of writing by the high level of exactitude demanded by the procedures they had to speak into activation? We talk of a complex writing system here because it is known that Ifá priests do make graphemic signs with semantic significance on their divining trays, but these signs are not designed to be used as long-term records. In fact such signs are usually made on sand or powder (*iyérè osùn*) and are therefore easily rubbed off as soon as they have satisfied the temporary memory aid function they are meant for.
The tonality of the Yoruba language could have been a disincentive to the development of a complex writing system. Because Yoruba is highly tonal, ordinary statements in Yoruba usually feature esthetically pleasing melody. Even when deliberate efforts are not made to write Yoruba in verse, the incidental melodies that emerge are sometimes sufficient to make the statements memorable. Hence, passages in the Yoruba language tend to be relatively easy to memorise. The ease of memorisation of Yoruba passages is testified to by the plethora of verbal arts such as oríkì, ìjálá and ìyèrè Ifá to name just a few that the Yoruba pride themselves in. The large volumes of Odù Ifá that are memorised by Ifá priests and are recited with little variation all over Yoruba land is also testimony to the relative ease with which large passages in Yoruba can be memorised.

Hence, while large bodies of scientific knowledge might have been generated by the Yoruba, providing an incentive for the development of a writing system, the tonal nature of the language, which promotes ease of memorisation, could have also served as a disincentive.

**Conclusion**

The totality of the knowledge with which the Yoruba ran their traditional societies was essentially recorded orally until the introduction of writing by Christian missionaries in the 19th century. This body of knowledge was documented using various verbal arts and this reflected on the type of knowledge that was easily documented. Apart from myths, legends, and other types of content that are normally well suited for oral literature, the Yoruba managed to document and transmit important fact-finding and law-finding scientific knowledge in oral traditions.

Spiritual forces are usually attributed to a range of Yoruba potent speech forms such as ọfọ, àyájọ, épè, iuwäre, etc. It may be rather challenging to perform scientific experiments to assess the role of these spiritual forces in the efficacy of such potent speech forms. It is, however, apparent that many utterances in these potent speech forms express deep scientific principles and that there are even much deeper elements of scientific knowledge in some of the practices they accompany. Without any doubt, these utterances constitute an oral corpus of the literature of a scientific body of knowledge which the Yoruba employ to control material and non-material forces in their environment and thereby better the human condition.

Hitherto, Yoruba oral literature has not been generally embraced as a source of scientific knowledge. It has however been demonstrated in this chapter that there exists deep scientific knowledge locked beneath simple and condensed statements from Yoruba oral literature. There is a need, therefore, to reappraise Yoruba oral literature in order to be able to take due advantage of
it as part of the global collective of scientific literature. There might be unique and fresh insights into some of the yet unsolved science problems lurking in Yoruba oral literature. In achieving this goal, the challenge will be twofold: (a) how do we unpack the brief and dense statements that harbour these elements of scientific knowledge, and, (b) how do we ensure the documentation of as much as possible of the vestiges of this way of knowing before their custodians pass into eternity?

Notes


9. The numerical approach is usually adopted in solving a mathematical problem whose answer may not be easily deducible from a closed-form algebraic expression. This approach is facilitated by the work of the celebrated Iraqi mathematician, Muhammed Ibn Musa Al-Khwarizmi. Al-Khwarizmi introduced the problem solving approach in mathematics of breaking down a task into a repeated set of simple computations that is guaranteed to terminate. This approach is at the core of computer science and the word algorithm is a medieval Spanish mispronunciation of the name Al-Khwarizmi.
INTRODUCTION

In *The Philosophy of History*, which comprises his serial lectures on the subject of the philosophical history of the world, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel unconditionally concluded that Africans lacked a history and thus were uncivilized.\(^1\) Hegel’s assertion was based on his view that Africans had not developed any aboriginal form of writing. Indeed nothing could be more incorrect! Africans do have a history, which exists in their diverse oral and visual forms. Seemingly examples, as they relate to the Yoruba of Nigeria in West Africa, include *Oríkì* (literally ‘head praising’) and *Ìjálá-Aré-Ode* (also called *Ìrémọjẹ*) (hunters dirges). Others include *Ohún-Enu-Ifá* (Ifa oral literary corpuses), *Ayájọ/ Àásán* (sacred incantations concerning the history/etymology of nature and its contents—living and non-living things) and *Ọwe* (proverbs), among others. Likewise there is an array of Yoruba traditional recording devices which exist as visual texts. They include *Àrokò* (hilgorglyphic), *Ààlè* (abstract power-impregnated sculptural construct), and *Èkú Egúngún* (masquerade and masquerade costume ensemble), to mention just a few.
As the title suggests, the *Oríkì Egúngún* Abidogun (Abidogun masquerade praise poems) of Oke-Igbo (an ancient Ile-Ife sister city down south) is the focus of this study. First, it provides an overview of the Yoruba concept of *Oríkì* (praise poems) as it concerns *Orí* (the head). Next, it examines the *Oríkì Egúngún* Abidogun. Thirdly, it analyzes *Èkú Egúngún* Abidogun (Abidogun masquerade costume ensemble) as an important aspect of Yoruba art and ritual. The study concludes with critical reflections on the Yoruba art historiography of *Egúngún* Abidogun (Abidogun masquerade and masquerade costume art) and the associated *Oríkì Egúngún* Abidogun (Abidogun masquerade praise poems).

**Yoruba Concept of Oríkì**

The Yoruba term *Oríkì* derives from two words (*ORĺ + KÌ*). Biologically, the word *Orí* means the head that houses the brain, ears, eyes, nose, mouth, and other parts of the head. Thus by extension, *Orí* (the head) controls the entire body. From their cosmological and metaphysics standpoint, the Yoruba conceptualize the essence of *Orí* as much more than its biological or physical allusion. First of all, they (the Yoruba) hold that *Orí* symbolizes an individual’s creator (*Elédàá*). Thus their saying: *Orí ló dô ni, enikan ò i d’Órí o* (the head created humankind, no one created the head) and *Orí eni, l’Elédàá eni* (the head is its owner’s creator).² Secondly, the word *Orí* also signifies *Ìpín* or *Àyànmá* (the destiny). Hence, the Yoruba philosophical song: *Nbá ma’bi ol’Órí gbé y’Orí òo; Nbá rèé yan t’èmi; Ibìkan náà sá la gbé y’Orí o; Àyànmá kò papò ni* (had I known where the head’s owner chose the good one, I would not hesitate going there and selecting the best for myself; we all chose our heads from the same creator-source, but destinies are not the same).

I now move to the holistic analysis of *Kì*, the second mono-syllabic word that combined with *Orí* in *Orí-Kì*. The word *Kì* means ‘stuff-in’, ‘press tight’, or ‘praise, exalt, or laud’. As it concerns *Orí* (the head) in this context of *Oríkì, Kì* means to ‘praise or exalt’ an individual’s *Orí*, and by extension, to chant, recite, or sing that individual’s praise poems or songs. The key idea in this context is that *Oríkì* (praise poems) connect essentially with the owner’s *Orí* (head). Consequently owing to this creator-destiny allusion to *Orí*, the Yoruba habitually honor and worship the head (*Orí*) with an array of ritual offerings, the commonest but most efficacious of which is *Oríkì* (literally ‘head praise’).

Further illustration of the interconnectedness of *Orí* (the head) with *Oríkì* (head praise) is drawn from the Yoruba belief that if an individual’s *Oríkì* is chanted or sung correctly, that individual’s head (*Orí*) spontaneously swells, figuratively (*Orí Wú*)—an allusion to an ecstatic, inestimable pleasure that makes one feels extraordinarily great.
Moreover, every Oríkì characteristically belongs to a particular body of poetry or dialectic grouping, which may depend largely on how it is chanted, sung, or verbalized, as well as from which Yoruba subgroup, town, or village it came. Examples abound, but three are enough to corroborate this point. The first, the praise poem of Egúngún Alare/ Egúngún Onídán (itinerants-masquerades) and other Oyo and Oyo-related Egúngún Àgbà (ancestral/ ritual masquerades) is called Ésà (to honor, exalt, or laud with praise poems). The next is the song of Ifa (Yoruba divination god) that is termed Ìyèrè (also pronounced Òyèrè). As it concerns this Chapter, Oríkì Egúngún Abidogun falls into the body of praise poetry known as Ègè, associated specifically with the Egba (Abeokuta) Yoruba subgroup. The term Ègè literally means ‘praise’, while the chanting or reciting of Ègè is called Ègè Dídá (literally ‘to chant praise poem intelligently’).

By and large, as in Oríkì in other parts of the Yorubaland, Ègè characteristically concerns its owner’s family history, such as the respective family history of origin, family tree, or genealogy; the individual’s accomplishments, and social, economic, religious and political status, among others. Thus, as it would reflect in the following Oríkì Egúngún Abidogun, it could be argued that the Yoruba oral traditions of Oríkì and their material culture, such as the art, are reliable ways or means in which the people record or document their history.

**Oríkì Egúngún Abidogun**

The term Abidogun (literally ‘one that was born with intent to becoming warrior or soldier’, also implying Èsó ‘to defend’) exists in two contexts. First, it is the name of the masquerade owned by the late warrior-masquerader Abidolu from Oke-Igbo. Secondly, it also functions as the short-form Oríkì of Abidogun masquerade, and by extension, the masquerader (Abidolu Abidogun) himself.

As the Yoruba tradition of Esè Ntayé/ Ìkòsè Wáyé (literally ‘stepping into the world’) required in the past and to some extent, still requires today especially among the ardent Yoruba traditionalists, a few weeks or months after a given baby was born, the parents took the baby to an Ifa diviner (Babaláwo) who obtained from Ifa (divination god), the newborn’s Àyànmá (destiny or what the future hold’s in stock). More importantly, it was at this divination ritual (of Esè Ntayé/ Ìkòsè Wáyé) that the newborn obtained the short-form Oríkì (praise name) as well as what the parents would do in terms of ritual offerings, which would make the baby’s good destiny become a reality. Such a ritual offering is termed Ètùtù Ìmórí (literally ‘the ritual sacrifices that sticks (good) destiny to its owner’s head’). On the other hand, if the Ifa diviner foresaw a bad destiny for the baby, he would as well prescribe for the baby’s parents the necessary ritual sacrifices that would avert any foreseeable bad luck. As it concerned Abidolu, the praise name Abidogun was given him by Ifa (divination god) through an Ifa
diviner (Babaláwo). The diviner also revealed that baby Abidolu had come to the world through the intercession of Egúngún (spirit being). He therefore suggested that he (Abidolu) become a devoted masquerader and own a masquerade that would be called Abidogun, when he came of age.

The following Oríkì Egúngún Abidogun was recorded by the author at Oke-Igbo in 2004, during Ìta Egúngún (the third-day rituals of Egúngún masquerades festival). They were recited (chanted) by two of the late masquerader Abidolu Abidogun’s biological daughters, Mogbojubade and Adunni. Both Ègè chanters (in 2004) were between the ages of seventy five and eighty years old.

Adunni commenced on the Ègè (Oríkì) Abidogun as follows:

\[
\text{O sé omo Abidolu} \\
\text{Omo Abidogun} \\
\text{Omo Edemobi lâà r'òsé fún} \\
\text{Baba Adesoji tan'jé ro're ti baba ti nse.} \\
\text{Orolu moò rojò} \\
\text{Orolu mori’pon sè’ké} \\
\text{Gbonjubade, mo l'épo nlé jelá ní funfun} \\
\text{Ìwòriwò ni mo rin re baluwà} \\
\text{Baluwè ókú o, kěni màà mú s’kú} \\
\text{Ibi omo ni wón fí nsi}
\]

Translation:

I thank you, children of Abidolu.  
Children of Abidogun.  
Children of the caring father Edemobi,  
who always assisted the people in need.  
Father of Adesoji, who among his  
beneficiaries ever applaud our father’s  
openhandedness?  
Orolu the cheerful giver.  
Orolu who shared all he had including the soup (food).  
Gbonjubade, I had oil at home but ate my okra soup without the oil.  
I went to the bathroom unclothed.  
The bathroom does not die; do not turn it to a graveyard.  
It (the bathroom) is used for burying the placenta (that usually follows  
shortly after the baby’s birth).

Mogbonjubade took over the Ègè from Adunni:

\[
\text{Émi nàà ré o, omo Odera ò} \\
\text{Émi nàà ré o, omo Tubunibi}
\]
Translation:

It is me, child of Odera.
It is me, child of Tubunibi.
Child of Laaja, the son of Asura.
Child of Laaroye.
Mogbonjubade, child of the great warrior, who fought in Ibadan.
He defeated and forged ahead and became the lead-warrior else-
where.
Lobutu child of the art lover.
Lobutu whose father owned 1,400 art pieces.
Child’s owner of the brass mortar.
Lobutu whose father’s art blister like the soap lather.
Odera’s children do not call the morsel by its name.
We refer to the morsel as ‘that which is put into the mouth.’
It is me, child of Abidogun.
Owner of the house built on top of the hill.
I saw the birds’ flying limits.
Child of Ogunrinade who has plentiful yams to eat potage.
Each day he wore 200 ancient hand-woven strip cloths.
The wearing of black cloth to the Odera house is a taboo.
But rather, white cloth is acceptable.
Isogun, child of the skillful drummer.
Isogun child of the experienced drummer.
Abidogun has become Isogun, come and watch him play the drum.
Child of the one with the brass mortar.
He tied his robes to the left.
My father used his right hand to prepare the white lime.

*Song I:* The dead survived by children did not die.
*Chorus:* As the children-survivors would uphold the family tradition (of Egungun) when their parent is gone.

Adunni took over from Mogbonjubade:

*Gbonjubade nlé*
*Omo Ogunrinade ar’epéé j’ibe*
*Omo Adefunmike*
*Omo Saadun*
*Kí Ìsòkùn sokùn*
*Kí won mà f’órò okùn lámi l’ójú*
*Èniyàn t’ó bá wo’Lédi (Ogboni)*
*Áá bá bàmi l’órí esin*
*Kókó aso rè pègbèje omo Elébura*

*Song II:* *Abiyamo mà rééé o*
*Chorus:* *Jéé kí nghó’mò mii pàn-àn*
*Ôní mà l’ojó èrèè ọ̀*

*Translation:*

Gbonjubade, I salute you.
Child of Ogunrinade who has plentiful yams to eat potage.
Child of Adefunmike.
Child of Saadun.
Let them tie their robe.
But they need not brag about it.
Whoever enters the Ogboni (lodge) house
Would meet my father on the horse back.
The knots on his (my father’s) Ogboni robe numbered over 1,400 spiritually powerful individuals.
Song II: This is the ancestor who cheerfully bless people with children.
Chorus: I pray, bless me with my own baby, so that I could carry
the baby on my back.
Today is the day for celebration.

Mogbonjubade took over from Adunni:

Èmi náà ré o, omo Osofo
Aibila omo Kolalu
Kolalu t’Alubo
Alubo Olumaarin
Omo Adesoji, ärébi ye’ra
Èmi náà ré o
Omo Tubunibi
O gbé’yun le bebe idi
Nitorí èwe Owu
Ógòngó l’áràn-án, baba Osofo
Aláràn-án ti gb’áràn-án rè bòra bí aso
Èmi náà ré, omo Abidolu
Onílé l’ò nsélélè o
Àtióro mà’bá sónsó orí irókò
Oyin a se kókó igi
Délé mi démí
Omo eku ni yóò sòrò l’éyìn eku
Ojó nbá d’ágbà, bí nbá rèlé
Omo ni kó sòrò l’éyìn

Translation:

It is me, child of Osofo.
Aibila, child of Kolalu.
Kolalu of Alubo.
Alubo of Olumaarin.
Child of Adesoji, who treasures his family.
It is me.
Child of Tubunibi.
She secured her beaded strings around her bottom.
In order to seduce the young men of Owu (Abeokuta).
Father of Osofo whose masquerade costume is made of Aran
(imported velvets).
He has wore his velvet masquerade costume as if it were robe.
It is me, child of Abidolu.
The home owner takes it good care.
The tree top is home to birds.
Bees live inside the tree holes.
Take care of my home for me.
The young mouse would inherit its parents’ nets.
The day I become old and pass away.
May my children inherit my family tradition (of Egungun).

Adunni took over from Mogbonjubade and concluded the Ègè:

\[
\begin{align*}
O \ sé \ o, \ Gbronjubade \ o \\
Momí \ r’élé \ bábàá \ mi, \ Abidogun \\
Edenimobi \ a’àípèè \ l’ode \\
Bábaá \ mi, \ ab’odán \ rere \\
Isán \ o, \ méè \ gbódò \ j’epo \\
Ní’bi \ t’áà \ gbé \ bí \ mi \ l’ómo \\
Orolu \ fí’jó \ mésàn-án \ j’àtè \\
Momí \ r’élé \ rèè \ jè’be \ bí \ ení \ je’su \\
Abidogun \ bábàá \ mi \\
Arabaríbí \ Eléégún \ odún, \ omo \ Elebura
\end{align*}
\]

Translation:

Thank you, Gbonjubade.
I am going to my father’s (Abidogun) home.
Edenimobi who has an Ape tree in front of his house.
My father whose courtyard is shaded by large Odán tree branches.
I must not eat palm oil for nine days.
In my family house, where I was born.
Orolu ate for nine days the tasteless, unsalted soup.
I am going home to eat potage, as if it was yam.
Abidogun, my father.
The great warrior and ardent masquerader.

**Analysis of Oríkì Egúngún Abidogun**

As earlier mentioned, the *Ègè* body of *Oríkì* is peculiar to only the Egba (Abeokuta) Yoruba subgroup, the recited *Oríkì Egúngún Abidogun* (praise poems) therefore, leave no doubt that Abidolu Abidogun and his family originated from Egbaland (Abeokuta). Moreover, the *Oríkì (Ègè)* Egúngún Abidogun clearly reveals the exact Egba Yoruba subgroup of Owu, to which Abidogun and his family belong (line 54). Similarly, the praise poems meticulously record the family tree of Abidolu Abidogun, from Orolu Odera (father of Asura Laaroye), down to Laaja (father of Abidolu Abidogun), and from Abidogun himself to Adesoji Osofo (his son). Others within the Abidogun family ances-
try include Ogunrinade, Adefunke, Gbonjubade, Adunni, Aibila, and Kolalu, to mention but just few (lines 1-2, 4-5, 7, 14, 27, 47, and 48).

Also well documented and revealed in the *Oríkì Egúngún* Abidogun were the late Abidolu Abidogun’s accomplishments; religious and political status; lineage/ family taboos, and even a detailed description of his house, as well as where his compound/ street is located at Oke-Igbo (lines 25-26 and 67-68). These historical and cultural data embedded in the *Oríkì Egúngún* Abidogun deserve more elaboration as follows.

Concerning his personality traits, the praise poems reveal Abidogun as a cheerful giver, who always delighted in solving people’s problems, especially by sharing his wealth with the poor or people in need (lines 3-4 and 6). Pertaining to the masquerader’s high economic and social status, the praise poems describe Abidogun as a successful farmer who had a large barn filled with Èpè (yams), owned and wore each day, two hundred Ètù (the highly expensive hand-woven Yoruba strip cloth), and adorned his Èkú Egúngún (masquerade costume ensemble) with the most fashionable Àrán fabric (velvets) procured from abroad, such as from London, New York, and Hong Kong (lines 27-28 and 55-56). The praise poems also describe Abidogun as a famous art collector-patron, who owned more than 1,400 art pieces (lines 18-21).

The *Oríkì Egúngún* Abidogun likewise make known that Abidogun was not only an ardent masquerader, but also a title holder in *Egbé Ògbóni* (also called Òṣùgbó), the Yoruba political and religious society). As an *Egbé Ògbóni* high chieftaincy title holder, Abidogun’s emblems of office included *Odó Ide* (*Ògbóni* brass mortar) and *Ìtàgbè* (*Ògbóni* traditional hand-woven robe/ cloth) embellished with over 1,400 sacred knots (lines 20, 34, and 43-45).

Of all his aforementioned accomplishments established in the *Oríkì Egúngún* Abidogun, the most important of which the entire community of Oke-Igbo still remember, was his achievement as a great warrior (Ołógun/ Èsò) (lines 16-17 and 75). According to Ganiyu Adesoji Osofo, the family oral tradition claimed that during the Owu and Ile-Ife-Ijebu war of the early nineteenth-century, Abidogun’s father was among the Owu community (near Ile-Ife) soldiers, who led their townspeople to refuge in Egbaland (Abeokuta), which had supported them. This family history, as also revealed in the *Oríkì Egúngún* Abidogun, asserts further that Abidogun soon followed his father’s foot steps and fought his way from Egbaland to Ibadan, down to Ile-Ife, and finally, to Oke-Igbo, where he settled down permanently (lines 16-17).

By and large, *Oríkì Egúngún* Abidogun also provides graphic descriptions of the courtyard of Abidogun, which was actually once shaded by large Èpè tree branches (lines 67-68). It is important to note that the famous Idi-Ape street of Oke-Igbo, at which the Abidogun family house/ compound is still located to
this day, was named after this same Ape tree, even though the tree had been cut down in the late 1970s, on the occasion of the street’s expansion.

It has been noted that the Oríkì Egúngún Abidogun were recited by the deceased masquerader’s children, at Ita Egúngún Oke-Igbo (the third-day rituals of Egúngún masquerades festival at Oke-Igbo) held in 2004. It becomes imperative to also examine as follows, Egúngún Abidogun (Abidogun masquerade), to whom the recited praise poems (Oríkì Egúngún Abidogun) were dedicated.

**Egúngún Abidogun**

Before examining Egúngún Abidogun (masquerade and masquerade costume), it is vital that I first provide the reader with some background knowledge about Egúngún Oke-Igbo within the larger context of the entire Yoruba Egúngún masquerades.

Depending on the individual Egúngún masquerade’s cultural significance, and to some extent, the respective Egúngún costume ensemble style (Èkú Egúngún), the Yoruba Egúngún could be loosely categorized into ritual and non-ritualized Egúngún. The latter is popularly called Egúngún Aláré (also pronounced Egúngún Onídán), which comprises the itinerants-masquerades, who entertain their spectators essentially with vigorous acrobatic display and/or petty magic. Specifically, the non-ritualized Egúngún perform for monetary gains. Thus, the German editor, writer and scholar Ulli Beier has referred to them as “the unserious masquerades.”

Belonging to the former (ritualized Egúngún) are the Oyo and Oyo related masquerades generally identified as Ará Òrun (literally ‘the heaven’s dwellers’). The adherents of this category of Egúngún share the conviction that they emblematize the spirits of their dead ancestors. Some even maintain that their family or lineage masquerade costume (Èkú Egúngún) is not just the deceased (ancestral) emblem but rather, his physical manifestation. Also classified within the rubric of the ritualized Egúngún are the Ijumu Yoruba Egúngún (in the most northeasterly Yorubaland), which the adherents conceptualize as Ehora/Okè se wìlì-wìlì (the nature spirits that dwell in the natural environments). Other examples of ritual Egúngún abound; but they are beyond the scope of this chapter.

Concerning Egúngún Oke-Igbo, which include Egúngún Abidogun, they belong to the class of ritual Egúngún, visualized by their adherents as Ará Òrun-Kin'kin (ancestral masquerades). Specifically, Ará Òrun-Kin’kin are subdivided into three categories—Egúngún Àgbà (senior masquerades), Egúngún Ode (hunters’ masquerades’), and Egúngún Ológun (warrior-masquerades). Egúngún Àgbà exemplifies the Oyo and Oyo related Egúngún, which migrated southwards (to Oke-Igbo) from the war-torn Oyo Yoruba nation in the early
nineteenth century. Examples include *Egúngún* Olobanka (from the Odana-Ogunmakinde *Egúngún* lineage) and *Egúngún* Etiyeri (from the Igbalade *Egúngún* family), which originated in Oyo Alaafin and Ede, respectively. Belonging to the second but not the less spiritually powerful Oke-Igbo *Egúngún Ode* subgroup are *Egúngún* Iyekiyee, Alawopala, and Alayewu, among others. The third but not the least recognized *Egúngún Ológun* subgroup typifies *Egúngún* Abidogun, examined as follows (figs. 3.1-3.3).

Every year on the third day of the *Egúngún* festival (*Ìta Egúngún*), the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of *Egúngún* Abidogun honor their lineage ancestor (Abidolu Abidogun) with an array of ritual offerings and request his blessing and spiritual protection. The most important of these ritual sacrifices are the praise poems of the Abidogun masquerade (*Oríkì Egúngún* Abidogun). The next important ritual offering is the performance context of *Egungun* Abidogun, in which the Abidogun masquerade costume ensemble (*Èkú Egúngún* Abidogun) is worn or literally carried (*gbé Egúngún*) and danced by a masker (*Arèkú Egúngún*).

However, the masquerade costume of Abidogun is worn and danced once every other year, on the third day of the *Egúngún* festival, by a specially trained masker or masked dancer by the name Israel Oloyede (aka Folly) (fig. 4). For instance, the costume was not worn during the year 2004 *Egúngún* festival witnessed by the author. The obvious reason was that it had been worn the previous year. Thus, the following analysis concerns essentially the *Èkú Egúngún* Abidogun (Abidogun masquerade costume ensemble), not the masquerader’s performance context (figs. 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3).

Nonetheless, looking at this *Egúngún* masking ensemble from the esoteric point of view, it emblematizes the ancestral spirit of the deceased Abidolu Abidogun. And more importantly, viewing it from the esoteric standpoint, the children of the late masquerader Abidogun did perceive their father’s *Èkú Egúngún* (figs. 3.1-3.3) as the reincarnated spirit of their deceased father. Thus, it is not surprising that Mogbonjubade and Adunni persistently pointed their hands to the *Èkú Egúngún* Abidogun hanging on the wall inside the masquerade’s altar (*Ojúbo Egúngún* Abidogun), addressing it (the masquerade costume) as *Baba mi* (my father), as they recited the unending *Oríkì Egúngún*.

Generally speaking in Yoruba art, as in this *Èku Egúngún* Abidogun, the emphasis is on the head (*Orí*) (figs. 3.2 and 3.5). From the functionalist standpoint, the headdress or head section of the *Egúngún* masquerade costume ensemble embodies the masquerader’s or masker’s head and conceals his face, and by extension, hides his physical, human identity. However, from the spiritual, epistemological perspective, the headdress or head section (of the masquerade costume) is an allusion to the spiritual site of the ancestor.
Consequently in this Yoruba art example of Èkú Ègúngún Abidogun, the headdress (head section) is elaborately adorned with Ojú Ègúngún (the face panel) (figs. 3.2 and 3.3). The face panel (Ojú Ègúngún) comprises Awón Ègúngún (the face net), through which the masker (Israel Oloyede) would see the visible world of the living (Ayé) and enjoy its fresh air (Atégún). The face net (Awon Ègúngún) has a symmetrical block pattern of two colors (black and white), a clear indication that the weaver (of the face-net) is/was prolific, endowed with Ojú Onà (design consciousness and originality).

The face panel (Ojú Ègúngún) is also embellished with Owó Eyo (cowry shells), clustering the net in eight rolls (figs. 3.2 and 3.3). Right above it (the face panel) is the headdress designed with rich traditionally hand-woven strip and imported Àrán (velvets) textiles. Moreover, the most prominent and awe inspiring elements of this headdress is the human skull (Aghári Éniyàn), glittering with the thickly built-up patina from the votive blood and feathers. Israel Oloyede (the masker of Ègúngún Abidogun) has emphasized that the human skull was actually one of the many enemies’ heads, which he (Abidogun) decapitated and took with him as a trophy to Oke-Igbo, his final destination. He (Israel Oloyede) explained further that the masquerade costume was constructed originally for warfare, and that the great masquerade-warrior Abidolu Abidogun used it to conceal his physical identity in battle.

The remaining (lower) portion of the masquerade costume ensemble comprises the expensive, prestigious and most fashionable multicolored imported Àrán (velvets) and other industrially-made textiles of inestimable value. The multiplicity and rarity of these costume elements illustrates the high social and economic status of the deceased masquerader Abidolu Abidogun and his children, who habitually enhance the masquerade costume’s appearance on yearly basis by adding the newest fashionable items to it.

More importantly, this blatant display of socio-economic power, in which children of the deceased honor and glorify their ancestor with expensive imported textiles, is also an allusion to Ebo Opé, the ritual sacrifice or offering in appreciation of the spiritual protection, long life and prosperity, which were presumably showered on them by their ancestral spirit (in this case, of Abidogun). Indeed, the sophisticated, most fashionable Ègúngún costume ensemble and other forms of ritual offerings, which included Órìkì Ègúngún Abidogun and the sacrificial, votive animals (goat, cock, and pigeon), also clearly underscore the Yoruba saying: Ení dúpé ore àná, áá gbà miràn (one good turn deserves another). Thus, by extension, these offerings represent more than a ritual thanksgiving, but they also a form of prayer request to the ancestral Ègúngún Abidogun, to shower on them (his children) more spiritual and material blessings.
Also noticeable in this masquerade costume ensemble (Èkú Egúngún Abidogun) is a pair of sleeves that were conspicuously absent. The masker Israel Oloyede has mentioned that the sleeves were long removed since the end of the Yoruba inter-ethnic wars in the early twentieth century, when the British colonial regime ruled that human killing, for whatever reasons, is illegal. He stressed that the removal of the sleeves from this masquerade costume has restricted its wearer (masker) from holding any equipment of war like guns, cutlasses, clubs, and swords. Thus, by extension, this trick has permanently curbed any would be masker of the Èkú Egúngún Abidogun from killing human beings. Oloyede concluded that the present day Egúngün Abidogun ritual festival is for peace, providing an inestimable opportunity for family reunion, not for warfare.

**Oríkì Egúngún Abidogun: Critical Perspectives on Yoruba Art Historiography**

It is indubitable that the relationship existing between the Oríkì Egúngún Abidogun and Èkú Egúngún Abidogun is symbiotic, and that the classified historical and cultural information embedded in this aspect of Yoruba art and religion is reliably recoverable essentially in the masquerade’s or masquerader’s praise poems (Oríkì). Yet very little attempt has been made to push against limiting the boundaries of oral traditions, such as Oríkì, in the study of this aspect of the African art historiography.

Of great importance in the present study are three ideas out of the wealth of esoteric information concealed in the Èkú Egúngún Abidogun, but retrieved in the masquerader’s or masquerade’s praise poems (Oríkì), which apparently would have been irrecoverable using any western-oriented art-historical paradigms. The first classified information unveiled in this masquerade costume art by the Oríkì Egúngún Abidogun, has to do with the human skull headdress costume element (fig. 3.5). If studied predominantly on the formal, extrinsic level, using formalism or formalist approach, which stresses the significance of form over the art’s content, one could be tempted to read or interpret the art (human skull) as ugly, old, or dirty. Likewise if viewed from the ethnocentric and/or humanistic standpoint, some viewers might even judge the Yoruba subgroup from where the masquerade costume headdress (made of the human skull) came as being cannibalistic, ruthless, or primitive.

Whereas, accessible only in the associated Oríkì Egúngún Abidogun, the exegetical, historical relevance of the Egúngün masquerade to which the human skull costume element belongs, functioned essentially within the inter-ethnic warfare that pervaded the whole of the Yoruba nation in the nineteenth-century. The praise poems unmistakably reveal how Abidogun (masquerade) attacked and destroyed the enemy camp at Ibadan and forged ahead to other places, such
as Oke-Igbo, where he became the head-warrior (lines 16-17 and 75). From this perspective, it becomes clear that the human skull belongs to one of the fallen victims of war, which the masquerade-warrior used as trophy on one hand, and as a device to humiliate and terrorize his enemies’ camps on the other hand.

A second but not the less important insight recovered in the *Oríkì Egúngún* Abidogun concerns the origin of *Egúngún* Abidogun, and by extension, the masquerader-warrior and his entire family. Again any analysis based on the formal level to determine the art (*Èkú Egúngún* Abidogun) and its owner’s provenance is bound to be doomed, as such an approach would end up portraying only the art’s expression and style. The culturally and historically rich *Oríkì Egúngún* Abidogun did reveal that the deceased masquerader Abidolu, with his masquerade and entire family, originated from the Owu community of Egbaland (Abeokuta) (lines 13 and 54). Likewise significant is the distinctive *Oríkì Abidogun* chanting pattern as well as the chanters’ tone of voice peculiar only to Ègè, the praise poems of the Egba Yoruba subgroup, which further confirms the family claim that its progenitor migrated to Oke-Igbo from the Egbaland.

The third and last but not the least role of the *Oríkì Egúngún* Abidogun to recovering the classified family historical and cultural information ingrained in the art and ritual of *Egúngún* Abidogun, which other (western) art historical frameworks often lose, concerns the cultural relevance of *Odún Egúngún* (the festival for masquerades). As already mentioned, the third day of the Oke-Igbo *Egúngún* festival is dedicated to making diverse ritual offerings, the most important of which is chanting or singing the praise poems of *Egúngún* Abidogun. These praise poems, especially as contained in the two chorused songs in the *Oríkì*, make explicit the “why” of the festival for *Egúngún* masquerades (*Odún Egúngún*). The first song states: ‘the dead survived by his or her children did not die; as the children-survivors would honor their parent (the dead) and hold or keep the family traditions (/K’ènì māmā kú d’omo nù ò/ Omo eni asèyìn dé’ni/). By extension, the song illuminates the core essence of the *Egúngún* ritual festival as a form of commemoration of the deceased ancestor Abidolu Abidogun. The song unmistakably confirms the claim by Ganiyu Adesoji Osofo (Abidolu Abidogun’s grandson): Írántí ni odún Egúngún Abidogun jé; a nfi ojó óní se irántí bábá wa Abidogun ní (the masquerade festival is celebrated in remembrance of our ancestral father Abidolu Abidogun). The second song affirms: ‘this is the cheerful giver of children; I pray that you enable me carry my own babies on my back; today is the day of celebration/joy’ (*Abiyamo mà rééé o/ Jé kí ngb'ómò mii pàn/ Óní mà lojó arée òo/). From this song, it becomes imperative that *Odún Egúngún* Abidogun (the festival for Abidogun masquerade) functions as a prayer request to masquerader-ancestor Abidolu Abidogun, that he bless them (his children-ritual performers) with
many children. In other words, *Odún Egúngún* Abidogun is a form of prayer-petition to the ancestral masquerader Abidogun for human fecundity.

Owing to the indispensable role of orality in Yoruba art historiography, as evident in the study of *Oríkì Egúngún* Abidogun, it is suggested that the prospective researcher into any aspect of Yoruba art be well familiar with the Yoruba language, especially the oral traditions. Secondly, the potential Yoruba visual culture scholar should listen to, and respect the indigenous voices, when seeking answers to the art’s intentional cultural significance. And finally, for authenticity and the avoidance of cultural misrepresentation or misinterpretation, it is highly recommended that such a would-be Yoruba art historian study the art essentially within its exegetical, cultural context.

![Figure 3.1 Eku Egungun Abidogun](Abidogun masquerade costume ensemble), Oke-Igbo Photograph by Olawole F. Famule (July 2004).
Figure 3.2 Eku Egungun Abidogun (close view), Oke-Igbo
Photograph by Olawole F. Famule (July 2004).
Figure 3.3 Eku Egungun Abidogun (the face panel and headdress section), Oke-Igbo
Photograph by Olawole F. Famule (July 2004).
Figure 3.4 Eku Egungun Abidogun
(the human skull headdress section), Oke-Igbo
Photograph by Olawole F. Famule (July 2004).
Figure 3.5 Israel Oloyede (aka Folly), the Masker of Eku Egungun Abidogun (Aworo Abidogun), Oke-Igbo
Photograph by Olawole F. Famule (July 2004).

Notes

3. *Ita-Egungun* at Oke-Igbo illustrates the third-day of the *Egungun* festival and its associated rituals.


5. Ganiyu Adesoji Osofo is the grandson of Abidolu Abidogun. In 2004 at Oke-Igbo, on the third day of the masquerades festival (*Ita Egungun*), I interviewed him (Ganiyu) concerning the history of *Egungun* Abidogun.


9. The claim that ‘the masquerade festival for *Egungun* Abidogun is celebrated in remembrance of the late masquerader Abidolu Abidogun’ was made by Ganiyu Adesoji Osofo (Abidolu Abidogun’s grandson); during the interview I conducted with him in 2004.
Chapter 4

ODOLAYE AREMU AS A PARTISAN POET: ARTISTIC SOPHISTICATION, IDEOLOGICAL CLARITY AND PERFORMANCE PASSION¹

Abdul-Rasheed Na’Allah

INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to say precisely how old Odolaye Aremu was when I visited him many times between 1985 and 1987, to interview him about his performance traditions, and in particular, about the origin of Dàdákúàdá, the traditional Ilorin oral genre within which he figured among the leading poets.

Perhaps no oral poet in the whole of Nigeria was and is, still years after Odolaye’s death, as blunt, brave and bold as the Ilorin oral singer, Odolaye Aremu.² The Yoruba people in Ilorin, Ogbomosho, Oyo, Ibadan, Mushin, Lagos, Ilesha, Ede, Iwo, Ikirun, Saki and other cities of Nigeria often single out Odolaye for special mention when discussing traditional oral griots! Odolaye’s feat in traditional oral poetry satisfies what Kofi Anyidoho describes as the art of mythmaking and mythbreaking in traditional art. The art of ‘mythmaking and mythbreaking’ is fundamental to the preoccupation of traditional oral artists in Africa,³ and Odolaye created myths on issues and around personalities and, conversely, he also broke lots of mythical masques shielding many people.
This chapter examines a few of the political feats achieved by Odolaye and how contemporary Yoruba Community in Nigeria relates to him even years after his death in 1997.

**Odolaye and His Yoruba Audience**

It is interesting that soon after the death of Alhaji Lamidi Adedibu, the strongman of Ibadan politics, many Yoruba people who were trying to remember Adedibu, both in electronic and in print media, were quoting Odolaye Aremu’s songs for Adedibu where he presented the restless grass root politician as politically sagacious, socially crude and economically generous. Yet, many Yoruba politicians detested Odolaye during the poet’s lifetime. During the political crisis in Southwestern Nigeria in the first republic, they called him a rebel against the Yoruba race. They asserted that he did not support any cause of the Yorubas: that he was against the late Chief Obafemi Awolowo, a foremost Yoruba politician and the first premier of the then Nigerian Western Region. These people accused Odolaye of often inciting one Yoruba politician against another. They insisted that he fueled an air of discord even among the Yoruba Obas. However, his poetry, as we shall begin to see, show that while it may be true that he was harsh on and impatient with those he disagreed with, he certainly loved his country. One may safely say that he was a rebel only against those who, in his judgment, were opposed to the cause for a united Nigeria.

**Artistic Philosophy**

Excerpts from Odolaye’s many songs would reveal that his poetic periscope gazes farther than mere ethnocentric setting. Odolaye was an avowed federalist and promoted politics played within a national structure of a federation. If Odolaye was bigoted, it was only in the love he had for Ilorin of his birth. He would yell to whoever would listen in praising his beloved Ilorin, “Ilorin o! Ilu taa lomi ta lodo, taa si je nto wuwa ni gba gboyoro!” meaning, “A City where we have neither river nor sea, but eat whatever (fresh food) we like whenever we like.” He said of Ilorin, “Kosi ibi tolahun o si, ama Ilorin nin sun” meaning, “Indeed God is everywhere (as they say). But He sleeps in Ilorin!”

In discussing Odolaye’s political nationalism, my first example is a song he addressed to all Nigerians, advocating unity and mutual understanding among the ethnically and religiously polarized nation:

Eyin oselu aye, emaa ma je o ba jee
Tori ojo tin pagon bo ojo ti pe
Eje ka takaka ka ronu
Eje ka sowo wa po
Oh you politicians of this world,
don’t destabilize the world
For, the rain has been beating hard on the vulture for so long!
Let’s sleep on our backs and think
Let’s join hands together
So that our situation can improve
Burning of houses, beheading of people,
May God Almighty put a stop to them!

Nigeria, here, is the metaphorical vulture, which the poet says has been over-beaten by the heavily descending rain. The irony is that the ‘rain’, a reference to oppression, repression, instability and poverty during colonization, is certainly an abnormality here. The rain of colonization and now neo-colonization and globalization, according to Odolaye, has come to destroy Nigeria. It rains pebbles and rocks on the vulture—a naked and homeless bird. Odolaye admonishes the politicians to desist from being or using thugs and destroyers on each other. They must come together to build Nigeria—the vulture—who, in a Yoruba saying, *Gunugun kii ku l’ewe*, “never dies young.” Odolaye implores every Nigerian politician in every community, and in every local and state government area, to make a hecatomb of their differences and to consolidate their gains for the sake of a strong Nigeria. In the next song he declares a similar challenge to the entire country, inviting different state governments across Nigeria to hold on to an agenda for national development:

Eyun ‘joba eko, e maa ma je o baje
Ijoba Ibadan, e maa ma je o bajee
Ijoba Oyo, e maa ma je o bajee
Oselu Ogbomosho, e maa ma je o bajee
Oselu Kuwara, e maa ma je o bajee
Oselu Sokoto, e maa ma je o bajee
Oselu Kaduna, e maa ma je o bajee
Igbomina, e maa ma je o bajee
Oselu Ile-Ife, e maa ma je o bajee
Eje ka so’wopo k’aye o d’okan o?

You Government of Eko [Lagos], save her (Nigeria) from destruction
Government of Ibadan, save her from destruction
Government of Oyo, save her from destruction
Politicians of Ogbomoso, save her from destruction
Politicians of Kwara, save her from destruction
Politicians of Sokoto, save her from destruction
Politicians of Kaduna, save her from destruction
Igbomina, save her from destruction
Politicians of Ile-Ife, save her from destruction
Let us join hands and make the world one!

Oدولویه’s preaching is quite pragmatic. The ‘world’ in the last line refers to Nigeria. Although literally one may think it is naïve to expect the “world” to be one, what he wanted here was a unity of purpose and love for growth, peace and progress of Nigeria. His was not a postprandial oratory. He wailed and wailed that Nigeria must not be destroyed. The geographical distribution of the Nigerian peoples and the governments the poet appealed to yet again testify to his nationalistic outlook. For example, Oyo, Ogbomosho and Ibadan are Yoruba communities in Western Nigeria. Kaduna and Sokoto are Hausa/Fulani in the Northern part of the country. Oدولویه, in another song, wants all Nigerians to reason together and show that they understand what was at stake for the nation:

Eje ka takaka, ka ro’nu
Eje ka ni’fe ara wa
Eranti awon ota
Ti won d’enule erin le?8

Let’s sleep on our backs, and think!
Let’s love ourselves!!
[Let’s] remember the enemies,
They are set at making mockery of us.

The ‘adversaries’ Oدولویه had in mind are those who, within and without the country, believed that Nigeria could not survive after independence. Oدولویه felt that they were eager to see that the country disintegrated so that they could mock the self-rule seekers. Oدولویه enjoined Nigerians to love themselves and to try to shame their detractors. The poet rarely sang, on record and on an open field performance, without touching on issues of national unity and survival. He would often exclaim during a performance: ‘Naijiriya!’ (Nigeria!) He often paid homage to many past Nigerian leaders, Azikiwe, Balewa, Bello, Aguiyi Ironsi, Akintola, Adelabu, who gained independence for Nigeria, while he challenged current ones to prove their worth by developing the country.

Politics at Home

The fact of Oدولویه’s love for Ilorin did not result in being uncritical about whatever he thought was important political issue of his Ilorin home. Oدولویه
commented regularly on the sociopolitical and economic activities in Ilorin and indeed in the entire Kwara State of which Ilorin is the capital city. He was always very bold in putting forward important suggestions for solving the community’s problems. For example, when the then Governor of Kwara State, Adamu Atta, quarreled with the then Senate Leader, Olusola Saraki, his political godfather who represented Ilorin-Asa senatorial district in the Nigerian Senate, Odolaye employed his poetry for a reconciliatory role. He sang repeatedly at the climax of that feud:

Amon edakun e ro wo!
B’erin meji ba n ja ni’nu igbo,
Aaaa, koko, eruwa, gbogbo igi inu igbe oo
Lara o man ta
Eyin eyan jankan-jankan,
Dokita Saraki, Sulu Gambari, Akanbi Oniyangi,
Adamu Atta,
Kilo se tee le perayin jo
Kee ba’rayin soro,
Ki gbogbo Kwara o toro,
Ka ma rije, ka ri mu, ka ma rale, kamaa kole
Ki oni kaluku o maa tun aye baba re se.9

But please, have a thought!
When two elephants fight in the forest,
Haaa! grasses, every tree in the bush
Shall feel pain on its body!!
All you big, big people:
Doctor Saraki, Sulu Gambari, Akanbi Oniyangi, Adamu Atta,
Why can’t you call yourselves (together)
And talk (truth) to yourselves!
So that we could have (enough) to eat, to drink, to buy land, to build
houses
So that everyone can develop his father’s place.

Odolaye’s words here may be soft, but they are certainly direct and straight to the point! They are satires that project the stark failures of the quarreling leaders. The poet challenged them to have some thoughts. He reminded them that their conflicting egos caused the masses, those he called the ‘grasses’ and the ‘every tree in the bush,’ untold sufferings. Odolaye re-stated that abundant food and shelter could only be available to people in times of peace. The poet asked the leaders to reconcile so that no community would suffer.

Unlike most traditional singers in Africa, Odolaye did not stop at mere verbal agitation. The general belief that professional oral artists would lose
important patronage if they became partisans did not bother him. He felt that an oral poet with a deep sense of responsibility did not need to be a political and social prostitute. He carefully chose his tent and abided patriotically by it. He held strongly to the view that every poet must have an ideology or principle in line with his/her poetic vision, and must stick solidly to it. He believed that it was the only way the society could respect the poet.

During the first republic in Nigeria, from 1962 to 1966, Odolaye associated with the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC), which controlled the central government. In the second republic, 1979 to 1983, the poet publicly declared for the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), which also eventually won the Presidential election, secured the highest number of gubernatorial seats in the Nigerian federation and controlled the federal government. While declaring for the NPN, Odolaye sang:

Baba mi daakun,
N o s'onile
Gbogbo egbon mi,
N o s'onile,
Gbogbo Eko
N o s'onile,
Egbe Sagari wumi pipo o
Emi na o maa ni yan'le loodi o.¹⁰

Please my father,
I want to join the (party) with the house symbol.
You all my elderly ones,
I want to join the (party) with the house.
All people of Lagos,
I want to join the one with the house.
The party of Shagari is after my heart,
I won't keep malice with the house!

A symbol of a house was the logo of the defunct National Party of Nigeria (NPN). The Yorubas called the party, “Egbe oni’le” (“the party with the house”). It would be fair to say that Odolaye’s concern for a true national unity attracted him to that party. It seemed the only political party with a true national spread. For example, apart from winning the presidential election, the defunct NPN also controlled most of the states, and the most seats in the Senate and House of Representatives. In teaming up with the NPN, Odolaye’s preoccupation was the oneness of Nigeria. This was evident in some of his songs that became campaign slogans for the NPN in Yoruba areas of the country:
Odolaye Aremu as a Partisan Poet

Igboro Ilorin,
Waan Najiriya!
Bo de Kano,
Waan Najiriya!
Ni Sokoto,
Waan Najiriya!
Kaduna,
Waan Najiriya11

On the streets of Ilorin,
One Nigeria!
If you go to Kano,
One Nigeria!
In Sokoto,
One Nigeria!
Kaduna,
One Nigeria ...

The NPN’s slogan: “One Nigeria, One Nation, One Destiny”, was an attractive weapon, even if used fraudulently, that won the hearts of many nationalist Nigerians.

It may be true that his choice of a political party did not result in what he expected. The second republic’s politics would do for ordinary Nigerians, but it would be unfair to fault Odolaye’s genuineness in pitching his tent with the NPN and in actively campaigning for it. Although the poet was sincere in his concern for national unity and in his thought that a party with a symbol of a house and a slogan of “One Nation, One Destiny,” would gear the country towards a common destiny, the catastrophic end of the second republic in the hands of the NPN proved that Odolaye’s (and many other Nigerians’) choice was unfortunately merely cosmetic. Though the party had the largest spread, it proved clearly that a national spread was not commensurate with a sincere concern for the majority of downtrodden Nigerians! The allegations of election riggings that led into a “landslide victory” of the NPN in the 1983 election culminated in the violence of a military coup that brought the second republic to an abrupt end. Yet, as Odolaye the poet incorporated his reflections on the failed second republic in his nationalistic agenda, a teeming population of Nigerians had to do the same, who had once been card-carrying members of the NPN.

Political Advocacy

Odolaye regularly advocated for participatory democracy, and insisted that every part of Nigeria must take a part in the governance of the country. He performed several songs that show that he did not accept a concept that politi-
cal power in Nigeria should remain with any one particular linguistic, ethnic or geographical group in Nigeria. The following song, in particular, deals with the issues of power manipulation, monopolization and drunkenness:

Bi kinihun ba kan wa,
Ema je o baje.
Te ban ranti otun
Bi kinihun ba kan yin,
Ese ‘ranti osi.
Ema je kod’awa lowanbe tinbaluje
Ori buruku nin mu k’olori o wajoba maya.\(^{12}\)

When it (the governance of Nigeria) comes to our turn,
Don’t let it (Nigeria) be destroyed
If you remember the right section,
When it comes to your turn,
Remember also the left section
Remember the front, remember the back
Don’t let us make governance ‘We-are-the-one-in-charge,’
which spoils a country ...
It is a bad head that makes a leader
wants to monopolize his reign.

In the song, Odolaye asserts that the ruling party has a responsibility to extend hands of fellowship to other political parties, and to ensure that the opposition participated actively in governance. In the last line, Odolaye maintains that *ori buruku*, a “bad head,” meaning a “cursed head,” a head destined to fail, “makes a leader to want to monopolize his reign”!

Odolaye’s uncompromising political stance puts him in a minority among the Yoruba people of Nigeria. It sharply set him against many of his traditional audience populations in Lagos, Ibadan, Oyo and Abeokuta. Odolaye was a strong supporter of Samuel Akintola, the late premier of the then Nigerian Western Region during the first Nigerian republic. He strongly backed Akintola’s alliance with the NPC-controlled Federal Government that Akintola’s party, the Action Group (AG), was against.\(^{13}\)

Odolaye always argued in his songs that Akintola’s actions were in the primary interest of the Yoruba people. He saw Akintola’s step as a necessity to the survival of the Nigerian nation. This was contradictory to the late AG leader Obafemi Awolowo’s opinion, and to those of his teeming Yoruba loyalists, who, together, saw Akintola as a betrayer of the Yoruba race.\(^{14}\) On the contrary, Odolaye praised Akintola for leading the Yoruba people into the fold of a true national politics, and for saving them from a regional, sectional and myopic political party, which he felt the defunct Action Group represented.
After the assassination of Akintola in 1966, Odolaye smelled a rat in the killing and pointed out the conspiracy of Akintola’s murder. He sang:

Aso wipe won o mo paa  
Won pa  
Won p’agbe tan ayc o r’aro da ma  
Won p’aluko tan aye o r’osun  
Won pa lekeleke aye o gbadun efun funfun.  
Aso, ani emapa,  
E paa  
Won pa gunungun aye o r’oju  
Won pa’kalamango, aye o raaye

We kept warning that they shouldn’t kill him (Akintola).  
Yet they killed him  
They killed the agbe-bird, and the world could no longer get aro-dye  
They killed the aluko-bird and the world could no longer find osun-dye  
They killed lekeleke-bird, and the world could no longer enjoy the efun-dye  
We kept saying they shouldn’t kill him, yet they killed him.  
They killed the gunnungun bird, and the world is no longer healthy.  
They killed the akalamago-bird, and the world is no longer stable!

Odolaye believed that Akintola’s murder was as a result of a well-hatched plot to destabilize Nigeria. He referred to it as an ‘unceasing rainfall,’ again using the rain metaphor. The rainfall, ironically again, resulted in a death. According to Odolaye, only God knew the number of people the violence would sweep away. Odolaye insisted:

Ajalaagbe, nbe lorun osan gangan  
Kiya o ma je Yooba lofa sababi e.

Ajalaagbe (Akintola) was killed in day-light  
His struggle to save the Yorubas from suffering caused his death!

Odolaye gave adjudication on the matter to God, whom, he says, “knows the true cause of the enmity between the cat and the rat.”

During the 1979 national election campaigns, Radio stations in some Yoruba speaking states of Nigeria used Odolaye’s songs as campaign jingles. Indeed the songs were a winner for the NPN in the nation as a whole:

Olohun lo yan Sagari, Seehu, Sagari.  
It is God who has chosen Shagari, Shehu Shagari.
Odolaye’s political enemies multiplied among the Yorubas who actually campaigned and voted en-masse for the defunct Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), the party that featured Awolowo as its presidential candidate. After the victory of the NPN in the 1979 federal elections that Odolaye had much predicted, the poet went on field performances and on records to celebrate his party’s successes. He asked those he called the enemies of his party to see the true writings on the wall, and to accept the federal ruling party. He directed some of his songs particularly at the people of Ibadan:

Eyin omo Ibadan  
Ewa gba f’olohun.  
Gbogbo nkan tanwi lo se,  
Sagari geri ijoba’.

You offsprings of Ibadanland,  
Come and surrender to God!  
Everything we have said has come to past!  
Shagari has ascended the throne!

Rumors had it that many Ibadan people threatened Odolaye’s life. His call on them to desert the UPN and join the NPN was considered an insult. Odolaye fled Ibadan for his life!

**Conclusion**

Odolaye Aremu often insisted that he did not praise or condemn people just for the sake of the exercise. He asserted that individual person’s activities in the society determined the songs he composed for that individual. In a record he released in December 1990 on EMI label and titled “Olowe Mowe,” the poet attempted to clear himself of double-dealing. He sang:

Odolaye Aremu,  
Aja kwara ti kii gbo lasan  
Bio ba r’eran  
Asi r’eeyan!  
B’eyan o daa,  
Aa ni po daa,  
B’eyan o suhan,  
Aa ni po suhan,  
Awa na o maa ni f’igbakan bo kan n nu.18

Odolaye Aremu,
Odolaye Aremu as a Partisan Poet

The dog of Kwara who doesn’t bark without cause
If he hasn’t seen a goat,
He must have seen a human being!
If a person isn’t good,
We won’t say he is good
If a person isn’t decent,
We won’t say he is decent,
We too would never put one calabash into another!

Odolaye is reemphasizing what Chidi Amuta says about the basic preoccupation of an African poet in his community:

In the African world, this historical necessity, in which the poet as a man of culture devotes his art and life to the pursuit of justice and freedom, has become part of the very legitimacy of the poetic undertaking. 19

Thus Odolaye was very conscious of his poetic direction and was already declaring literally that he was the ‘dog’ keeping guard on Kwara State, like the police dog, the night watchman’s dog going after thieves! The “goat” and the “human being” referred to in Odolaye’s songs are the metaphorical thieves whom the police or the watchman’s dogs give some chase. By implication, Odolaye was out to pursue those he saw as thieves and unjust in the entire Nigerian society. He was out to show his love, without apology to anyone, to his dearest Nigeria and to its continued unity. Whatever critics might say was wrong about Odolaye as a partisan poet, he demonstrated artistic sophistication, ideological clarity and performance passion.

Notes

that oral poets’ involvement in politics, as the present work tries to show among the Yorubas with the Odolaye example, is an age-long African tradition.

4. Alhaji Lamidi Adedibu died in June 2008 in Ibadan, Nigeria. News about his death was carried widely in Nigerian media.

5. An “Oba” is the traditional ruler of a Yoruba community. People easily make references to several songs in which Odolaye praised someObas, i.e., the Alafin of Oyo, Olubadan of Ibadan and Owa Obokun of Ijesaland, who have been on very strong antagonism to the Ooni of Ife on the question of superiority in and chairmanship of the then Oyo State Traditional Council. Oyo state was divided into two separate states, Oyo and Osun, in 1991, by the Babangida administration.


7. Ibid.


9. Ibid.


12. Ibid.


14. Today, there is a kind of notorious (rather rebellious) weed in Yorubaland of Nigeria called “koko Akintola.” This weed is so named because it gives farmers lots of problems. Read Akintola: the Man, for a full story of how and why some Yoruba alleged that this former Premier of the Western region was a betrayer of the Yorubas.


16. Ibid.


ORATURE AS SOURCE FOR RECONSTRUCTING HEROES’ DRESS IN ANCIENT ILE-IFE

Tunde M. Akinwumi

INTRODUCTION

A n old Yoruba saying speculates that it will be futile to seek the unraveling of mysterious surrounding the early history of Ile-Ife.¹ This notwithstanding, the quest for further insight into the history and culture of ancient Ile-Ife has not waned.² This chapter attempts to resolve the mystery behind the peculiar dress worn by heroes of the period shortly before and during Odua, a period between the pre-9th century and 12th century C.E.³ Before now, the characteristics of Yoruba heroes have been discussed in several works, but such treatment often glossed over the peculiar dress usually identified with heroes.⁴ For example, the late Chief Obafemi Awolowo is regarded as a hero and people associated him with a special cap and circular rimmed eye-glasses. Similarly, Obatala is associated with white dress and Osun with lavish appearance in metal jewlry.⁵

Searching more carefully, one could detect other heroes with peculiar modes of dress. These characteristics may have either been developed for them or divinely imposed upon them. This Chapter, therefore, illuminates the factors and elements underpinning the uniqueness of the mode of dress of Oke Ajibise, Sonponno and Orunmila, and discusses their dress symbolism and the benefit of their being worn by relating them to their socio-political environs and the development of clothing production in ancient Ile-Ife.
The clue to the secret of their dress life is found in orature. The choice of orature is appropriate for this work. Orature is rich, dense and usually full of historical nuggets. However, the choice is not without its problems. Granted that the myths, legends, chants and recitals make copious reference to social and cultural events and activities which occurred many centuries ago, including stories of origins reflecting dress history and clothing tradition, techniques of production, beliefs, habits, laws and values, the need to collect many of these narratives is critical for the reconstruction of the past. Fortunately, these stories are presented in writings or narratives supplied by local historians, archaeologists, linguists, anthropologists and even art historians. These stories will provide the primary source.

One of the problems associated with the use of this source is that it is difficult to separate myths from facts, especially from the Ifa corpus. One needs a very deep knowledge of the language and dialect to be able to understand the content of the narratives. One of the greatest problems is that orature usually lacks absolute dates of events referred to in these narratives. This, of course, does not mean that the event never occurred. Scholars have developed various methodologies to cope with these inherent problems, such as using written, archaeological and verbal art, visual art, philosophy, linguistic forms and botany for augmenting, cross-checking, clarifying and criticizing these narratives.

Dress, as defined in this chapter, refers to all the items that cover or are attached to and held by the natural body, modifying it through various manipulations. Such body modifications involve manipulation of the skin through painting and decorative scarification, hair manipulations, coverings with fabrics, apparel, jewelry, shoes and various accessories. Ajibise, Sonponno and Orunmila were among members of the elite class with characteristic dress in Ile-Ife. At this juncture, the dress associated with ancient Ile-Ife elite will be better appreciated if we first give a general view of the size of the elite population and what made members of the group to be outstanding to an extent that many of them later became heroes.

The Elite Population and Their Social Roles in Ancient Ife

It would be pretentious at the outset to imagine that one commands enough sources and resources to provide a comprehensive account of the elite population, their social life and their performance in ancient Ile-Ife. Rather an outline is attempted here. Ile-Ife became a hive of greater activity when Oduduwa emerged as a new political head during a period believed to be between the 9th and 12th centuries C.E. It has been established that he started a new political, social, economic and religious system which has endured until modern times.
This was after he launched a successful attack against the weak administration of Obatala and his team. He came from Oke Ora (Ora Hill), a place on the way to Ilesha. His success was made possible because, among other things, the then thirteen Ife communities were not united in resisting Oduduwa’s forces who had better military technology.\(^\text{10}\)

In the attempt to reposition Ile-Ife as a regional power, Oduduwa re-organized various indigenous institutions. Among other reforms, he made the autochthonous chiefs subservient to him, assigned religious titles which allowed them to appropriate the land of Ife and also allotted secular duties. They were allowed to settle in their compounds (this was inclusive of those meant for professional title-holders)\(^\text{11}\) while he concentrated on the expansion of the city.

During this period, Ile-Ife became not the only first centralized polity in Yorubaland, it developed into a great commercial centre in the region. The territorial limit of the then pre-Oduduwa Ile-Ife was probably what today is the eastern and northeastern part of the present town, or Moore to be precise. He expanded it to include parts of Ilare, Ilode, Okerewe and Iremo.\(^\text{12}\) The first urban market, Oja Ejigbomekun often mentioned in oral traditions was established then.\(^\text{13}\) As a means of protecting the city and its population from invasion, city-walls were created as far back as 960 C.E.\(^\text{14}\)

It has been hypothetically presented that trade routes were developed from Ile-Ife linking the Niger-Benue and the forest with the sea board.\(^\text{15}\) Archaeological sources\(^\text{16}\) and oral traditions\(^\text{17}\) confirm the characteristics and potential of Ile-Ife as a place of agricultural activity. The manufacturing achievement was, however, in the field of metal casting, glass bead making, clay work including potsherd pavement terracing and other art and craft industries.\(^\text{18}\) With all these, Ile-Ife acted as a magnet drawing in warriors, craftsmen, artists and adventurers of all kinds, in the aftermath of which Ife emerged as a city of prosperous population, and full of elites.\(^\text{19}\)

At this time, the city already had the sixteen elders (16 Oọye) who were the autochthonous elite. Oral tradition states that they ‘descended’ with Oduduwa to Ile-Ife. In essence, they were on hand at the inception of Oduduwa’s government. Ademakinwa and Obayemi provide a roll-call of them. They were Orunmila, Obatala, Oluorogbo, Obameri, Oreeluere, Obasin, Obagede, Ogun, Obamakin, Obawinni, Aje, Erisije, Olose, Alajo and Esidale.\(^\text{20}\)

The elite who were on the side of Oduduwa included his wives. They were Olokun, favourite but childless wife and the wealthiest woman of her time; Osara, poor but blessed with many children; Omitoto–Jasan, Y eyemolu and Atiba. Among his assistants were Obameri, the war-general who rose against Obatala, Obagede who was the latter’s head messenger and Obalufon, the eldest son of Oduduwa who succeeded him as the Ooni.
Another group of elite lived there. The *Odu Ifa* narrative, *Irosun Obara* reveals the migration of thirteen waves of migration of 401 ‘rare heads’ to Ife at the time of its expansion. They were known as *orisa (awon ori ti a sa)*, the ‘selected brains.’ They were also called 401 wise people who knew about the establishment of Ile-Ife (*imole; eniti-o-mo-ipe or okanle-ninwo irunmole*). Obayemi has suggested that these 401 ‘orisa,’ ‘imole’ were most likely professionals or ideas-men and women on full time basis or otherwise whose activities must have been vital to the industrial, commercial and intellectual development of the new polity, and that the outstanding practitioners were deified or made heroes later.

The following were some of the elite whose outstanding service to, or prominence in Ile-Ife, earned them hero status and deification after their death:

1. Orunmila (Agbonmiregun) personified divination or science.
2. Ogun personified metallurgy.
3. Aje stood for commerce (or wealth).
4. Elesije is described as Physician.
5. Egungun is described in Odu Ose-Rosun as the founder of ceremonials relating to the remembrance and celebration of the dead.
6. Eluku is recorded in Odu Oturupon-Meji as renowned spiritualist who protected infants from *abiku* (born-to-die) syndrome.
7. Oke, a young philanthropist is described in Odu Eji-Ogbe.
8. Agemo, a renowned spiritualist is shown in Odu Oyeku-sa.
9. Osun, female paediatrician/spiritualist is celebrated in Odu Ose Tura and Odu Ogundase.
10. Sonponno is described in Odu Obara-Otua as a renowned herbalist who always controlled the spread and cure of smallpox.
11. Osanyin who is shown in Odu Ogunda meji stood for pharmacy.
12. Osoosi personified hunting and archery as described in Odu Ose Okanran.
13. Sango Ajuwon personified terrorism in Ife social life and the story is shown in Odu Oyeku-Meji and Okanran-Meji.
14. Ijoriwo (Moore), a renowned social crusader of lineage cohesion and family identity protection in Ife urban life. Her role is described in Odu Ogbe-Yeku.

Oral tradition asserts that there was a spate of envy, bickering and unhealthy rivalry among these men and women. Orunmila reported various and separate events involving confrontations among members of this group. For example, there were report of confrontation between Orunmila and many other *orisa.* Sango
Ajuwon (i.e. the Ile-Ife Sango not Oyo Alaafin Sango who adopted the former’s attributes in the sixteenth century) and the other orisa and Sango and Ogun. In the same vein, Esu and Ogun competed with each other for attention.

In spite of the spate of squabbles and quarrels they had, many distinguished themselves at various fora and at specific times by wearing certain peculiar dress items which were well known to the Ile-Ife populace. As earlier stated, the dress items were either developed for their wearing or were divinely imposed upon them. The uniqueness of the dress worn by Oke Ajibise, Sonponno and Orunmila is considered next in terms of the following:

(a) their social background and the emergence of dress (what was the context of the emergence of dress?)
(b) dress production and source of procurement (what was the state of local technology producing it and whether it was imported?)
(c) dress design features and symbolism (what were the design elements and their significance to the wearer and its beholders?)

**Oke Ajibise’s Dress**

His actual name was Ladeokin Ajibise. He was very popular, jovial, and wealthy; a man of the people and a philanthropist. He provided for the poor and had many friends. However, Ajibise had many enemies as many people paid back his extreme philanthropist stance with ingratitude. This situation is reflected in Yoruba saying: *bi ore ba po a di ibi* (showing exceeding kindness to people usually turns evil eventually). He escaped many assassination attempts but was eventually killed. The burial site miraculously turned into a hill (*oke*). The case of a hill formation at his burial site made news in Ile-Ife and surrounding areas, and Ajibise became more popular. Consequently, he was nicknamed Oke (meaning hill). Anywhere there was a hill in Yorubaland was thought in the Yoruba belief system to be a place inhabited by Ajibise’s spirit. Because Ajibise was socially and economically successful, he liked appearing distinguished at various Ile-Ife events. His praise name (*oriki*) associated him with wearing an exclusive set of traditional hand-woven fabrics (*aso ofi*) having stripe patterns and thus he literally enveloped himself in wealth (Fig. 5.1). He was also linked with apparel made of novel fabrics especially those with a glossy surface. These definitely are the clothes of the great as reflected in the following praise name (*oriki*):

Oke Ladeokin Ajibise
Oku erin ti i ba araba leru
Oke Ladeokin a bi aso kola
Oke Ladeokin elewu mona mona
Oke Ladeokin elewu mona mona
The remains of an elephant which creates fear in *araba* (a large African tree)

Oke Ladeokin Ajibise

- wearer of dress fabrics with stripe pattern
- wearer of highly glossy fabrics

Figure 5.1 Oke Ajibise’s Dress

*Ajibise’s characteristic mode of dress in c. ninth century included the body draping toga of stripe patterns (aso onikola).* Credit: Tunde M. Akinwumi, 2008.
An inspection of sculptural depictions of an Ife monarch and wife dated between the 12th and 15th century C.E. shows that they were dressed in draped fabrics. The figures provide a base for assessing fabric/dress technology in Ife at this time. Willett’s report on Ife archaeology in relationship with dress on these two figures shows the following: that broad looms for weaving wide cloth had been developed as well as narrow strips from narrow loom; that clothing worn by these figures was evidently of cloth with hems sewn round while evidence of embroidery crafts had been established. Plain woven dress fabric production had also been instituted.

The stripe pattern is a part of plain weave structure allowing two series of threads to be employed in the construction of fabrics. Textile materials with stripe patterns may have been evolved at Ile-Ife this time as a novel fabric culminating in Ajibise blazing the trail in its adoption. For Ajibise to be associated with *aso kola* in the praise poem (*oriki*) suggests that he must have had a wardrobe full of a nuance of the stripe patterned cloths and colors. More so this was a period, as earlier mentioned in the list of elites, when Aro was being celebrated as a master textile dyer at Ile-Ife.

Ajibise was also noted in the praise-poem for dressing in highly glossy fabrics (*elewu mono mono*). How he acquired this set of dress during his time is difficult to explain. For example, a report on Ife archaeology was silent on the available textile materials used during this period, whether it was of cotton, raffia fibre or others. It was also silent on the surface quality of the fabrics suspected to have been used, whether of glossy or rough texture. Archaeological research at Igbo-Ukwu has revealed evidence of a number of textiles based on fibers other than cotton, in use in ancient Nigeria in the period c.700 to c.1050 C.E. Archaeology in Benin shows evidence of the use of a mixture between cotton and raffia in the thirteenth century. It has been speculated that a diffusion of cotton growing and production came from Mali to other places in West Africa with Kano and Borno areas first experiencing cotton trade in the fourteenth century. Consequently, raffia textile materials (*odun*) were preponderantly produced before the thirteenth century which was the period focused on in this chapter.

On the other hand, there is a high probability that this distinctive fabric with bronze-like sheen (*ewu monomo*) was produced locally. Woven fabrics with shining fibers using flosses derived from silk-cotton trees (*owu egun*) were produced locally. Alaafin Agboluaje appeared in this dress fabrics made of *owu egun* at a public event in the 1760s. It was reported that the dress produced a high glossy effect to the great applause of the audience at the occasion.
many variants of this fabric (*aso komina*, *aso monomono*) were exclusively produced from *owo egun* for Ajibise at Ife because of his great wealth.

**Sonponno’s Dress**

Three different narratives are presented on Sonponno with various interpretations. The first narrative in *Osaturapọn* from *Odu Ifa* literature shows Sonponno as generous and humane in disposition. He touched the lives of many people at Ile-Ife. In due course, his beneficiaries turned against him. As earlier stated, this situation is reflected in the Yoruba saying: *bi ore ba po a di ibi*. Sonponno became grossly sullen from this period because he was publicly jeered at and was no longer appreciated by members of the public at various events.

Sonponno sought divine counsel from Orunmila on how to counteract the public nuisance he had silently borne. Orunmila demanded certain sacrifices involving the provision of some materials. They included a set of small boxer shorts (*sokoto penpe*), a small tunic (*ewu penpe*), two hundred tiny gourds (*ado*) and Rosewood tint (*osun*). After the demand had been met, Orunmila asked Sonponno to attach the tiny gourds onto the tunic and wear it thereafter along with the small boxer shorts. Besides this, he was instructed to smear *osun* all over these dress items and walk across many streets in the city at a particular day of the hot and dry season (Fig. 5.2). He carried out this instruction. The result was that as many people including his enemies who beheld his spectacular walk were magically afflicted with smallpox (*igbono*). This affliction also known as *olode* means he who walked across the streets. In other words, it denotes he who made the symbolic and historic trek.

Smallpox virus is characterized by swellings on the skin leaving tiny scars on the face and body. The smallpox epidemic at Ile-Ife got to an alarming proportion and it attracted the concern of many well-meaning people. Orunmila was again consulted but this time on how to salvage the arising bad state of public health. Many people had already died from the epidemics. Orunmila, who knew the origin of this problem, provided the solution. The victims were referred to Sonponno for treatment.

According to this narrative, Sonponno applied many curative materials on his patients including on Sango (i.e Sango Ajuwon of Ile-Ife, not Sango of Oyo). The curative features included fermented palm wine (*emu*), palm oil (*epo*), honey (*oyin*), snail fluid (*omi igbin*) and Rosewood powder (*osun*). The curative potency of these items for treating and controlling the disease in the pre-literate Yoruba communities has been medically confirmed. The fermented palm wine is alcoholic. It disinfects the skin. Palm oil which contains vitamin A has not only a protective function but it also enhances the skin. The honey has little bacterial elements for healing wounds, burns and other skin diseases.
when applied directly on the skin. Although snail water contains urine and other fluid, it has elements which coagulate blood when bleeding takes place. In essence, it stops bleeding and douses pain arising from smallpox affliction. Rosewood powder is an indigenous powder which also has medicinal effects. Like the Western-derived medicated powder, *osun* soothes the skin when it is applied particularly in hot weather. Consequently, Sonponno became a specialist in the management and treatment of smallpox. Many victims recovered.

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Figure 5.2 Sonponno’s Dress

*Sonponno’s characteristic mode of dress in ancient Ife. The main items worn included sokoto pempe (boxer shorts), ewu pempe (small tunic) onto which were attached two hundred tiny charmed gourds (ado), a neck lace having a magical label.* Credit: Tunde M. Akinwumi, 2008.
The narrative confirms that Sonponno thereafter repeated the symbolic trek at Ile-Ife on a yearly basis. This was done to control the spread of the virus during the dry hot season. He performed this act up till the time of his death.40

The content of the first narrative needs be examined and interpreted. Sonponno’s dress in his first outing could be interpreted as an outward expression of a retaliatory assignment against Sonponno’s adversaries and other people in Ile-Ife. The boxer shorts and simple tunic were meant to aid his swift movement during the trek and they could also be associated with free movement during public fight as it was the practice in the immediate past among the Yoruba. The tiny gourds were amulets and charms prepared either to achieve personal success or to cause the downfall of perceived enemies.41 The appearance of Sonponno in osun red painted attire seems to convey danger to those who beheld him.

The second narrative on the emergence of Sonponno at Ile-Ife differs slightly from the above one. Beier’s collection of Yoruba narratives presents him as being cheated in the sharing of his father’s property leading him to take to arms.42 As he shot his arrows to the four corners of the “world,” the smallpox virus spread. Besides, as Sonponno forgave the co-sharers of his father’s property, the disease varnished from the “world” (i.e. from Ile-Ife) and he later became known as Obaluaiye, the king who hurts the world.43 This can be translated to mean the man who shook Ile-Ife with smallpox.

The third narrative acknowledges Sonponno’s appellation while providing further details on his dress features as stated below:

Babalu-Aye, who brings leprosy and also cures it, the god of infectious disease in Yorubaland, walks slowly in, leading an imaginary mule; he is a sickly, afraid of flies and insects, and whenever anyone comes near him he warns him by shaking the little placard that hangs around his neck as a sign of infection.44

Some salient points emerge from the foregoing story. Sonponno had a necklace with a badge. He was an underdog who vented his spleen on the society by cursing smallpox on the people and paradoxically healing same people afterwards.

Two of the three narratives provided above on Sonponno depict him as a wicked person who sought to avenge the evil that many people in Ile-Ife did to him by inflicting them with smallpox virus. He could not have been made a hero after his death if not for his humanitarian medical gesture to the people of Ife. Consequently, it is fair reconstructing the image of Sonponno differently from what has been presented above. One could infer from the narratives that smallpox inflicting has been an age-long one. This is then to suggest that it is most probable Sonponno bravely blazed the trail in the cure and control of the spread of this disease during his own days and that he worked hand in hand with Orun-
milasu who decided on the type of community ritual sacrifice to be performed in order to control the virus. The choice was that Sonponno should wear a special charmed dress capable of magically warding off the virus as he walked through the nook and cranny of Ile-Ife. Sonponno performed this act annually besides treating the afflicted in his house and in their houses.

Some years after his death, he was deified as a god (orisa), a king (Obaluaye) and a hero for being a health crusader and “doctor” against smallpox. After his death, his votaries continued the propagation of his public health role all over Yorubaland. However, the role played by his votaries during the early part of the twentieth century seems not to have been appreciated by the British administration in Yorubaland as the cult was declared illegal in 1917. It was said that its members were deliberately spreading smallpox in order to inherit the property of their victims.45 This was a situation that Sonponno did not encounter during his lifetime as recorded in the narratives just analyzed.

Sonponno’s ewu pempe and sokoto pempe were likely produced at Ile-Ife. The boxer shorts (sokoto pempe) were tailored using needles. It forms a part of the body draping dress ensemble earlier discussed on the two sculptural figures.46 To produce the tunic (ewu pempe), the shape of double square was cut from the length of a fabric. The head opening was cut and the ends of the fabrics fastened on each side of the waist with two straps. This production process was probably the Yoruba’s established first stage at producing tailored torso apparels as done similarly by the Greeks in the First Century B.C.E. The Greek called their own ewu pempe Doric Chiton.47 Rosewood tint (osun) was smeared on the ewu and sokoto pempe just as two hundred charmed tiny gourds (ado) were thereafter attached to the former.

**Orunmila’s Dress**

Orunmila is another name for Ifa divinity. He was a diviner blessed with the spirit of discerning a man’s past, present and future. In other words, he had the unique advantage of knowing the destiny of everyone including those of other orisa for whom he also divined. According to Abiodun, Orunmila who knows the secret of the power and skills of all orisa, possesses also the attributes of these other orisa.48 Because Orunmila lived during the era of the first Ile-Ife monarch Oduduwa, he was a palace associate to the former, as a counselor. As a seer, he was consulted by the low and the high in the Ife community. Because of his extraordinary talent as an embodiment of wisdom and as a great philosopher, he became very popular. In addition, Orunmila earned the respect and confidence of all having been involved in healing psychological and physiological ailments among numerous people who consulted him. In the course of these activities, the Ifa priest became materially very wealthy in society.49
As mentioned before, he was one of the earlier settlers of Ile-Ife, having lived there before the arrival of Oduduwa. He could be considered as an historian of Ile-Ife since many events which occurred in Ile-Ife at its dawn and later were preserved in Ifa literature (i.e in Odu records). He initially resided at Oke-Igeti before relocating to Oke-Itase, hence his neighbours here remembered him as Baba kukuru Oke-Itase (the short elder from Oke-Itase).

When Orunmila went out on appointment to provide divine assistance, how was he usually dressed? How did he come about these dress items? Glimpses of his dress could be gleaned from the record of the last annual festival organized by Orunmila. The festival attracted the presence of his children and
many elites all over Yorubaland. As observed in Ifa Odu Iwori Meji narrative, Olowo—the most prosperous, successful and popular child of Orunmila went to appropriate his father’s dress before the latter’s arrival at the venue. He appeared haughtily before Orunmila in a toga made of raffia fabric (aso odun), holding an osun walking stick made of brass, shod in a pair of brass sandals (bata ide) combined with a crown (ade ide), arguing that he had right to wear his father’s type of dress in as much he Olowo was also an authority by right. Orunmila became enraged and took exception to Olowo’s behaviour which denoted rejection of Orunmila’s authority. He snatched away the osun walking stick held by Olowo, symbolizing the seizure of authority from Olowo. According to Abimbola, the filial disobedience of Olowo led to Orunmila’s untimely death.53 Going deep into this matter, one wonders why the primary issue of dress appropriation could lead to Orunmila’s death. It can be deduced from this record that during the Ifa annual festival, Orunmila clad in a crown and sandals made of brass, wore a toga made of odun (woven fabric made of raffia threads) and held a walking stick known as osungaga (Fig. 5.3).

It is possible to reconstruct another peculiar way that Orunmila dressed himself up particularly for his daily routine. Glimpses of this could be observed from the type of dress items donated by his followers as grave goods at his burial ceremony. The donation of grave goods was very significant up till the last century in Yorubaland. It was the belief among the Yoruba that the donated grave goods, often fabrics/dress items, were to be worn by the “dead” during his journey to heaven and when there. Consequently, the following were donated at Orunmila’s burial: 420 aso (cloths), 1460 ewu (apparels) and 164 asibori (headcoverings).54 What is being questioned here is the donation of asibori (headcoverings). If headcoverings had not been part and parcel of Orunmila’s dress while he was alive, the items would not have been donated as grave goods. The implication here is that Orunmila appeared most likely in asibori during his daily routine. Elsewhere it was indicated that Obatala (an Orunmila’s contemporary) also had gele headgear combined with red parrot feathers as his characteristic headcovering.55 In essence, it would appear that Orunmila dressed in asibori, odun toga, osun walking stick, apo ifa (bag for keeping Ifa divination instruments such as opele, ibo, iroke, opon-Ifa) and, perhaps, clog sandals for his daily routine (Fig. 5.4).

The walking stick (osungaga) has two sets of slim bell shapes that are welded to the staff and at the top is a pigeon form. The Odu Ejiogbe narrative shows that the walking stick was divined for use by Orunmila as a source for healing and for bringing honor and authority to Ifa.56 It is the symbol of Orunmila’s authority and power.57 The brass crown and sandals were parts of the symbol of leadership and eminence. Although the brass crown and brass sandals were very expensive, they were still produced locally for the priest-rulers who admin-
istered their areas of jurisdiction at Ile-Ife and elsewhere before the emergence of Oduduwa monarchial administration. As earlier stated, Ile-Ife had achieved great feats in the metal casting field and it was therefore possible to produce art objects like brass crowns and sandals for prominent wealthy kings and rulers.\(^{58}\)

Slags of brass were imported to brass casting centers in ancient Nigeria from North Africa through the Sahara Desert.\(^{59}\)

As mentioned above, textile materials made of raffia yarns (\textit{odun}) dominated the dress fabric fashion of this period. The \textit{odun} may have been selected for creating \textit{asibori} too. As a priest, Orunmila may have, in all probability, adopted \textit{asibori} for covering and protecting his head (\textit{ori}) from spiritual attack. This was more so because the Yoruba conceive \textit{ori} as an individual’s own guard-

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.7\textwidth]{figure5.4.jpg}
\caption{Orunmila’s Dress II}
\end{figure}

\textit{Items worn in ancient Ile-Ife for his daily routine included asibori head-covering, odun toga, a walking stick, osungaga, apo ifa (bag for keeping Ifa instruments) and clog sandals.}

Credit: Tunde M. Akinwumi, 2008.
ian and personal divinity.\textsuperscript{60} \textit{Asibori} may have also been worn as Orunmila’s identity insignia. After Orunmila’s death, the Yoruba chose and conferred on him the leadership of all the \textit{orisa}, hence the appellation of \textit{Obarisa} (the king of all deities).\textsuperscript{61}

\section*{Conclusion}

The three heroes analyzed here rose to socio-economic, political and religious prominence as a result of their recognized roles in the rise of Ife culture. This was likely between the ninth and twelfth century C.E. It has been shown that there existed among the elite of the time envy, bickering and unhealthy rivalry. This notwithstanding, many of them, particularly those analyzed in this chapter, distinguished themselves in public life by the dress they wore. In this respect, stripe patterned cloths and highly glossy dress cloths were associated with Oke Ajibise while Sonponno’s dress was a combination of a charmed tunic and a boxer short. Orunmila’s own was distinctly a combination of large and broad body wrapper cloth, a staff, handbag and brass sandals and a crown; another being a simple head kerchief, body wrapper cloth, staff and simple sandals. The dress items had associations with status identification, healing and spiritual functions. The three men stood tall with their dress in Ile-Ife. Their dress items, resplendent with various motifs, were symbols of wealth, power and leadership.

The three men have been presented in the chronicles as leaders who were wealthy, powerful and status-conscious. It would be claimed from the narratives that the people’s response to their distinctive dress ranged between admiration, bitterness, jealousy, envy and hatred. Oke and Orunmila appeared to be victims of more of envy, jealousy, hatred and bitterness than of admiration. The antagonists’ reactions, as just indicated, may have contributed to the remote cause of Oke and Orunmila’s mysterious deaths. The people’s response to Sonponno’s dress was also more or less hated because of the perceived power of terror and death that it unleashed on them. In essence, therefore, the hero’s dress tended to be more of a snare than an advantage to its beholder and to the hero himself.

Many factors combine to influence a designer while designing exclusive wear for prominent leaders. They include inspirations based on shape, color, line, texture, balance and at times the incorporation of design features from the sacred and the secular.\textsuperscript{62} In the chronicle, these heroes’ dress were mostly presented as being divinely and magically inspired, thus showing the relationship between magic and dress, and the influence of magic at that time among the people of Ile-Ife. Magico-religious considerations therefore influenced dominantly the dress designs of the heroes analyzed.
The purpose of the chronicle is also to reveal the uniqueness which a hero’s dress had with its materials cost and new ideas. In this respect, the heroes wore brass sandals, a rare form of dress, the material for which was imported to the brass casting centers of ancient Nigeria from North Africa. Besides, the stripe-patterned fabric of Oke was a new woven design concept, and so also was the flash-like surface of his dress. This seems to have been extraordinary to the people of this time.

One observes from the chronicle that the dress items are art objects which serve certain functions. Dress items as art forms have a unique power to create public opinion, to radiate the wearer’s meaning and sometimes transform ordinary time and ordinary space into an extraordinary event—one of those intense moments in human existence that combine pageantry with mystery and spectacle with order. All these were manifested in the use of dress possessed by Oke, Sonponno and Orunmila.

All in all, these men’s achievements in ancient Ile-Ife contributed to their being made heroes later while their unique garb, an outward sign of spiritual power, wealth and leadership, may have one way or another attracted a snare to their performance of public roles. This notwithstanding, the unique garb served as an additional hallmark of these heroes’ identity. The study has contributed to our understanding of the art history of Yoruba elite costume in particular and African leadership art in general using oral tradition as a source for reconstruction.

Notes

1. The Yoruba old saying reflects this doubt thus: A ki iri idi okun/A ki iri idi osa/Beni a ki yio r’idi/Itan isedale Ife-Ooadaye/We cannot unravel the origins of the ocean (We cannot know the genesis of the sea/So shall men not be able to unravel the mystery of the history of Ile-Oodaye). See, Ade Obayemi, “Ancient Ile-Ife: Another Cultural Historical Reinterpretation,” Journal of Historical Society of Nigeria, 9, No. 4 (1979): 151.

2. The unending list of publication on Ile-Ife is exemplified in many works especially in Janet Stanley and Richard Olaniyan, Ife, the Holy City of the Yoruba: An Annotated Bibliography, (Ile-Ife: University of Ife Press, 1982).

Orature as Source for Reconstructing Heroes’ Dress in Ancient Ile-Ife


8. See endnote 3 above.


13. Ibid., 40.


25. ibid., 44-48.
27. Falola, “Yoruba Writers,” 170.
29. ibid., 165.
36. ibid., 319.
37. Interview, as observed in expanded narrative of Odu Osaturopon, supplied by Chief Ifagbade Odunyi, Araba Batoro (Supreme Babalawo) Offin-Sagamu, 6 May 2006; Abimbola Fasesan, son Apena of Oyo Babalawo, Asipa Oyo, 6 Sept. 2004.
39. Interview with Dr. Mike Enokhile, Medical Centre, Yaba College of Technology, Lagos, 18 January 2008; Dr. G.G. Awosanya, Associate Professor, Department of Radiology, University of Lagos Teaching Hospital, Lagos, 12 December 2007.
40. See endnote 37 above.
42. Refer to Ulli Beier, *Yoruba Myths*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 44.
43. ibid.
There are contemporary Nigerian ethnic groups which adorn themselves principally with broad long body covering fabrics. This is draped over the body leaving one of the shoulders open. It was an ancient dress with its associated pair of shorts. It was therefore easy for a smaller pair of shorts to be produced for Sonponno from the existing model so as to enhance fast movement during his historic trek.


Adeoye, *Ighagbo ati Esin Yoruba*, 175.


Abimbola, *Sixteen Great Poems*, 52.


Finery: Exquisite Clothes to Make and Treasure (London: Mills and Boon 1979), 17, 18.

THE ENDURING LEGACY OF YORÙBÁ ORATURE: ETHNOGRAPHIC FINDS AND ADAMU-ORISA RITUAL PERFORMANCE

Ademola Omobewaji Dasylva

INTRODUCTION

It is neither my intention to be dragged into the age-long controversy on the appropriateness of the term “orature”, nor am I in my characteristic mood to argue, as it were, the apparent contradiction in the term “oral literature.” I believe Isidore Okpewho and a few others have done justice to that aspect, perfectly. Simply put, orature is synonymous with oral literature: an oral (literary) performance. And in the context intended here, it is a form of collective expression and/or a celebration of culture-related communal experiences which give voice to loric values that are rooted in the philosophy of a predominantly non-literate indigenous society.

As I have tried to explain elsewhere, orature embodies the different hues and shades of color of shared experiences on the canvas of cultural expression. In orature and verbal behavior (or language), Roman Jakobson argued that the “poetic function” is most predominant and central. The poetic function of language is the specialized use of language (or communication) in a way that emphasizes the message for its own sake. The term “message” as used here, means
the material substance and linguistic form of the utterance. I would like to go a little further to add that for the purpose of this study, meaning is as fundamental to communication as the means or medium. For example, the oral history of a people has two distinct components: the semiotization of its ethnographic finds which are the basis of its materiality or substance; and the verbal rendition, the narratology. They constitute veritable means of verifying documentation in communication, by means of the linguistic form and the material substance.

**THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF EKO-LAGOS**

A Yoruba coastal settlement, Eko¹, southwestern Nigeria, was visited by some Portuguese traders in 1472. They named the settlement Lagos, after a sea port in Portugal. Lagos has since grown to become the chief sea port and the largest mega-city which, until December 1991 when the nation’s capital moved to Abuja, had served as Nigeria’s capital and seat of the federal government. Four principal islands make up Lagos, all of which are connected by bridges: the old city which serves as the commercial district on western Lagos island; Ikoyi island which is situated east of Lagos island and joined to it by a landfill; Apapa, the chief port district is located on the mainland; residential Victoria island; and the industrialized Iddo island. In 1967, important mainland suburbs, which include Ebute-Metta, Yaba, Surulere, Ajegunle, Somolu, Agege, Mushin, and Ikeja, were incorporated as part of the city. *(Encarta Premium 2007)*

As a result of its strategic geographic location, and the fact that the National Museum is sited in the city, coupled with its rich Yoruba ethnographic finds—especially ancestral antiquities from Egypt *en route* Ile-Ife² (the cradle of the Yoruba race) to Isheri Olofin—Lagos remains the principal economic and cultural centre of the country. Regardless of the flippant statement, often made by non-indigenes, that “Lagos is no man’s land,” or that “Lagos is everyman’s city,” the city is predominantly Yoruba. Chief N.A.O. Dosumu, the Paramount Apena of Lagos, in his “foreword” to Chief Banji Adeseko’s *Lagos State University Ethnographic Museum & The Lake of Mystery*, a project workbook, “Lagos island was discovered by Aromire, the son of Ogunfunminire- the incumbent founder of Lagos.” He explains further, “Lagos belongs to... the Aworis, the early settlers, and they occupied the mainland of Lagos-Agege, Isheri Olofin, down to Iddo and Lagos Island.” It is, therefore, predictable that almost every aspect of Yoruba orature exists in Lagos. Although some non-Yoruba settlers do display, periodically, fragments of their tribal dances, masquerades, songs, etc., at social functions such as traditional marriage ceremonies, end-of-year activities, organized national and international trade fares, etc., all of which add cultural color to the cosmopolitanity of the city, they neither approximate to, nor are they sufficient to transfer ownership of Lagos from the descendants of Ogunfunminire to “everybody.”
As a corollary to the above, the significance of Yoruba oriki came to the fore in 2002, when the issue of the true owners of Lagos came up in the case Aromire family (plaintiffs) vs. Ibrahim Taiwo Ajomagberin and the Osere Odokun family (defendants), the late monarch of Lagos, Oba Adeyinka Oyekan, the Lagos State Attorney-General and Commissioner for Justice, and others (co-defendants). What was being contested in the High Court of Lagos State was whether the nominee of the Oba of Lagos, who the monarch wanted to fill the Aromire of Lagos’ vacant stool, had any right to the stool. The Aromire family’s declaration was that the Aromires consisted of only three ruling houses namely, Oluya, Meku and Adesina, and as such, any nominee who did not belong to the Aromire chieftaincy family was a product of illegal acts of commission, and therefore unacceptable. The Oba’s nominee belonged to the Osere Odokun family (co-defendants in the suit), the Aromires argued, not any of the three ruling families of the Aromire lineage, and as such, the Oba’s nominee could not claim any right whatsoever to the vacant stool.

What is of interest to this essay is not so much the facts of the case but the role that orature was made to play as the final arbiter in the scenario. Kayode Sofola’s chambers, solicitors and counsels to the Aromires (the plaintiffs) formally requested for the appropriate orthography, the correct English translation and the ethnographic interpretation of an attached 20 line-Oriki of the Osere Odokun family. The then Head of Linguistics and African Languages Department of Nigeria’s premier University of Ibadan, Professor Adedotun Ogundeji, was represented by Dr. Duro Adeleke as a principal witness at the designated Lagos High Court. His duty was to read at the floor of the court the department’s translation and correct interpretation of the oriki which traced the family of the Oba’s nominee to Offa town in Kwara State, and not to the Aromire chieftaincy family. The intervention of Yoruba oral history, and in this context, “orature,” came in handy to douse the controversy, finally.

Oral accounts had it that (Prince) Olofin Ogunfunminire was said to have left Ile-Ife palace in the late 13th century, not knowing exactly where his journey would terminate. His purpose was to found a kingdom for himself. A floating bowl containing a prepared sacrifice on a river served as his “compass”. Olofin Ogunfunminire had followed closely the floating ritual bowl in a raffia-canoe, using a paddle also made of raffia palms, in the direction of the river into the Atlantic Ocean. He had problems on the way with the raffia-paddle which broke, and as such, had to use his bare hands. Finally, the floating bowl stopped at a location now known as Iseri Olofin, and sank. There Olofin Ogunfunminire decided to settle permanently. It informs his oriki:

*Omo ka fi owo wa*
*Ka fi aje wa,*
Ka fi ogedegede owo wa
Titi de Iseri Olofin ...
(Chief Banji Adeseko, “Journey to Isheri Olofin”)

Offspring of the great one that paddled with hands,
He who rowed with a paddle,
He it was who paddled with bare hands
Till he reached Iseri Olofin ... (My translation)

The oral source had it further that when Olofin Ogunfunminire finally landed at Iseri Olofin, great hunter that he was, he shot a magical “gun” into the air and an elephant suddenly appeared; the elephant slumped and died as a result of fatal the wound it sustained from the magical ‘gun-shot’. When the elephant was opened up, a live baby elephant was found in it. Olofin Ogunfunminire nurtured it to maturity; tamed it, and began to ride on it. It informed the Oro-wood carvings, (i) mother-elephant (pronounced Eri in Awori-Yoruba dialect, dated 1849) and (ii) child-elephant (Ole), all at Iseri Olofin. The carvings offer a visual artistic impression of this aspect of the Aworis’ oral history. Beside the oral evidence provided by his oriki, there is an Abora woodcarving, dated 1847, showing the Aworis’ genealogical family-tree. Also at Iseri there is the tomb of one of the Olofins of Iseri who was buried around 1650, in a sitting position, symbolizing his majestic reign. His guard was sacrificed by decapitation to ease the passage of the late monarch, reminiscent of the “Abobaku tradition in the ancient Oyo. A small hole was left for his soul to escape. An Abora woodcarving of the head of the guard dating 1831 also adorns the museum.

Besides the Olofin title which is common to Ile-Ife and ancient Bini (Edo/ Benin), there are visual representations of the historical connection between indigenous Lagos and Bini. For example, there is an Old Bini bronze-work (dated 1805), of Olofin Ogunfunminire’s mysterious cat: “mysterious,” in the sense that the magical cat commemorates the transformation of Ile-Ife wizards into cats at Iseri by means of superior magical power.

**Yoruba Ancestry Traceable to Ancient Egypt**

The Lagos State University Ethnographic Museum, the very first of its kind in the country, is rich in artifacts, archeological finds, etc., which offer proven evidences of the origin of the Yoruba race, traceable to Oduduwa, and his epic journey to Ile-Ife from Egypt. For example, there is the brass cast head of Pharaoh Seti I of Egypt (1318-1381B.C.E). It was believed to have been brought to Ile-ife by Oduduwa. It was later brought from Ile-Ife palace to Iseri Olofin and Iddo by Prince Ogunfunminire. Also brought with him from Ile-Ife palace was a magical amulet for invincibility at wars which the ancient Obas
in Ile-Ife used to wear like a pendant on their neck for protection. It belonged to King Kharfre 2560 B.C.E., and was brought from Cairo to Ile-Ife in 1540. The amulet consists of a Pharaoh’s statue sitting “aloof” and “immutable,” on a throne made of a carved image of the Hawk-(Sky-god, Horus).

Another interesting piece housed in the museum is the pre-historic (stone-age) statue made of ivory and stone suspected to be that of Venus, regarded as forerunners of the mother goddess, possessing life-giving power in such places like the classical Greece, ancient Rome and Nubia/Egypt. It is also believed to have been brought by Olofin Ogunfunminire from Ile-Ife.

**SPIRITUALITY OF PERFORMANCE AND SIGNIFICANCE**

I began this study by stating that orature is a form of collective expression and/or celebration of culture-related communal experiences which give voice to loric values that are rooted in the philosophy of a predominantly non-literate (indigenous) society. I must quickly add that orature is characterized by similar generic forms as in written literature: poetry, prose narrative and drama, however in a more dynamic, integrative and interactive sense. Chants or songs, for example, are capable of functions similar to the written poems of a literate culture. Although dramatic elements abound in storytelling and poetic recitals, there are performances that belong exclusively to the drama genre of orature, as is the case in the Adamu-Orisa ‘dramatic’ festival, the obvious difference being largely in form and mode. Again, there are observable peculiar generic features which are that orature has the tendency of drawing attention to its formal and non-formal structures. I shall come back to this shortly. It is in light of the scope of the above working definition that I intend to locate and situate my examination of the Adamu-Orisa/Adimu-Orisa performance, which is a cultural phenomenon peculiar to the people of Isale-Eko, in particular, and to the entire Lagos, more generally.

In most nations of the world including those in Africa, ritual performance informed the possible beginning of the development of drama, as was the case in classical Greece. It is on the strength of this claim that I hope to base my discussion on the festival under discussion, and to examine its possible origin, dramaturgy and psychosocial significance. However, let me quickly correct an impression credited to the great scholar Oyekan Owomoyela, the subject of our celebration in this volume, to the effect that “festivals are social institutions by means of which men satisfy their fun-seeking instinct …” (1971:122). Although this claim seems hardly fallible, that is, to the degree that one takes into consideration, the partitive antecedents in the Dionysian worship in classical Greece; or in Africa, especially in contemporary Nigerian society: the Ojoye-jusu festival at Ode-Irele in Ondo State, which is similar to the ancient Roman feast of
Lupercal, the *Oke’Badan* festival, in Ibadan, in Oyo State; *Edi* festival in Ile-Ife, in Osun State; the Agemo festival of the Ijebus in Ogun State; or the *Udje* festival of the Urhobo of Delta State, Nigeria. However, Owomoyela’s position only reveals half the truth and, as such, risks overgeneralization that may not be sustainable in an absolute sense.

There is hardly any festival anywhere in the world that is not made up of at least two fundamental components, the spiritual and the entertainment. Festivals as the ones identified above are cultural markers of, among other things, transition (from an old year to a new year) and communal purification, fertility rites, rites of passage (as in a funerary, or a community transiting from an old year into a new year), such that when such festivals as are mentioned above permit obscenity, licentious orgies, and the ‘youthful’ participants tend to throw caution to the wind, the very acts constitute a part of the rituals. Human society, according to Femi Osofisan (1978), periodically accumulates a burden of “sins.” These sins are believed to be dangerous not only to its existence but also to its progress and peaceful co-existence. The accumulated sins pose a threat of severance from the umbilical cord that links the society and the ancestral world together. This belief informs the society’s genuine effort at evolving some purification measures capable of ensuring its salvation and continued existence, through seasonal ritual festivals.

The apparent effort on the part of the society at enacting seasonal or annual purification rites for purposes of purging it of all physical and spiritual pollutions that could possibly sever its filial relationship with the ancestors foregrounded the assurance of communal salvation. For example, most if not all of the festivals referred to above have similar intent, purpose, and mode, although the form, theatrical structure and syntax of action may not be exactly the same. Again, the mode of the ritual enactment is as important as the cleansing objectives. Let me illustrate briefly with “Oke’Badan” and “Edi” festivals which share a common purpose of spiritual purification.

While the Chief Priest of the Oke’Badan festival solely performs the ritual, followed by a communal consummation amidst provocative songs, verbal assaults, chants and invectives bordering on obscenities, the “Edi” festival, on the other hand, is a little more involved. The Priest prepares an offering (*ebo*), into which the society’s accumulated sins of the past year are invoked. A selected volunteer-carrier, *Tele*, usually a non-indigene, now dressed in white, is made to carry the offering in a ritual procession through the town into the sacred grove, somewhere near the outskirts of the town. The implication of the carrier or scape-goat role is that by the singular action of shifting the burden of societal sins on to the carrier, he automatically embodies the sins of the society, the sacrificial lamb as it were, that carries away the sins of the (not his) society. As the carrier, *Tele*, moves through the town amidst the mammoth crowd, the
people shout loudly their misfortunes, sins, crimes, diseases and all, praying the carrier to carry away their unwanted lots. “Gbeku lo, gbarun lo!” (carry death away, carry diseases away!). (Ogunba, 1975:103) People would pick pieces of items, paper, empty cans, or whatever little thing they could lay their hands upon, speak their wishes religiously on it, and throw them at the carrier as he trudges on, sweating under the heavy burden of the people’s “sins”. By implication, the carrier is not expected to return from the sacred grove alive.

What is of significance in the scape-goat motif or the notion of transformative performance is the society’s need to feed on a ritual victim who is relatively innocent. It is for this reason that the Tele is a non-native. In Oke’Badan, Edi and other similar festivals, the topicality of societal purgation is extended to include social and political purification. In effect, the community identifies some individuals whose untoward behavior could bring, or have brought, untold hardship to members of the society. As soon as the primary rituals are concluded by the Priest, members of the community, especially the youth, dance and sing round the town. On such occasions, the gathering youth, professional chanters and singers are “licensed” by the enabling tradition to make statements, sing or chant on any issue no matter how obscene, scandalous, slanderous, or libellous. The traditional law permits them to congregate in front of the house(s) of erring members in the community and chant or sing the hitherto “secret” crimes for everybody to hear. The culprit may choose to change for the better, or quit the community altogether. It predicated the birth of satire in the communities where purification rituals are practiced.

What Owomoyela and those critics who share similar views are oblivious of, is that what the ritual cleansing achieves in the spiritual realm through the carrier, the direct verbal assaults through the use of invectives on erring members in the community, and other forms of orgy and obscenity indiscreetly displayed, are also meant to achieve psychosocially. This way, non-literate indigenous Yoruba society was able to rid itself of both spiritual and social pollutants in its conscious effort to promote sanity, harmony, progress and peaceful coexistence. Besides, a critical examination of the spiritualized function of the satiric butt (who although he is widely regarded as an enemy of the society) reveals in a rather complex but interesting sense, his “carrier” status of some sort. In a way, the satirized butt or “victim” conjures a somewhat magical figure of binary opposition and mediation. By virtue of his crimes which are diametrically opposed to the well-being of his community, he is both a spiritual and social pollutant and as such he is a subject of satiric attack, for which he suffers humiliation, ego assassination, and possible ejection from the community.

Again, through this process of “atonement” for the crimes of an individual against the society, the polluting agent becomes a mediating agent chosen by the society for the purpose of purification and rejuvenation of the polluted and
dying society. Soon I shall try to link the relevance of this aspect of the study to the Adamu-Orisa ritual performance.

**Possible Origin of Adamu-Orisa Festival**

Critics’ views about the origin of Adamuorisà are as controversial as they are diverse. But for the pioneering efforts of Joel Adedeji (1973), Bode Osanyin (1983 & 2004), and lately, Adedotun Ogundeji’s incisive comments in his “Foreword” to Bode Osanyin’s *Adamuorisha Play of Lagos: A Study in Ritual Drama* (2004), the origin of Adámu-Orisà would probably have remained shrouded in obscurity. The efforts of these scholars paid off in the sense that they no doubt stemmed the controversies. And because of the conciseness of their contribution, which I find very reliable, their works shall serve as principal sources in this study.

The actual meaning of the prefix of the name of the protagonist-masquerade-actor in the festival, despite all the efforts by critics has rarely been established. Ogundeji (2004: xi), for example, identifies four possibilities: AdámuÜ, one with a broken or open nose; AdímuÜ, one with a blocked nosery (or a derivation from Adimula—that which one holds to ensure prosperity or salvation, that is, considering the benevolence of Adimu-Orisa enjoyed by the worshippers); AdaYaÝmuÜ one who troubles the deity (Rev. J. O. Lucas & Dupe Oduyoye (1983); Oduyoye also suspects that Adamu could possibly have had its origin traced to Adam the first man in Hebrew (Biblical) tradition. This might be a little far-fetched, although if one considers the tradition as one of the cultural relics from the already established link (which I already drew attention to in Part 1) between Yoruba and ancient Greco-Egyptian-Hebrew civilization, perhaps not it is not far-fetched after all. Finally, AdììmuÜ, one who holds the deity. Ogundeji opines that it is easier to corroborate the first two possibilities, that is, Adamu or Adimu, if the evidence provided by the facial mask of the masquerade is anything to go by. Again, I hope to return to this shortly, but first, let us examine the origin of AdámuÜ-Orisà by Joel Adedeji and Bode Osanyin, respectively.

**Joel Adedeji’s Version**

Olugbami, wife of King Addo of Lagos, had no child. Her search for a child took her to an Ijebu Remo village called Ibèfun where she consulted the Ifà oracle and finally had a child after performing some rituals. The child’s name was Kuti who later became ruler of Lagos as Ologunkutere starting in 1749.

When King Ologunkutere was later informed about his “miraculous” birth, he ordered that the deity responsible for his birth be brought nearer to a place where he could occasionally offer sacrifice and worship him. Two emis-
saries of the king brought the Orisa from Ijebu to Okeipa in Ikoyi, Lagos. They were Ajilu and Imalakin. The yearly sacrifice and worship of the deity began from that time by the Ologunkutere lineage.

**Bode Osanyin’s Version**

Like Joel Adedeji, oral history and records from the archives especially of the ethnographic museum, now of the Lagos State University, largely foreground Osanyin’s version of Adámu-Orisa’s origin. Olugbani, also called Olufaderin, a pretty woman, a native of Ibèfun, was childless for a long time. Her people were so concerned about her childlessness that they consulted with the Ifà oracle. Ifà instructed that she should leave Ibèfun for Lagos where she would be fruitful.

She got married to the king of Addo after her arrival in Lagos. Olugbani, also the Olori Oba, was the principal wife of Oba Addo who was believed to have reigned from about 1630. Olugbani had three children by the monarch: Akinsenmoyin, Erelu Kuti, and Gabaro. Erelu Kuti was the only daughter. Akinsenmoyin reigned after Oba Addo and Gabaro reigned after Akinsenmoyin. The throne was open to Ologun Kutere and Sookun, the two sons of Erelu-Kuti, after the demise of Gabaro. Ologun-Kutere reigned after Gabaro.

The people of Ibèfun heard and were happy about the fortune of their daughter Olugbani, who settled in Lagos. They sent her brothers, Malaki and Ejihi, from Ibèfun to pay her a visit in Lagos. Olugbani had died before their arrival in Lagos but they met Erelu-Kuti and her sons, Oba Ologun Kutere of Iga Iduganran and Sookun, the Ogboni of Iga Iduntafa. The emissaries from Ibèfun were happy to be associated with Lagos’ royal family. The two returned home with a resolve to find a way of honoring their royal relations: Malaki (Imalakin) brought Eyò from Iperu, and Ejilu (Ajilu) brought Awo Opa from Oyo to honor their worthy in-laws. This source also claimed that Eyà came to Lagos before other gods like Adimu, Oniko, Ologede, Alagere and Eyò Okolaba. Their fellowship later characterized what is now known as Adamu-Orisà festival.

At the beginning, Eyà had its abode at Okepa (an island) and the Oba and his people used to cross to the island to celebrate Eyò festival. It was Oba Erelu-Kuti who was said to have chosen the site because Eyò and Awo Opa would not stay among the people at Isale Eko probably due to the immense rituals associated with their celebrations. To this day, Awo Opa rituals are always celebrated to round off Adámu-Orisà festival.

Different versions of this origin-study exist today with sources traceable to, for example, “the Igbogbo myth” and the Eyà Ajabe of Iperu. From the two versions, issues such as the actual hometown of Olugbani remain unresolved, whether Ibèfun or Lagos? Whether Olugbani actually came to Ibèfun from
Lagos in search of a child, or that, as an Ibèfun woman she left for Lagos on the instruction of the Ifa oracle; and whether Malaki and Ejilu were Ologun-Kutere’s emissaries to Ibèfun, or that as Olugbani’s siblings or kinsmen they were sent by Olugbani’s relations at Ibèfun to Lagos. The seemingly shrouded issues are far from being resolved, but two aspects remain constant and fundamental. They are (i) that the first recorded and documented performance of Adamu-Orisà festival was in 1854, not necessarily the year Adamuorisà festival began though, (ii) that Malaki and Ejilu were responsible for importing Eyo and Awo Opa from Iperu and Oyo, respectively, to Lagos.

**Psychosocial Significance of Adamu-Orisa Festival**

Adamu-Orisa serves different ritual purposes. It is not quite clear whether this can be attributed to a deliberate act of commission or of omission, but what is certain is that it is largely responsible for Adamu-Orisa meaning different things to different people. For example, as a posthumous funerary, it is used in celebrating the great achievements of illustrious sons and daughters of Lagos. Indeed, the first documented Adamu-Orisa festival was in honor of Oba Akitoye I, on February 20, 1854; the most recent one was in honor of Oba Adeyinka Oyekan II, on August 2, 2003. And in recognition of the complementary significant functions of women in advancing the cause of the society, the first woman documented to have been similarly honored was Iya Oba Dosumu, on February 13, 1875, while the last woman, to date, was Lady Oyinkan Abayomi (nee Kitoyi Ajasa), in November, 1996. (Osanyin, 2004: 121-122). Early this year, 2009, an elaborate Adamuorisa-Eyo sponsored performance was carried out at the instance of Glo mobile phone provider to honor the first federal minister for information, late Chief T.O.S Benson.

The Adamu-Orisa performance may have a semblance of an elegy, but it is not. Although Adamu-Orisa is a chief mourner whose role among other things includes mourning at the Imoku for the purpose of atoning for the “sins” of the deceased, and who carries the offering of expiation on behalf of the deceased through the symbolic sweeping of the filth in the land, the mourning is not construed as the usual lament of the loss of a great citizen, provider or protector, neither is the mourning an expression of fear of uncertainty of personal or communal security which characterizes, especially, the Anglo Saxon elegiac tradition. Similarly, although the Adamu-festival has a semblance of a dirge in that the ritual could be held simultaneously with actual burial ceremony of a deceased, it is not a dirge either, simply because it does not lament the dead. The Adamu-performance is a celebration of a fulfilled life that is worthy of emulation. It is an occasion that is suggestive of ‘reckless’ ululations, as it were; a festive occasion that almost, it seems from all indications, encourages unrestrained (and abuse of?) freedom capable of a threat to public peace. However, the bulk of the festivals held and
documented so far have had the real corpses of the subjects of celebration not present, but usually substituted with effigies properly laid on caparisoned beds at *Imoku* segment of the ritual performance. Ogundeji advises:

> The theoretical semiotisation of the funerary ritual event here would probably have to be reinterpreted in a way that it will cater for occasion when the real corpse is used, if indeed it is. (2004:xiii)

I suspect a problem here arising from the apparent ambivalence. When the actual corpse is present and the festival constitutes an integral part of the rites-of-passage to ease the transiting spirit of the deceased from the world of the living to the ancestral world, Adamu-Orisa qualifies as a rite of passage. However, if the festival takes place posthumously as is often the case, long after the actual burial and rites-of-passage have been concluded for the soul of the departed, the festival cannot be said to constitute a part of the rites-of-passage anymore. The issue is no longer whether or not Adamu-Orisa is a ritual festival because it is already granted that it evokes a unique occasion for a binary fellowship between the ancestors and the living. The Adamu-Orisa ritual festival, at this point, is expected to communicate to the ancestral world through the mummified effigy of the honored deceased; it is the intention of the world of the living to elevate the soul of the celebrated to the rank of an ancestor. In other words, the ritual is meant to curry the endorsement of ancestors to cause the elevation of the soul of the honoree to a higher pedestal in the ancestral realm. Therefore, if the celebration of the honoree, the deceased, is to serve as a motivation to the living by encouraging people to live an accomplished life by way of contributing meaningfully to the development of the society, and the atoned “sins” of the honoree through the symbolic mourning and the act of sweeping communal filth by the Adamu, then the act of hooliganism and the violence witnessed on a regular basis every time the festival was performed could only have meant to serve a mediation in a manner similar to “Oke’Badan,” or the “Udje,” or “Edi” festivals.

**Dramatic Features of Adamu-Orisa Performance**

I hinted earlier and concluded, *Eyo* originated from Iperu, while *Awo Opa* was brought from Oyo to Lagos about the same time. Their twin-celebration was originally considered as exclusive preserves of the royal family. The royal grip became relaxed, making the ritual a little more flexible and adaptable beyond the royal court. This was as a result of King Dosumu’s approval of Chief Apena Ajasa’s imagination and creativity, which he brought to bear on the Eyo enactment. Chief Apena Ajasa’s design with its unique peculiarities was a deliberate deviation from and/or distortion of the original ritual and worship. This was
largely so because it was intended for public participation. According to Joel Adedeji, it was one Jacob Alesinloye who was probably the first person outside the royal family to have adapted the Eyo play to mark the funeral rites of his late mother, though not without initial objections from the king. King Dosumu in honor of his own late mother later staged the Eyo or Adámü-Orisà play on 13 April 1875. (J. Adedeji, 1973:6, Osanyin, 2004: 120) “The Adamu-Orisà play” as identified by Joel Adedeji is by every standard an African ritual drama. It has all the dramatic ingredients (elements) that make a good ritual drama. Adedeji’s detailed description of Adamu-Orisà dramatic form is considered very reliable in this respect and shall be the major source at this juncture.

At the outset, Adimu/Adamu, the re-incarnated Orisà (-nla), is summoned to lead the rites, (i) to play the Chief Mourner at the Amoku (or Imoku) for the atonement of the sins of the deceased, (ii) to carry the offered sacrifice of expiation on behalf of the deceased through the symbolic sweeping of the debris and filth by the Eyô groups. The Eyo are ancestral ‘spirits’ representing the inhabitants of Lagos, (iii) to face the immolation he must suffer in the hands of the Eyo as well as final ejection as carrier, beyond the lagoon.

The Adamu-Orisà ritual festival has a simple and unilinear, organic plot in the strict Aristotelian sense, with a beginning, middle, and end. Its uniqueness is in the sense of, among other things, its multiple transiting stages, four in all, and that is, besides the performances en route, the four stages. The stages are located in selected streets within and around the Lagos Island: (i) Agodo stage-location is a relative sanctuary located at the Upper King Street and, is usually set up on the eve of performance. The stage/performing area is enclosed with specially woven raffia mats. There, members of the Adimu cult dance to the sixteen Osugbo drums and gong. The unusual rustic spi-Ritual sound and the “Igbe” song facilitate cultic immersion and possession which are familiar scenes at Agodo. (ii) Iga Idunganran palace stage-location. Thick mats similar to those used at Agodo are also used to enclose the stage/performing area. Here Adamu the “carrier” and the mundane ruler of Lagos exchange formal homage. (iii) Imoku stage-location where the mummy is made to “lie-in-state” with all the ritual paraphernalia on display—mask, hat, staff, etc. This is similar to Iremoje’s Isipa Ode ritual of the hunters’ guild funerary.

The design varies from person to person, and it is usually determined by the social status of the deceased. The “lying-in-state” is usually in an Iga (royal court) if the deceased is from a royal family; if a white cap chief, the setting is predictably to be in a public place like the famous Glover Hall; but if the deceased is an honorary chief the setting is in a private home of the deceased. Setting in this context is significant in many ways; for example, it is the scene of the symbolic mourning of Adimu, where the traditional dialogue with the deceased takes place. Every Eyo pays homage by filing past the mummy. Finally,
(iv) Idumota stage-location. This is a rectangular enclosure provided along Nnamdi Azikiwe Street around the Idumota cenotaph. The acting area (stage) is on the main road facing the grandstand. The different Eyo groups are on parade, marking the climax of the drama and the grand finale of the festival. Here people witness the formal encounter between Adimu and Eyo, as well as the symbolic submission of the latter and his final ejection as the “scapegoat.” It is similar to the mock-duel in the Obàtálá festival drama at Ede, an ancient town in Osun State, Nigeria, in which Oluuwin and Ajagemo, both priests, are engaged in a symbolic duel, and in which Ajagemo is defeated and taken hostage by the former. Oba Timi, the town’s monarch, later pays a ransom to Oluuwin for the release of Ajagemo. The ransomed Ajagemo is then carried shoulder high among dins and ululations, singing and dancing into Timi’s palace. (Ogundeji 2000)

Richard Schechner in, The Future of Ritual (1995), devotes a whole chapter to “Street Theatre” in one of his proposals for the future of ritual in which “the Street” is the stage. This can be better appreciated when one considers the veracity of Schechner’s proposal and silhouettes this against the setting of the Adamu-Oríṣà festival performance. For example, the performance is held on selected streets of Lagos. The routes leading to the four different stages constitute street stage performances; a necessary symbolization of the numinous passage through which the soul of the departed crosses the gulf to the ancestral world. Oju Elégba where Esu shrine is located, is one of these street stages. The shrine is significant in the sense that Adamu/Adimu must stop there on his way to Agodo, and offer symbolic sacrifices to appease Esu so that he (Adimu) may be fit enough to perform his delicate task without a hitch. Another significance of the selected streets of Lagos in the performance of Adámu-Oríṣà play is that other Eyo groups flood them later in the day to perform their symbolic sweeping.

Furthermore, the Eyo play involves several dramatis personae. These include Adimu, Eyo, Mummy, Oniko Ológèdè, Agere, Alakete-pupa or Okolaba and Eyô Adimu. Adimu the tragic hero represents the Oríṣà (-nla) who made the barren woman, Olugbani, to be procreative. Eyo is a tall masquerade that represents the ancestor or founder of Lagos. He speaks the Awori dialect of the Yoruba language. The mummified effigy is the honored deceased whose spirit is intended to be elevated to the rank of an ancestor by means of the Eyo ritual festival.

Oniko is a masquerade costumed in raffia. According to Bode Osanyin (1980:418), Oniko acquires the status of the officiating priest. The costume is similar to that of Sangbeto masquerade of Togoland, having an appearance of a thatched hut. The masquerade usually ushers in the day with series of rituals. Ológèdè is a masquerade costumed in banana leaves. It represents the evoked spirit of Olugbani, wife of King of Addo summoned to witness Adimu’s actions. Ológèdè literally means the “owner of banana,” in other words and according to Bode Osanyin (1983: 419) it is the spirit of the banana tree embodying “the
sweetness, the soothing and tranquilizing spirit in banana.” Perhaps this is why it was found convenient to represent Olugbani, but perhaps not. Nonetheless, it is quite obvious that it is the physical and metaphysical soothing properties in banana as an object of appeasement (etutu) that make Ológèdè a god of peace. It is predictable to note that primarily Ológèdè ushers in peace in the course of the performance. Ológèdè usually performs his own rites after Oniko’s ritual offerings.

Nowadays, banana leaves are no longer used. Instead, a spherical costume built of green damask, still with the impression of banana leaves, is used. Although (Al-) Agere is traditionally regarded as an entertainer, his stilts are regarded and worshipped as spirits. Adedeji identifies him as one of the witnessing masquerades. Okolaba is also known as Alaketepupa, or Olori Eyô or Olopa Eyô (the royal police), and is believed in many quarters to have arrived alone and separately. Okolaba even though he belongs to the Oba, that is, the king’s own Eyô, is not put in a permanent custody of any family Okolaba is moved from family to family. Eyo Adimu is a group of masquerades that serve as chorus attendants on the Adimu. Other cultic masquerades have similar attendants.

Other areas of dramatic importance in the Adamu-Orisà play include the use of dialogue, songs and poetry in general. Dialogue is used in the exchange of greetings or in paying homage to the Eyô masquerades:

Ope ado  
Iba Ado  
Iba Akinsiku  
Thanks be to ado  
Worship be to ado  
Worship be to Akinsiku  
(Osanyin, 1983:456)

Other examples of the use of dialogue can be found in the exchange between the cultist and Eyo as recorded by Joel Adeleji:

Cultist: Agogoro Eyà!  
(You are the imposing Eyo)  
Eyo: Mo yo fun o  
Moyo fun’ra mi.  
Emi agogoro Eyô!  
(I rejoice with you  
I rejoice with myself  
I am the imposing Eyo)  
Cultist: Pa nti wa?  
(Why have you come?)

Eyô: Pa nti se
(Because I have a duty)

Cultist: Opa asileka siko?
(What about the staff on the shoulder)
Eyô: Ti ehin loju
Ni mode Iraiye
(It is the rear part
which weighs more in
the precinct of Iraiye)

Cultist: Ni bo lo pade anikanjiya?
(Where did you meet the lone sufferer?)
(The Adamuorisà Play, 17-18)

Similarly, songs play a vital role in Adámu-Orisà play. For example,

O ti f’abebe
Fe ’ku lo o ti f’abebe
Fe ’ku lo
Ad(mu se ohun na lo so pe
On tifabebe
Fe ’ku lo

(He has dispelled death
With his magic fan
He has dispelled death
With his magic fan
Adimu has given us his pledge
To dispel death
With his magic fan)
(Osanyin, 1983:439)

Furthermore, the songs celebrating Ejilu and Malaki’s importation of Eyô and Awo Opa to Lagos are rendered in Igbe verses. Osanyin has this to say on Igbe praise songs:

Igbe is the traditional royal song of praise. It is indeed a unique genre for Lagos. The style of singing comes from Awori land and has become the traditional music of the agreed Oloris (Queen)...The repertory of Igbe songs is essentially made of the history of royal lineage since the inception of Lagos. Igbe songs are never altered. They are handed down the ages. They have become classic. (Bode Osanyin 414)
Describing the Igbe music, Olatunji Vidal (1980: 13), reflects that it has its own set of tones and is usually accompanied on a series of agogo (hand bells).

**Significance**

The religious functions of the Adamu-Orisà play cannot be overemphasized. The festival, for example, serves dual religious purposes: funeral and purification rituals. The funeral rites-of-passage is the purpose of ancestrizing or deifying a deceased considered worthy of such an honor. Purification, on the other hand, is observed in the literal sweeping (cleansing) exercise performed by the symbolic sweeping of filth and decay off the land by Eyo masquerades, as well as in the carrier role of Adimu who becomes the satirical butt and at the same time the scapegoat of the appeasement rites so that peace, health and wealth might reign in the land. This aspect I have dealt with, in detail, under “spi-Rituality of Festivals and Significance.”

Still, on the social relevance of the Adámu-Orisà performance as play, Abiola Irele has identified three basic functions of the arts, namely, the phatic, the ludic and the ideological. The first two are associated with oral literature. The phatic is concerned with the ability of oral performances like Adámu-Orisà play to stimulate and encourage a sense of kinship among the people and thus establish a definitive relationship. Given the cosmopolitan outlook of the Lagos Island, the traditional setting of this performance, the inter-ethnic and inter-tribal historical link with Ijebu Remo, Iperu, Oyo, Bini, etc., it is obvious that a bond of kinship has long been established among the different tribes that exist within Lagos State, and among the towns that are culturally connected through the Eyo masquerade or Adámu-Orisà ritual festival.

As a political tool, the adapted version of the Adamu-Orisà play is particularly used as a rallying point of public opinion such that history is re-created through the songs. For example, borrowing the opinion which Finnegans once offered, the songs, the praise poems in Adamu-Orisà play “are fruitful sources of currently authorized interpretation of certain historical events and genealogies”. In one of the “Igbe” songs in praise of Malaki and Ejilu in Adamu-Orisà play is traced to Oyo where it was alleged to have been imported to Lagos:

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Omo lo si Oyo Ajaka Ajaka
o 'ro n mu'bo si rele.
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The emissary went to Qyo Ajaka
And brought something home

(Osanyin, 1980: 440)
Similarly, it is possible to trace the source of Adamu-Orisà festival to Igbogbo in Ijebu. This is confirmed in one of Igbogbo praise poetry:

Igbo Ilu omo Meri Ipara
Igbogbo Eyo, Eyó Osinbokunran
Igbogbo Eyó, Eyó Igbogbo
Igbogbo losan Igbogbo loru
Igbogbo Eyó ilu ti adaba mo oriki re:
(1980-442)

It is in the light of this fact that the Igbogbo community sends representatives on invitation to Lagos whenever the Adamu-Orisà festival is held. Other important areas of the Adamu-Orisà play that are also found to be compelling include the spectacle and the general masque-ly scenes from which audience and participants derive aesthetic satisfaction. For example, at the Imàku (Amòku), there is usually a lavish arrangement that suggests the status of the deceased. Equally lavishly dressed are those seated round the mummified effigy. In effect, the Adamu-Orisà ritual performance affords the people of Lagos the opportunity to express, during the festival celebration, suppressed desires in role-playing performances.

**Conclusion**

It is characteristic of ritual drama to be situated in or fused with tragedy, as in the case of Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman,* or with history, as in the case of the Adámu-Orisà ritual performance. Indeed, the two examples are a combination of both ritual and history. History plays are attempts at a creative documentation of actual events of communal (or national) significance and interest through re-enactments. So far, I have attempted to explore the enduring legacies of Yoruba orature of Lagos. Two areas were examined: selected aspects of Lagos ethnography of seven hundred years, and the Adamu-Orisà performance, as an ancestral-cult ritual, as well as a typical indigenous African ritual drama. On the latter, we have been guided in our discussion by the contributions of Joel Adedeji, Bode Osanyin and Dotun Ogundeji on the origin, form and significance of Adamu-Orisà ritual performance, as a typical indigenous African ritual drama.

**Notes**

1. *Eko* is a type of weed which illuminates at night. Information had it that it was a predominant weed in the land, hence the expression, “the land of Eko weed.” Eko (Lagos) derived its name from this source.
2. This is regardless of Fabunmi’s claims in his famous book, *Ife: The Genesis of Yoruba Race*, (Lagos: John West Publishers, 1985). Again, the warning of Kola Folayan, particularly on the problems he identified with Yoruba oral history, is apposite here.

3. In a letter dated June 26, 2002, to the Head of Department of Linguistics and African Languages of the University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

4. The immediate past civilian governor of Lagos State, Asiwaju Ahmed Tinubu initiated a research project into the 700 years ethnographic historical/study of Lagos State under the supervision of Professor Fatiu Ademola Akesode, Vice-Chancellor, Lagos State University (LASU). The project yielded result. It led to the establishment of an ancestral museum of 700 years through LASU. Rev. Johnson’s book, *The History of Yorubas*, and Adewale Thompson’s *The Black Peoples of the World* also corroborate the facts of the Yoruba race link with Egypt/Numbia and the Far East.

5. White attire of the scapegoat is indicative of his innocence and purity.

6. Elegba is a shortened form of Elegbara—one of the praise name of *Esu*, Yoruba trickster god.


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Forty years ago, when Oyekan Owomoyela and I were fellow graduate students at the University of California at Los Angeles, I wrote an essay contrasting Yoruba and Igbo prose styles in English. My basic assumption was that a person’s first language usually influences the manner in which he expresses himself in a second. From this it follows that two people with different first languages will speak the same second language differently. To put it more concretely, a native speaker of Yoruba and a native speaker of Igbo will not express themselves in English in quite the same way. But two native speakers of Yoruba might.¹

To prove this point I took examples from the writings of prominent authors from both ethnic groups—Daniel Olorunfemi Fagunwa, Amos Tutuola, Wole Soyinka, T.M. Aluko, and the mercurial Ibadan politician Adegoke Adelabu representing the Yoruba, and Chinua Achebe, Nkem Nwankwo, John Munonye, Flora Nwapa, Onuora Nzekwu, Chukwuemeka Ike, and a few others representing the Igbo.

After quoting characteristic passages from works then available by these writers, I arrived at the conclusion that one salient characteristic of Yoruba prose style in English is verbal ebullience. Yoruba writers exaggerate, embroider, reiterate and rant.
Preferring to use ten words where one might suffice, they bombard their readers with bombast, goading them to laughter. Their bold inventiveness and keen appreciation of the ridiculous often find expression in bizarre incongruities of action and pyrotechnical poetic conceits. They seem to believe with Adelabu that "Truth stands no chance of receiving an audience unless it is clothed in Fashion, adumbrated in Novelty, adorned in Sensationalism and enthroned on the Pedestal of Originality." And the truth they seek to reveal is usually a comic or satiric truth, one which penetrates deeply with a light touch. But they mean no harm by their literary persiflages. They would much rather tickle than teach.²

In contrast, Igbo writers display

a clear preference for a prose style in English which simulates natural expression in their native tongue. By introducing traditional Igbo proverbs, idioms, images and words into their fiction, they produce a convincing, in-depth portrait of traditional Igbo society. Unlike the Yoruba novelists who revel in fantasy and comic exaggeration, the Igbo novelists tend to favor realism and sober moral truths. Instead of verbal ebullience they prize verbal economy, for they would far rather instruct than entertain.³

I believe that this argument concerning a significant stylistic difference between the earliest Yoruba and Igbo writers who expressed themselves in English still has validity, though I am not sure that the same point could be made today based on examples drawn from the writings of a later generation of authors from both ethnic groups. The English of contemporary Nigerians may have been shaped by a greater variety of influences than was the language of their predecessors by the singular impact of their own ancestral mother tongue. Indeed, some among the latest crop of Nigerian novelists may have been brought up speaking English as their first language, so there may be little or no discernible residue of traditional ethnic expressiveness in their writing. One may search their works in vain for signs of the sort of rhetorical recidivism that permeated the prose of their predecessors.

I intend here to revisit my earlier argument by testing one side of it—the Yoruba side—against an altogether different body of stylistic evidence—namely, Yoruba proverbs. Is it possible to find among these microtexts some of the same tendencies toward "verbal ebullience" that I identified as characteristic of a Yoruba prose style in English? At first glance, this seems to be a quixotic undertaking. Proverbs, after all, have been defined by one leading paremiologist as "self-contained, pithy, traditional expressions with didactic content and fixed, poetic form."⁴ How can an utterance of this type be both self-contained and
free, pithy and prolix, traditional and innovative, didactic and playful, fixed and expansive, poetic and prosaic, all at the same time? The definition given seems to fit more comfortably as an analogue of the sententiousness of Igbo prose than as an apt description of the novelty of Yoruba writing. Proverbs by their very nature seem to argue for sanity and sobriety, not satire and sensationalism.

A predisposition toward laying down the law—that is, toward articulating social norms that regulate and reform human behavior by serving as guiding principles or conventional codes of civilized conduct—appears to be a primary feature of proverbs the world over. This makes them a powerful agent and enforcer to community values. Old saws are thought to contain ageless wisdom; these are words to live by. In some traditional African law courts, for example, timeworn adages almost carry the weight and authority of legal precedents; they may be cited to enhance an argument or prove a point that conforms to customary law. In such circumstances the adroit deployment of pertinent proverbs is a very serious business indeed.

The Yoruba have sayings about the power of proverbs:

A person who knows proverbs has the last word in a dispute. (1137)
It is a-sage-who-knows-proverbs that resolves disputes. (4719)
Proverbs are the pronouncements of [the oracle god] Ifa. (870)
Like proverbs one plays the ogidigbó music; only the wise can dance to it, and only the knowledgeable know it. (869)
If the butt of a proverb recognizes but does not acknowledge it, he is afraid of a fight. (1441)
Proverbs are the horses of communication; if communication is lost, proverbs are what one uses to find it. (5188)

These metaproverbs reveal the great respect that the Yoruba have for the potency of gnomic formulas. The Yoruba also prize careful, discreet communication, for

Words are eggs; when they drop on the floor, they shatter into pieces. (1550)
Good talk brings the kola nut out of the pouch; provocative talk draws the arrow out of the quiver. (1234)
The wound left by a cutlass may heal, but the wound left by speech does not heal. (377)
Whoever drinks 40 cowries’ worth of wine will talk 20 cowries’ worth of talk. (1525)

The Yoruba deplore excessive talk, believing that

Whoever talks a lot will misspeak. (1506)
A lot of words will not fill a basket; they will only lead to lies. (1866)
Speech like drunken babble does not befit a venerable person. (537)
To a well-bred person half a speech is enough; when it reaches his inside it becomes whole.7
Your eyes flinch not and your mouth is unstoppable, but you do not know nine times nine. (453)
It is an empty barrel that is noisy; a sack full of money makes no sound. (111)
If a drum makes too much noise, it breaks. (1430)

Given this pronounced preference for quiet, controlled, economical speech, how can one argue that the Yoruba take pleasure in demonstrations of verbal ebullience and favor a literary style suffused with “excessive exuberance” of the sort flaunted in Adelabu’s book?8 There are no Yoruba proverbs in support of logorrhea, a condition defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “excessive volubility accompanying some forms of insanity,”9 and more popularly known as a diarrhea of the mouth. The Yoruba appear to eschew wordiness, or so it seems from the evidence so far set before us. In a nuanced study of proverbs in African literature, the Yoruba scholar Adélékè Adéèkó theorizes that “the oral milieu in which proverbs were invented made it imperative that the speaker should dispatch with the essence of a thought unit in the smallest number of words possible, and in forms open-ended enough for the receiver to decipher the sender’s intent.”10 This makes sense if one assumes, as most folklorists do, that brevity is the soul of the proverb—or to put it more exactly, is the sole soul of the proverb.

Of course, brevity, as Shakespeare reminds us in *Hamlet*, is also the soul of wit,11 and wit is so often seen as a property of the proverb that the two are thought to be joined at the hip, Siamese twins of sense and sensibility. Indeed, one common definition of the proverb is that it is “the wisdom of many and the wit of one.”12 Samuel Taylor Coleridge exercised his own wit and wisdom in refining this definition when he wrote:

What is an Epigram? A dwarfish whole,
Its body brevity, and wit its soul.13

Certainly there is plenty of wit evident in Yoruba proverbs. For instance,

There is nothing inscrutable about beans. (4802)
A town is never so small that it does not have a dung hill. (3811)
A bride with a gaping nose is better than an empty bedroom. (2966)
A one-eyed person does not attempt standing somersaults. (490)

One also finds clever wordplay in such formulaic forms as tongue-twisters, tone-twisters, dialogue proverbs, and Wellerisms. Here is a sample of each:14
Tongue-twister: “We bought a Tapa man, we sold a Tapa man, we used the Tapa man’s money to buy tobacco for the Tapa man to smoke.” The alternation between Tápà and tábà (tobacco) makes this combination of words difficult to say rapidly.

Tone-twister: “Many frogs do not know that most frogs have brains.” Here the difficulty comes in trying to cope with the alternating tones of the words many (òpòlópò), frogs (òpòló), and brains (lópòlopò).

Dialogue proverb: “They say, ‘Lame man, the load on your head is sitting crookedly.’ He replies, ‘It is not the load, but the legs.’”

Wellerism: “‘Greet everyone over there,’ one says to a blind man going to heaven (dying) reluctantly.”

Such statements are amusing, but Alan Dundes points out that not all of them are meaningless and nonsensical.

Nor are these and other witty formulaic expressions always brief. The Yoruba in fact are remarkable for the number of longwinded outbursts in their arsenal of proverbs. As a people addicted to indirect discourse as an effective rhetorical strategy, the Yoruba may be exceptional in their propensity to resort fairly frequently to redundancy as a tactic to make a salient point. Instead of employing a single proverb to express a notion vividly and memorably, they may use two or more related sayings in rapid succession to reinforce their message. According to Roger D. Abrahams, such “formulaic intensifiers exist for no other reason than to decorate speech. These are devices of hyperbole; they take an ongoing argument and lend it wit and color.”

Judging from the large corpus of representative texts assembled by Owomoyela, which runs to 5235 distinct items, the preferred method of piling on proverbs to give added weight, wit and color to an idea is to cite three in a row:

One does not kill a dog for barking; one does not kill a ram for butting; one does not kill a he-goat because of randiness. (4353)

Whiteness is the pride of the teeth; straightness is the pride of the neck; firm, pointed breasts are the pride of a woman. (4991)

It is the incessant chattering of the Pataguenon monkey that causes people to belabor it with sticks; it is the annoying sounds of the ògbìgbì bird that causes people to throw stones at it; it is indiscriminate feeding that causes the bat to ingest food and excrete with the same mouth. (1586)

Before one can see the elephant, one must go to the bush; before one can see the buffalo, one must go to the wilderness; before one can see another bird like the egret, one must await the end of time. (4257)

The goat would wish that its kid was a he-goat, only God the King did not consent; the robust sheep would wish its lamb was a ram,
only God the King would not agree; the big hen would wish its chick was a cock, only God the King would not grant her wish. (3566) The death that will kill the hunter is in the forest; the death that will kill the farmer is coiled around the heap; the death that will kill the dancer to the kakanfa drums is in the market, sporting gargantuan headgear. (4544)

There are also occasions when four or five proverbs are cited in succession:

One walks on the ground, and the horse rider is angry; one flies in the air, and the bird keeper is angry; one wears rags, and the dealer in cloth is angry; one feeds on vegetables, and the meat seller is angry. (4035) The mousetrap leans to one side to kill the mouse; the hook bends in order to kill the fish; the guinea corn leans sideways to watch the farmer; if a child will eat with an elder, it is proper for the child to lean to the side. (3265) When day breaks, the trader takes up his trade; the cotton spinner picks up the spindle; the warrior grabs his shield; the farmer gets up with his hoe; the son of the hunter arises with his quiver and his bows; he-who-wakes-and-washes-with-soap makes his way to the river. (864)

These are examples of paremiological overkill. In a battle of wits, one over-whelms opponents rhetorically with rapid fire from a well-loaded maxim gun. This helps to give extra life and force to a do-or-die argument. A pregnant idea is delivered not just with twins but with triplets, quadruplets, quintuplets. The Yoruba, already famous for hailing multiple births as a blessing, here manifest a partiality for multiple metaphors, as if proliferation of a seminal idea was the most effective way of augmenting the number of one’s immediate relations. Repetition with variation breeds success. Excessive production seldom miscarries. Proverbial profluency promptly and progressively prevails.

Needless to say, this kind of hyperbolic verbal bombardment has a comic dimension. One sees this most plainly when the third constituent in a triad changes the thrust of the message by turning it in a new or unexpected direction:

When one sees women, one boasts of war; when one sees women, one talks of battle; when one gets to battle, one lies low. (1394) One never sees the bottom of the ocean; no one ever sees the bottom of the lagoon; a well-bred woman will never expose her buttocks to anyone. (1281)
Excessive cleverness turns one into a phantom; too much magical charm turns the owner into an imbecile; if a woman is too cunning, her husband’s clothes wind up ill-fitting. (1816)
Gray hair shows age; a beard shows maturity; a mustache shows impudence. (1476)

One could classify these triplets that trip us up as jokelore as well as folklore. The last link in the chain functions as the punch-line. The first two links lure us to the ambush that surprises us at the end.

Other deliberately humorous proverbs comment on human stupidity by using the words of the fool to reveal his foolishness:

There is no disappearing trick better than the availability of a dense forest to disappear into; there is no sacrifice more efficacious than having many people on one’s side; there is no “The gods have elevated me” that is higher than the back of a horse. (2622)
We recite someone’s praise names, we intone his attributes, and a person says he does not know who died; we say, “He of the two hundred granaries, he whose yams are plentiful on the farm, he whose corn is abundant in the fields,” and the person asks, “Is the dead person a hunter or a trader?” (662)
It is time to get out of here; the gatekeeper of Atadi, his home was burglarized; his wife was taken from him; the divining string he was going to use to investigate matters was snatched by a dog; his son who ran after the dog to retrieve the divining string fell into a well. The gatekeeper of Atadi then spoke up and said, “It is time to get out of here.” (1024)

Or the evaluative comment may be couched as a question:

You danced at Ìfón town and Ìfón became desolate; you danced at Òjìgbò and Òjìgbò was split asunder like a rag; now you came to Ìlà Òrànjùn and you commenced to wiggle your buttocks; were you given a mission to ruin all towns associated with gods? (1072)
The sun rises and you do not eat corn meal; the sun moves directly overhead and you do not eat yam-flour meal; a visitor arrives for you when the sun is just past the overhead position and you have nothing to entertain him with; and you ask, “Am I not in danger of being disgraced in his eyes”? Aren’t you already disgraced in your own eyes? Never mind whether you may be disgraced in others’ eyes or not. (540)

These examples prove that not all Yoruba proverbs are pithy. Some are wordy, and their wit may reside in the contrapuntal force of clashing elements within
more elaborate verbal structures. William Somerset Maugham once declared that “Impropriety is the soul of wit,” and the incongruities contained in elongated Yoruba proverbs bear this out. Such effusions are amusing because they deliberately violate the decorum of sober rationality by their loud, insistent, madcap drumming. Verbal ebullience remains the second soul of Yoruba expressive culture.

Notes


3. Ibid., 173.


6. The examples that follow are taken from Oyekan Owomoyela’s wonderfully comprehensive Yoruba Proverbs (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2005); the numbers cited in parentheses are item numbers, not page numbers. For the original Yoruba texts, see Owomoyela. Technically speaking, not all the 5235 items cited by Owomoyela are true proverbs. Some of them, including a few quoted here, would be classified by folklorists as aphorisms, maxims or axioms because they have no metaphorical dimension. For a discussion of this difference, see William Bascom, “Stylistic Features of Proverbs, a Comment,” Journal of American Folklore 78 (1969): 69.


12. Ibid., 1098b. Bartlett suggests that this proverb was probably based on a statement by Lord John Russell.

13. Ibid., 527a.


15. According to Wolfgang Mieder, *African Proverb Scholarship: An Annotated Bibliography* (Colorado Springs: African Proverbs Project, 1994), 103, European Wellerisms typically have a triadic structure consisting of a proverbial statement, the identification of a speaker, and a comment. This particular Yoruba example conforms to this structure, but not all African Wellerisms do so.


Chapter 8

BEYOND THE LITERAL TO THE MASTER SPEECH: PROVERBS IN CONDOLENCES

Rachael O. Béllò

INTRODUCTION

Condolence, the act of showing a bereaved person that you share in his or her sorrow is a form of greeting but of a special type. Like greetings, it is a phatic communion showing politeness. Condolence expressions come in different forms depending on different speech communities. Consequently, I see condolences as being culture bound. The concept of culture and human behavior, which this study exposes, may not be appreciated because we have become so used to exhibiting them that they appear not to be there. A people’s way of life, however, does not only determine how they have to carry on in the society but also determines how much meaning they make of human relationship. Expressing condolence requires some discourse strategies. Condolence expressions, as easy as they appear, vary and mean differently from one community to another. They could be expressed linguistically, para-linguistically and non-linguistically. This study looks at the societal relevance of proverbs in condolences. Expressing condolence requires some discourse strategies with the speaker being careful to select expressions that suit context.

Condolence is a universal phenomenon. Its usage presupposes in most cases death, accidents and other disasters, which in themselves are social phenom-
ena. It is expected of participants to have background knowledge of rules that guide interaction and co-operation among members of a group and put this to use either consciously or unconsciously. In showing pity to the bereaved, what members unconsciously do is to satisfy their interlocutor’s positive face where he aspires that his wants (in this instance being commiserated with) be desired by other members. The soothing word transcends showing sympathy; it also helps to promote the interlocutor’s public self image and personality. Condolences therefore go beyond merely communicating. They are indeed necessary to keep a group of people together. Consider Albright’s view of it:

Commiseration denotes a spontaneous and vocal expression, which is often made in the public by an individual or a group of people. Condolence denotes a formal expression of sympathy especially for the loss of a relative through death and refers strictly to an observance of etiquette with regards to the underlying feeling.

Proverbs and witty sayings accentuate a given idea and are used to add flavor to discourse. Such expressions help make discourse intelligent and rich. Witty sayings may not be widely acknowledged and known by members of the community in question, but they too, like proverbs, help drive home some earlier made points. In Adédíméjì’s view, “The ability to sum up ideas and experiences in captivating succinct expressions has always been considered a sign of native intelligence, linguistic competence and cultural erudition.” Proverbs, being expressions that relate a common truth from experience help to reinforce meanings thus establishing assertions. Proverbs in condolences perform the act of bringing the bereaved to the sense of realizations about some inevitable situations in life. Some of these condolences are highlighted below.

**BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

This study is an examination of a social phenomenon. In this paper I look at proverbs in condolence as a variety of language distinguished according to use. After all, one of the parameters for classifying a language into its varieties is the functional parameter. Such functional varieties are studied with the stylistic classifications of field, tenor and mode. Apart from constituting discrete vocabulary, the condolence register with the aid of proverbs brings certain sociolinguistic elements to bear on its interpretation and understanding. Thus though condolences of the educated Yoruba English speakers in Southwestern Nigeria (henceforth, EYESISN) as expressed by these proverbs may not literally reflect the philosophy of the Yoruba, such philosophical beliefs about life and
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definition of death are there all the same. A cursory analysis of these proverbs reveals some hidden undertones.

**Research Problem**

This study investigates the interplay between language and culture with particular reference to the use of proverbs and proverb-related expressions in the condolences of educated Yoruba English speakers in Southwestern Nigeria (henceforth, EYESISN). The study thus examines the intellectual and artistic activities of informants in this social phenomenon. We see, for instance, how these expressions are used to show politeness and even much more by their carrying additional underlying meanings beyond what their surface structures ordinarily suggest.

**Significance of Study**

Knowledge of and or use of proverbs is concomitant to being culturally educated since proverbs reflect the philosophy of the people with this philosophy being synonymous with the way of life of the people. Thus, proverbs indirectly help educate members of the community informally. The study is also significant by revealing the connection that exists between language and culture, showing how the worldview of a group works on its language. In doing this, members and non-members are brought to the knowledge of the requirement needed to maintain the society. In other words, they will become aware of the proverbs to use in a given context while putting certain sociolinguistic variables into consideration.

**Scope of the Study**

The Yoruba is one of the major groups found in Nigeria. The Yorùbá language is spoken in the Southwestern part of Nigeria in areas such as Òyó, Oríó, Òsun, Èkitì, Ògùn, Lagos, Kwara parts of Kogi and Edo. The term Yorùbá applies to a number of peoples such as Òyó, Ìjèbú, Àwóró, Ègba, Èkitì, Ìjèsà etc. We must say here, however, that there has been extensive contact among the various groups and this has led to a cultural blending of some sort. Yoruba belongs to the Yoruboid group of languages that also belong to the Benue Congo of Niger Congo. The EYESISN constitute the population sample for current research. Education is a relative term. Educated Yorùbá speakers, as used in this respect, refers to the Yorùbá people who have had contact with English as a second language. These are Yorùbá who have had at least three years of post secondary school education. Thus, our Educated Yorùbá informants constitute
any Nigerian Yorùbá who holds at least the National Certificate of Education (NCE), its equivalent and any higher academic qualification.

Our class of Yoruba informants is significant because they speak a variety of standardized and codified Nigerian English. In Odumuh’s view, “It seems reasonable to suppose that comparable students in Colleges of Education/Advanced Teachers College, Polytechnics/Colleges of Technology, Schools of Preliminary/Basic Studies, and Universities—the tertiary level of education—constitute the ‘educated’ Nigerian speakers of English. The variety used by this group of Nigerians is stable, systematic and widespread enough to justify its acceptance as a model of Standard Nigerian English, which could be used prescriptively.” Thus our informants fall under Banjo’s variety III of Nigerian English.5

**Theoretical Framework**

The research is premised on Hymes’ Ethnography of speaking and Adégbìjà’s Master Speech Acts Theory.6 Condolence expressions are acts intended by the speaker to perform certain functions. Though they may not imply any true or false condition, they constitute the commission of an act. Hymes’ Ethnography of Communication provides a basis for describing the ways that communicative behavior operates within a society. This model therefore captures both contextual and linguistic properties found in condolences. The idea of communicative competence becomes relevant in capturing a speaker’s ability or otherwise to apply his linguistic competence appropriately in a communicative exchange.

Adégbìjà identified three layers accountable for understanding an utterance in discourse. The primary layer, the literal level, simply relates comprehension to one’s knowledge of the language in question. Understanding a message at this level therefore is not tied to context per se. The secondary layer takes cognizance of the immediate context in discourse. With the third layer, the non-immediate context has to be brought to bear on the understanding of a given message.7

These models are useful to this study in a number of ways. The Master Speech Acts Theory, for instance, is relevant in classifying members’ speech acts in condolences. The theory thus reveals the possible illocutionary acts of condolence expressions. With the model, for example, we discern if the proverbs used in condolences are merely to show politeness or much more to sound a warning or even give a command. Furthermore, the theory helps to explain the diverse messages implied but not stated by the use of these proverbs. By employing proverbs in condolences, speakers provide an avenue for implying several unstated messages. In the same vein, being a study of a social group, this
study recognizes the importance of Hymes’ Ethnography of communication. It is common knowledge that the way we use language has something to do with certain sociolinguistic variables. The application of Hymes’ theory helps in defining our subjects’ social identity in linguistic terms.

**Literature Review**

This section is divided into two parts. The first part examines the relationship between language and culture. The second part simply looks at earlier related works. Language, which some linguists otherwise refer to as the tongue, is simply the signs used in communicating ideas or thoughts. By implication, language could be made up of limited signs such as we have with animals or elaborate signs as we have with the human language, which is made up of spoken and or written symbols. Though there are as many competing definitions of the concept, language, as there are linguists, a careful scrutiny of these definitions reveals some resemblance of one to another. For the purpose of this study however, I adopt Ron Smith Jr.’s definition of language. To him, language is:

A learned, shared and arbitrary system of vocal symbols through which human beings backup in the same speech community or sub-culture interact and hence communicate in terms of their common cultural experience and expectations.8

A given speech community is remarkably marked from other speech communities by its language. Language is thus seen as one of the criteria that mark a group as being different. Other criteria that distinguish cultures one from another include nationality, ethnicity, religion, territory, etc. In all of this, however, language and culture are seen to be related in a number of ways. For instance, while language is one of the elements of a culture, it is also the vehicle through which culture is promoted and preserved. That is to say, the one reflects the other. For instance, one can describe the ways of life of a people simply by studying the language of the group in question. It therefore means that the two concepts, language and culture, are as closely knitted together as a man is to his shadow.

Culture, broadly speaking, is the way of life of a people. In Ògúnsíji view, “Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs and all other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society.” 9 Distinguishing between the acquired and intransitive qualities of man, Ògúnsíji asserts that culture does not refer only to artifacts but also to ideas, technical knowledge, habits, values, mode of behavior and socialization. Culture therefore presupposes those qualities, consciously and socially acquired by man, as against qualities naturally deposited in him.
However, culture, being cognitive, is much more than this. For this reason, we examine Ward Goodenough’s definition of culture provided below:

A society’s culture consists of whatsoever it is one has to know or believes in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members. Culture is not a material phenomenon. It does not consist of things, behavior or emotions. It is rather an organization of these things. It is the form of things that people have in mind, their models for perceiving, relating and otherwise interpreting them.10

Cultures are noted for their relativity and should therefore be understood on their own terms apart from the standard and use of western society.11 Therefore, the relationship between language and culture could be seen in the concepts being symbolic meaning systems. According to Casson:

What is meant by these characterizations of language and culture is that both are systems in which symbols are the basic means which one individual communicates an idea to another. Thus, language consists of internal forms and meanings structured in the head while culture entails external structures of similar forms and meanings found in the world.12

A review of the literature reveals how the use of proverbs help show class differences teach social norms and accentuate beliefs as well as educate generally. Yusuf shows the dehumanization of woman as reflected in proverbs. Yusuf reveals how women, by these proverbs, are compared to animals, foods, plant life, property, and trouble.13 Adédiméji in an attempt to reflect how proverbs are used in reinforcing meaning examines a number of proverbs in Achebe’s Things Fall Apart and Rótìmí’s The Gods Are Not to Blame. He submits that because proverbs are not so commonly found in the British English language usage, Nigerian writers, in a bid to reflect the Nigerian ethos and culture, resort to expressing these proverbs in Nigerian English. Adédiméji linked the examinations of the truth proverbs to the different theories of types of meaning.14 In all, the proverbs appeal to all possible senses of interpretation. Thus, meanings of proverbs may not easily be discerned except by the addressee put to bear on the structure of some unstated connotations. In the end, the writer classifies the proverbs into types, namely: rhetorical, epistemological, philosophical/analytic and didactic.

Sheba reveals the result of language contact by examining Yorùbá proverbs that are Nupe, Hausa and Fulani oriented. To Sheba, the images of these ethnic groups are reflected in these Yorùbá proverbs. In her view, though these proverbs may result from some joking relationship, which might exist between these
speech communities, they nevertheless carry with them some images. Agbájé submits that proverbs in Yorùbá not only help to affirm the people’s philosophical beliefs but also help to educate the populace. He identifies proverbs, philosophy, and education as universal themes of knowledge. Agbájé, in his analysis, highlights some proverbs in the language identifying the relationship which exists between them and the philosophy and education of the Yorùbá people.

Adéníyi (forthcoming) takes a look at how Yorùbá proverbs, by extension, have come to name the Yorùbá people. In his view, the use of such proverbs as names suggests the socio-cultural elements that surround the birth of the person in question. In all, though these names may not take the structure of their related proverbs, the parts used are suggestive of the proverbs.

**Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings**

In this sub-section, we look at the interplay between language and culture with particular reference to the use of proverbs and proverb-related expressions in the condolences of EYESISN. We thus examine the intellectual and artistic activities of informants by their use of proverbs in this social phenomenon. We see, for instance, how these expressions are used to show politeness and even much more by their carrying additional underlying meanings. Some socio-linguistic and quasi-semantic factors are essential in the interpretation of a discourse in a communicative event. For instance, the contexts of discourse, the culture, social values, participants’ background knowledge as well as their mutual contextual beliefs, entailments and presupposition are all required to ensure the flow of a logical conclusion of topic. Such is the case with proverbs in condolences of EYESISN.

**Illustration 1: It is said that a good tree does not last long in the forest.**

This condolence is a direct translation of the Yorùbá proverb, “Igi tó dára kò kí í pé nígbó” (The valuable tree is soon felled in the bush). We understand a number of implications from this condolence. First, the dead who is talked about died prematurely. Secondly, he must have been a person appreciated in the society for his good conduct or generosity. And thirdly, though not clearly stated, just as the tree is felled in the forest, so also the proverb implies that the premature death talked about could have been the handiwork of some evil ones. This proverb not only recognizes the importance of the dead person but also helps to sound a warning to both the bereaved and the listeners around. Does it imply, for instance, that in order not to be terminated prematurely an individual has to live a life not beneficiary to other members of his society? In the other
sense, could it be a warning that one should be careful how he relates with his fellow human beings even when he is still of help to them?

Generally, therefore, the addressee’s interpretation of this condolence and his comprehension of it are based on some understanding between him and the speaker. Usually, participants in discourse are able to read more to a given utterance depending on their shared background knowledge. They tend in this situation to cut off other persons who may not share in the context known to them. Bernstein, referring to this shared mutual contextual beliefs, distinguished between particularistic and universalistic meanings. In particularistic meaning, the understanding of messages in discourse is limited to only participants who share the same background knowledge. On the other hand, all participants, in universalistic meaning, understand the meanings of utterances.17

Illustration 2: Life is like a walking stick on which we lean.

This witty saying suggests that the prop, life, on which man leans, could be broken unexpectedly. It reflects a universal truth that life is not permanent. Thus life like the stick is a support and not the substance. The question here is “for how long will the stick carry anybody?” This condolence may really be employed to produce an indirect speech act of warning to the bereaved. With propositions, Searle identified the possibility of having identical grammatical structures performing different illocutionary acts. Being different illocutionary acts notwithstanding, in the performance of each of the identical structures, the speaker will be characteristically performing some subsidiary acts, which are common to all acts. It is this common context that Searle refers to as proposition.

Illustration 3: This world is just a small world.

There is a sense of indirectness in this condolence. The expression may get beyond sympathizing with the bereaved to informing both the bereaved and other participants present about the brevity of life. This condolence, a witty saying, is swollen with meaning. Thus, we need knowledge of a number of extralinguistic pieces of information to understand the intention of the speaker. Searle based his explanation of the notion of meaning on Grice’s analysis of meaning. As Grice presents it, one sense of the notion of meaning in claiming that A meant something by X is to say that, ‘A intended the utterance of X to produce some effect in an audience by means of recognition of this intention.’ This analysis, to Searle, shows the close relationship between the notion of meaning and the notion of intention.18 It also helps to capture the speaker’s intention in discourse; this intention is an attempt to present exactly what
message the speaker wanted to pass across. The notion intended by the use of the word, *small* is not that of size but of period.

**Illustration 4: The fall of dead leaves is a warning to the green ones. E se dàadàa (Be good).**

This condolence like that in illustration 3 above is more of a warning than sympathy. So much is brought to bear on its understanding as a warning though. The perlocutionary act expressed here concerns the force this speech act has on the thoughts, beliefs or actions of the reader(s) or hearer(s). To Searle:

In the performance of an illocutionary act, the speaker intends to produce a certain effect by means of getting the hearer to recognize his intention to produce that effect, and furthermore, if he is using words literally, he intends his recognition to be achieved by virtue of the fact that the rules for using the expressions he utters associate the expressions with the production of this effect.¹⁹

The *dead leaves* symbolically relate to the dead while the green ones (i.e. leaves) refer to the living. The warning therefore lies in the fact that what befell the dead leaves could also happen to the green leaves. To complement this intention is the speaker’s related act, “e se dàadàa” which means “Be good.” This is an instance of code switching.

**Illustration 5: The breadwinner is dead and the house is now desolate.**

This condolence is a direct translation of the Yorùbá proverb, “Báalé ilé kú, ilé d’ahoro” (The head of the home dies and the home becomes desolate). Literally, the house may not be desolate but there is an appeal to emotion here. Similarly, the breadwinner, as used here, may not be in the literal sense of it. His person and not his money may be the thing desired.

**Conclusion**

As important as proverbs and witty sayings are in the day-to-day running of the Yorùbá society, they are rarely found in natural condolence discourses though they feature in the condolence registers. Their sparing use in the spoken register suggests one of two things. The first is that the linguistic framework itself, that is, that of condoling with the bereaved, does not put participants in a right psychological state of mind to bring about their frequent use. After all, since expressions do not come easily in condolences there may readily not be
too many proverbs to describe the activities of this social phenomenon being a human affair usually unplanned for. Again the participants and the context of discourse may index the disparity. Ordinarily, condolences in natural speech are directed at the bereaved, so the use of proverbs and witty sayings in this instance may not suppress but rekindle sorrow.

However, because the condolence register is available to many, the use of proverbs or witty sayings may become appropriate. Moreover, since there is usually a degree of anonymity in condolence registers, the use of proverbs could be allowed. If proverbs are the byproducts of the masses rather than of the classes as believed by Agbájé, does their sparing use in condolences suggest the unpreparedness of the masses for death? Does their infrequent usage in condolences in any way make members unwise? Not at all! The explanation here is that though we may not have proverbs that are directly associated with condolences, similar forms which are proverbial in form and connected with other social events may be employed in condolences. What do we say of this condolence, a word is enough for the wise when said to the bereaved, for instance? The idea therefore is that, apart from these proverbs saying much more than they represent on the surface level, their usage strictly restricts understanding of a given message to only the participants in discourse.

Notes


7. Ibid.


11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., 12.


Chapter 9

CULTURE, MEANING, AND PROVERBS

Adélékè Adéékó

With philosophers, literary and cultural critics, ethnographers, anthropologists, language pragmatists, and jurisprudents all involved in what could be characterized as the search for its source code, the proverb has incurred the greatest scrutiny from the most diverse tribes of scholars. Unfortunately, the variety of perspectives brought to this work has not clarified things. The more closely scholars examine the proverb, the less readers know about its essential nature; the more pronouncements are hazarded about its constitutive properties, the less assured the reader gets. The proverb is always about something else and hardly ever about itself. It slaves so assiduously to preserve traditional ethos that it leaves no visible traces of the attributes that enable it to carry on. When it is not serving tradition, the proverb rents itself out, free of charge, to numberless communications that cannot voice their will or intention without help. Any time the Yorùbá divination priest is asked “kínni Ifá wí” (what does the divination God say), the formulaic response always declares, “òwe n’Ifá ńpa” (Ifá speaks in proverbs). That is, the oracle speaks in yet-to-be-decoded figurative language. The proverb is the spokesperson, the “spokesfigure” more precisely, of an investigation protocol supervised by a divinity! Countless studies document the proverb performing its assigned tasks selflessly. However, when the time for analysis comes, little credit goes to the proverb; its cousin, metaphor, takes all the accolades. This chapter seeks to let the proverb be, and to ask communicators to look for other tropes to pick on.
A Yorùbá language proverb recommends that a gourmand should work his or her way into the center of a wrap of delicious steamed bean mush from the flat end (ibi pêlebe ni a ti ŋmú ọ`le`le` je). That is why I want to start with three proverb definitions and use Oyekan Owomoyela’s Yorùbá-based account as the flattest end of the serving. According to Owomoyela, the proverb is “a speech form that likens, or compares, one thing or situation to another, highlighting the essential similarities that the two share. In Yorùbá usage it is always at least one complete sentence” (Yorùbá Proverbs 3). In response to the heavy emphasis on difference and its entailments in Yorùbá terms for text and meaning, Owomoyela presents the proverb as a tool for synthesizing meaningful deictics out of ordinarily disparate concepts and ideas.1

Relying on materials from the Haya language in Tanzania, Peter Seitel’s most recent work describes the proverb’s distinctive features thus: “explicit and/or implicit reasoning, distinctively stylized language, forceful thematic statement, a characteristic kind of contextualization combining reference to the vivid present and the wider horizon, and different forms of embeddedness in the syntactic and interactional structures of speech” (36). For the Haya and the Yorùbá, proverb usage connects the utterance at hand to a much larger universe of intentions. Neal Norrick’s study of English language proverbs produces the following definition: “a ready-made utterance with a standard ideational meaning and perhaps a standard textual and/or interactional meaning as well, [with which] the speaker avoids the necessity of formulating an original utterance of his own” (25). The proverb user quotes from a linguistically and culturally delimited body of anonymously authored texts to make both evaluative and argumentative judgments without having to start from scratch. In English speech, proverbs are mainly text-making tools. The convergence points in these definitions are as follow: (i) in the ideal, fully formed state, proverbs are semantically complete texts; (ii) prior to usage, the dictionary meanings of a proverb’s lexis add up to a literal statement; (iii) during usage, a proverb’s lexical items enter fields of meaning wider than can be entered in dictionaries and anthologies; (iv) being full utterances, proverbs relieve speakers of the need to author new articulations.

An irremediable but determinant tension still lurks in these descriptions. On one hand, proverbs represent material preservations of vetted meanings that live on in conspicuous language. The sayings persist in mature speakers who hand them down from generation to generation, thereby perpetuating traces of each tradition’s cultural consensus. From this angle, the proverb is a well spoken but willful agent of culture, thought, and tradition. On the other hand, proverbs survive only in the contingent, fleeting—I hesitate to say flippant—moments of recall and usage; that is, they subject traditional thought and culture to contextual wiles. Within this perspective, the proverb resembles the
proverbial messenger that cannot not choose its message. Comprehending the proverb without assessing the value of its cultural rootedness sounds unthinkable; neglecting the untethered “face value” of its terms, prevarications and all, is no less grim. The proverb’s typically prominent mechanics of tangibility, including compelling imageries and arresting logic, valorizes appearance. Under usage conventions, however, the facade has to be peeled back (if not peeled off) to reveal the columns of meaning behind it. This chapter proposes that the tension be left unresolved because it is constitutive. The proverb, not unlike the needle that mends other holes in spite of the unpatched one on its back, carries out its tasks on the strength of the tension between the contingent, lexical face value and deeper cultural meaning. Proverbs work because they productively cross-hatch continuity and contingency. To use the idiom of ordinary language semantics, proverbs are performative utterances that weld syntax and conventions to create (and not just to reflect) desires.

**Proverbs on Proverbs: Message or Messenger**

In some European and Mediterranean traditions, proverbs are spoken about mainly as ornaments of well wrought and carefully sorted propositions. The Arabic proverb, for example, is not real food but the spice added to the main dish (“a proverb is to speech what salt is to food”), and in Hebrew, proverbs, like garden flowers, exist to induce emotional pleasure (“what flowers are to gardens, spices to food, gems to a garment, and stars to heaven, such are proverbs interwoven in speech”). Many African traditions think of proverbs as facilitators of conversations and also as materials for plumbing the inner landscape of discourse strategies: a digestive herb or soothing vegetable oil in Igbo, a bowl of soup in Birom, flesh to a skeleton in Zulu (Ojoade, “African Proverbs on Proverbs” 20). Syntactically, sayings that represent proverbs as decorators of speech and thought, or as agents of other pleasures, usually take on the form of “A is B” or “A is like B” constructions, where “A” is the proverb and “B” is either the cultural theme that the proverb expresses or some remarks on the proverb’s appearance. The large representation of “A is B” sentences in proverbs about proverbs encourages the dominant view in paremiology that proverbs are metaphors by other means. Proverb-is-metaphor explanations, hardly ever pausing to consider the implications of their un-proverbial appearance, unfold as if that represents the literal, “natural” state of things.

Translations of the Yorùbá meta-proverb, “òwọ leṣin ṣọ́rọ; bí ṣọ́rọ bá sọnù, òwọ la fí ì́wá a” (the proverb is the horse of the word; when the word is lost, it is the proverb that we use to look for it), towards the closed “A is B” syntax that is not quite the case in the more open-ended original permits the suspicion I am going to pursue here that the metaphoric reading of proverbs owes more to the scholars’ analytical paradigm than to the folk conception presumed to
inhere in “A is B” proverbs about proverbs. Ojoade’s rendering of the Yoruba saying as “a proverb is the horse of conversation; (thus) when the conversation droops, a proverb revives it,” in the study from which I took all the flower of speech sayings mentioned above, over-translates the original to emphasize the discourse agent theme that has ruled academic studies of proverbs since Aristotle. Ojoade speaks the Ilaje dialect of Yoruba with native competence and is presumed to know that the “A is B” introit of the original (“the proverb is the horse of words”) does not carry over to the other part. To make the whole saying cohere around the “A is B” formulation, however, Ojoade introduces ebbing and resurgence, discourse flow features not mentioned in the original. He adds the English language duration linker “thus” to construct a happy-ending allegory that illustrates how proverb usage approximates conversation reclamation. Ojoade reconfigures the open-ended original into a discourse elixir in order to produce a transcultural discourse helper theory of the proverb that works alike in Birom, Idoma, Igbo, Arabic, Hebrew, Ovambo, and Latin.

One need not be an apostle of radical difference in matters pertaining to cultures to conclude that the conceptual uniformity sought in Ojoade’s translation derives more from the “A is B” framework than from a common thread in his informing texts. Some sayings, according to Ojoade, remark the national peculiarities of proverb functions: “proverbs are the affairs of the nation” (Kikongo); “as the country, so the proverb” (German). Other proverbs Ojoade cites about proverb usage do not support the transcultural thesis. The sayings, typically lacking the “is” predicate, are longer, they are more difficult to attach to an overriding figure of speech, and the controlling imageries vary widely. Jarawa speakers use the proverb to “sell” their less-discerning opponents and to “end long talks.” The discourse closure function of proverbs in Krobo carries a more bellicose tone; it is not unlike “spearing animals with a pointed raffia midrib.” The Hausa, too, speak of proverb usage as verbal dueling.

I want to further illustrate how the proverb-is-metaphor viewpoint drives English language translations of the Yoruba “word’s horse” saying, particularly of its key term, the word or lexis (ọrọ). The saying is often translated into English because the opening part positions proverbs as word substitutes; that is, the proverb is the word’s horse in the manner that the Latin “pro-verbo” works in the word’s behalf. In their 1973 collection, Owomoyela and Lindfors render the saying thus: “Proverbs are the horses of speech; if communication is lost, we use proverbs to retrieve it.” They translate “the word” (ọrọ) as “speech” in one part and “communication” in the other to fit the theoretical assumption which insists that proverbs, in their true form, facilitate conversations, or “speech,” one of the several terms in the semantic range of the Yoruba ọrọ (the word). To avoid repeating the same term in the other part of the proverb, Owomoyela and Lindfors substitute the synonym “communication,” another translation still in
the meaning orbit of ọrọ (the word). In his massive, solo-edited collection published in 2005, Owomoyela translates the “word’s horse” saying in two different ways. The body of the anthology says “proverbs are the horses of communication; if communication is lost, proverbs are what one uses to find it” and glosses the saying as “effective discourse is impossible without resort to proverbs” (497). This version straightens out the earlier book and represents ọrọ (the word) consistently as communication. The implication remains, however, that the word (ọrọ) cannot be permanently lost. Proverb usage, the translations imply, counters the threat of miscarried lexis and helps manage the successful delivery of intentions. Owomoyela thus constructs the proverb as something communicators ride towards securing the integrity of message delivery channels.

The long, theoretical overview of the 2005 volume introduces still another translation: “the proverb is the horse of speech / When speech is lost, the proverb is the means we use to hunt for it” (12). The saying is now interpreted to mean a way of insisting “that bereft of proverbs, speech flounders and falls short of its mark, whereas aided by them communication is fleet and unerring” (12). Proverbs perform these functions because they “are held to express unexceptionable truths, albeit with some qualification, [and] their use is tantamount to an appeal to established authority” (12).

Owomoyela’s three translations render ọrọ (the word) as speech and/or communication but never as “word.” The variations are symptomatic not just because Owomoyela is a dominant figure in modern proverb studies but also because his writings on African thought and expressive cultures always put his unparalleled command of English and Yorùbá to the service of the endogenous view of things. These are the reasons it is remarkable that in the examples above, Owomoyela analyzes the nature of the proverb with information from Yorùbá sources without quite following the lead of the source language with regard to the central term of the all-important “word’s horse” saying, ọrọ (the word). His translations follow the Oxford English Dictionary route, where communication means “the imparting, conveying, or exchange of ideas, knowledge, information, etc. (whether by speech, writing, or signs).” Of course, communication could be a synonym of ọrọ (the word) when considered in the context of expressions generally. The most surprising and revealing part of Owomoyela’s translations is that they place the proverb outside of communication, as if proverbs were not speech but mere delivery agents. Although he declares rather stringently that “a proverb that has no truth value, however inventive or striking its imagery, is of no value” (Yorùbá Proverbs 16), Owomoyela restrains from advancing this firmly held understanding as the speech or communication of the proverb qua proverb.

To further explore the possible reasons for Owomoyela’s handling of ọrọ (the word), I consider it fruitful to look into how he treats the same term in
another proverb about the word, ọ`rọ`: “ẹyin lọ`rọ`, bí ó bá balẹ `, fifọ´ ló ńfọ´” (the word is an egg, once it falls, it cracks). The 1973 translation says “words are like eggs; when they drop, they scatter” and glosses the proverb to imply cautioning “a person to carefully consider his words before uttering them,” the reason being that “words, once said, cannot be unsaid, just as a broken egg cannot be put together again” (35). This translation changes a metaphor (the word is an egg) into a simile (words are like eggs). Unlike the situation in the “word’s horse” saying, ọ`rọ` (the word) is rendered literally as the word and the bare materiality of the signifier is reflected. Eleven years later, however, another translation is developed: “speech is an egg, when dropped it shatters” (11). The metaphor of the original is retained but ọ`rọ` (the word) is now “speech.” Furthermore, the 1973 translation is in the active voice, with the proverbial word dropping and breaking on its own volition. In the later version, the passive construction adopted elides the dropper. The suggested meaning also expands in the newer translation: “the message is that once speech is uttered it cannot be recalled; it might be retracted, corrected, regretted, or repudiated, but the state of never-having-been-uttered can never be re-achieved” (11). The new interpretation includes discourse reception management strategies—retraction, correction, repudiation—that are not in the original. The 2005 collection translates the saying as: “Words are eggs; when they drop on the floor, they shatter into pieces.” The metaphor-making syntax and the active voice construction in the original are retained; ọ`rọ` (the word) is translated literally; and the discourse management extrapolations of the 1974 versions are excluded. The new meaning now says, “words are delicate things; once spoken, they cannot be retrieved” (168).

The clue to Owomoyela’s preference for “speech” and “communication” over the literal “word” is to be found in the 1984 essay where, analyzing evidence from Yorùbá sayings about speech etiquette, he proposes that the one work that the proverb does well is to preserve the African “philosophy of communication.” He deduces that the tendency of traditional African societies towards “ephemerality” or impermanence in issues affecting the archiving of words is not an accident but a well considered approach to the dissemination of thought. Most African communities did not develop popular technologies of engraving sounds, probably because they saw no wisdom in making permanent records of speech. Contrary to accepted wisdom, Owomoyela argues that the predominance of orality in African societies did not result from a lack of technical know-how. Yorùbá societies, for example, carry over their deep distrust of “permanence” to the era of widespread literacy in the proverb that says, “òyìnbó tó şe lèçdì ló șe résà” (the white man who made the lead pencil also made the eraser). This saying, Owomoyela suggests, demonstrates that “the Yorùbá regard the invention of the eraser as a necessary and desirable corollary to the invention of writing” (7). Contingent calculations, acute self-awareness, swift response,
or the readiness to ride the horse of conversation in whichever direction things develop, govern Yorùbá speech. Yorùbá societies favor “proverbial overt explicit communication” and “oral ephemerality over literal permanence.” The cold indifference inherent to the materials of preserving words in permanent forms lacks the “softness, delicacy and wispiness” (8) of warm, ephemeral speech.

In a radical move that has gone unnoticed for the most part, Owomoyela opposes orality to literality and figurality to literacy and recommends the first item in each binary as underlying drivers of African thought on communication. He says that “societies with a writing tradition” are literal in their communication practice; they prefer “directness and precision in communication” (8). In contrast, “those with an oral tradition favor circuitousness and opacity” (8). The advantages of figuration’s nimbleness and suppleness, attributes inherent to proverb-governed discourses, seem to have inspired Owomoyela’s portrayal of Ṽ̀rò̀ (the word) as speech and communication. For Owomoyela, “speech” and “communication” endow words with intention and free them from the word’s cold literality (or materiality). It makes practical sense, he therefore argues, that the “word’s horse” saying should construct the proverbial “word” in the form of a horse that speakers ride to deliver messages. Owomoyela’s ideal Yorùbá speaker is not interested in the fate of words as words but in their serviceability for the delivery of messages.

A significant irony attends Owomoyela’s thinking on proverbs as sketched above. He argues for ephemerality but discounts the “face value” meaning of the keyword Ṽ̀rò̀ (the word) in the “word’s horse” saying. Also, the “white man and the eraser” proverb that is said to embody ephemerality serves as the evidence of a permanent philosophy. In both instances, the proverb means more than its literal terms spell out. Nonetheless, reading beyond the literal, beyond the cold word (Ṽrò̀), to the communicated is far from easy; indeed, I am not sure we can prove that the ephemeral cover of proverbial words carries a full, obvious meaning independent of all extended possibilities. Even when we focus on extended meanings exclusively, assuming for a moment that it is possible to do so, the face value of the cold, material saying is still implicated. Hence, the “white man and the eraser” proverb loses its virtuous meaning when it absolves perjury or justifies corrupt alterations of written records.

**Text contra Context in Proverbs**

Mining the face value meaning of proverbs allows Mineke Schipper to confront women’s unfavorable placement in tradition’s deep structure:

> When authors talk about the general consensus on proverbs and their objectivity as a source of information, they often idealize, nostalgically and romantically, their eternal truth, indestructible roots
and indispensable wisdom, as guards of social harmony and good
conduct. For the time being, it seems justified to ask some questions
on the speaker’s (gender) perspective and interests before taking the
general consensus for granted” (Source of All Evil, 5).

Her study of face value signification shows that many phrases stocked in
proverbs are depositories of prejudices, perhaps outright misogyny, and that
they place women at a significant cultural and political disadvantage. When it
is insisted in Shona that “one who applies proverbs gets what s/he wants,” it is
undeniable that sayings that denigrate women grant “authoritative validity” to
men seeking to manipulate the world against women’s interests. Syntactically,
the Lingala saying, “woman is like the earth: everyone sits down on her” (24)
operates as if the claims were natural facts. The declarative form of the first part
of the Fulani proverb from Senegal that says, “Woman is fire. If you have to, take
a little” presents a prejudice as a scientific claim. Each of these sayings plies its
users’ cultural ethos and directs men to mistreat women.9

I will not examine the merit of Schipper’s claims about women’s status
but will rather comment on her face-value theory of proverbs, which focuses
on how the palpable shape of the material signifier directly involves itself in
the meaning making process.10 The proverb’s literal signification in itself ought
to count for something, Schipper implies. A proverbial saying’s getting into
the cultural inventory means that it expresses some important idea, includ-
ing thoughts on patterns of gender relations. In Yorùbá language, they say ẹ̣ sẹ́
kìí ẹsẹ́ láṣán (the fist does not fist on account of nothing). The commonsensi-
cal appeal of the face-value contents of proverbs is the reason we quote them,
as I just did above, in cultural analysis. But this very important and popular
view of proverbial meaning, that the proverb means what it says, needs further
emendation because even the material sign means something only if it carries
traces of differences and similarities with other signs. The Yorùbá expression
that says “a woman who wants something for her stew will not give up looking
until she finds it” (àwárí lobinrin ńwá nńkan ọbẹ́) clearly ties domestic chores to
sex roles.11 However, because anatomical sex does not equate to discursive sex or
gender, we should imagine this proverb implying that males who need to cook
must find the right ingredients too. As proverbially true as it is in Yorùbá that
“without a cause, women are never named Death-Took-the-Heir-Apparent” (bí
kò bá nídìí, obìnrin kìí jẹ́ Kúmólú), the face value meaning does not preclude
the fact that men also get to be named Kúmólú (Death-Took-the-Heir-Appar-
ent) only when a strong cause indicates it. In other words, the foundation of a
proverb’s significance concerns more than the explicit phrases of the inventoried
saying.

Subordinating medium to content, as face value studies do, ranks prevailing
interests and explicit contexts very high within meaning construction factors.
The structure that holds contents together ranks not so high because it merely serves to contain the spirit of immediate and remote production circumstances. Hence, those who translate ọ̀rọ̀ (the word) as speech/communication in the “word’s horse” saying emphasize context in their understanding of the nature of the proverb. For them, speakers ride the word’s horse to fit performance contexts to their broader cultural (or semantic) antecedents. We quote proverbs, they imply, to bring the authority of the past to bear on current interactions and to press communal influence on the processing of delivered messages. The proverb’s face value calls, maybe not whips, conversations into linear cultural order. Proverb users mount the steed of proverbial words to instate age-long semantic coherence handed down from one epoch to another. Proverbs are considered capable of transporting the past into the present because their anonymous, communal, and ancient authorship underwrites a system of quotation and of manifesting reasonableness within a speech community. The proverb-quoting speaker reassures listeners that the expressed thoughts are not arbitrary: “a child knows that the proverb used by the scolding parent was not made up by that parent. It is a proverb from the cultural past whose voice speaks truth in traditional terms. It is the ‘One,’ the ‘Elders,’ or the ‘They’ in ‘They say,’ who direct. The parent is but the instrument through which the proverb speaks to the audience” (Arewa and Dundes 70). In this conception of folk historicist reasoning, the most effective and easily communicated ideas in quoted proverbs recreate the past, even if the audience—the child, for example—cannot recognize its details. The glossaries—ideational meaning, according to Norrick—attached to proverb inventories are apparitions of cultural presence. In face-value readings of proverbs, the horse rider in the “words’ horse” saying either revives or discovers something or catches up with it in every quotation. While quoting proverbs is not unlike citing “the Bible, Shakespeare or any other source felt to be part of the cultural heritage of the community as a whole,” the proverb user is deemed to “disappear as an individual directive agent” (Norrick 26).12

Accounting for difference is the main problem here: how is the past not the present; what separates the literal from the figural, the event from its textuation, culture from the individual, text from contexts, etc. It is apparent to me that proverb usage does not remove difference in these binaries, in spite of the eminent logical sense proposed by communicationist and face value models discussed above. The folk recognition of the difference between the present and the past, for example, is evident in their quoting the past. The act of quoting, assuming that it is the past that is being quoted, makes temporal difference perceptible. The surface meaning of the quoted text plies the similarity of the occasion at hand with antecedents. By the same gesture, however, the difference between the two temporal spheres is marked. I have not come across a proverb about proverbs that claims to portray meaning, intentions, logical relations,
cultural ethos, age old wisdom, etc., in their naked forms. To the contrary, proverbs speak of the capacity to generate similarities, differences, and comparisons: ohun tó bá jò’hun la fí ń wé’ra wọn (semblance is the basis of comparison), says one Yorùbá proverb. The common English translation of a similar proverb in Igbo says, “where one thing stands another will stand by it.” Proverbs, it seems, do not make things stand on their own. In the “word’s horse” example, the proverb becomes the horse only in the course of a continuing, contingent set of exchange activities. Without the loss of words, the horse is a horse, and the word is the word. Proverb users ride the horse made available to them when the word is lost. The saying does not promise recovery or, in other words, a return to the sameness of equilibrium.

Proverb anthologists grudgingly concede that meaning glossaries attached to sayings cannot fix proverbs for good and place them outside of the relentless comparisons within which meanings are hatched in conversations. Most anthologists plead that inventoried meanings are only samples and that the theoretically indeterminable number of contexts in which a saying can appear makes any proverb interpretation provisional. To my mind, this admission does not go far enough, because it does not reflect the centrality of polyvocality—not just polysemy—to proverb pragmatics.13

The importance of the play of difference to the being of proverbs is remarked most poignantly in what Raji-Oyelade names as “post-proverbials,” that is, new sayings that command attention and instantly get into the inventory by flaunting their awareness of tradition in the way they distort the logic and syntax of older texts. In one such popular “de-formation” the pathos-filled adage that says “màálù tí ó nírù, Olúwa ní lẹ́sinṣin fún un” (as for a cow that has no tail, God swats flies for it) becomes “màálù tí ó nírù, ó wà ní Sábó” (as for the cow that has no tail, it is at the livestock market)14 (77; translation modified). In post-proverbials, the supplementary structure of the new, flippant creation betrays the not-quite-not original status of the older proverb while facetiously brandishing the new one’s dubious claim to originality. When “ẹsin iwájú ní àwọn tèyin ñwò sáré” (the leading horse is an example to other racers) becomes “ẹsin iwájú ló gba ipò kinní” (the leading horse takes first position), the supplement fills the syntactic slots in the original differently, and marks for emphasis the significant role of substitution in proverb usage. The supplement’s hyper-competence betrays the arbitrary character of the canonical form. The logic and syntax of disaffirmation in post-proverbials defame allegedly ponderous wisdom and privilege profane literalism over high poetry. From within the culture, they loosen the hold of tradition on proverb usage. Raji-Oyelade praises these schizoid constructions that simultaneously recognize and misrecognize antecedence as the product of fecund thinking and imagination. Only
those who are competent in the workings of tradition but do not hold them sacrosanct can invent such texts, his research shows.

I would like to think that the playful marking of difference is not native only to post-modern sensibilities. The post-proverbial’s refusal to cede authority to the original’s temporal priority, and the straight-faced commitment to the possibility of reconfiguration, both manifest foundational features in proverb structure. Only a proverbial sentiment would, for example, hail the spoken word as “ọ̀rọ̀, ajepomápònón” (the word, one that subsists on red palm-oil without soiling itself). In this epithet, the meaning of proverbial words does not arise organically from what they ordinarily signify; palm-oil’s substantive redness loses its determinant power in the discursive realm where cold indifference rules. The word, as it were, bleaches redness out of palm-oil and absorbs its residue too. The aphorism’s force field nullifies substantiveness. I should not be understood to be arguing that proverbs erase difference without traces. They do not; after all, we still know that the word “ate” the palm oil. All I am suggesting is that proverbs manage the differences between the past and the present, literality and figuration, by transforming the alleged substantive elements of each term so that meaning-generating comparisons can continue.

How then should we think about the relationship of the contents of largely pre-formed texts like proverbs to their quotation context? Do pre-formed texts come with ante-contexts that affect usage? What is the role of antecedent situations in how proverbs create inter-texts? These theoretical considerations are well illustrated in students’ responses to the proverb used as an essay prompt in the January 1963 University of London’s GCE O/Level Yorùbá examination: “Ẹni bá sọ̀kò sọ̀já, ará ilé ẹni ní í bá” (if one throws a stone into the crowded market, it hits a relative) (Rowlands 250; translation modified). Rowlands observes in his analysis of 214 answer scripts that an overwhelming number wrote supplementary narratives with a full complement of characters, events, and plots. The story elements were drawn from published collections of folk tales, a school reader, and personal experiences. A very small group invented original stories and a still smaller proportion, precisely six percent, approached the question “in a manner which one might be expected to adopt in an English essay,” i.e., without reference to a narrative supplement. Rowlands views the students’ manner of essaying as the continuation in modernity of Yorùbá tradition’s “association of proverbs and moral tales” (251). Failing to acknowledge the value of supplementarity in the symbiotic relation of proverbs and narratives, Rowlands implies that Yorùbá students, contrary to what they are taught in schools, rely on tradition’s ready-made content and form to construct evaluative arguments even in a situation that calls for a unique, synthetic exposition. The stone throwing proverb also comes up for discussion in the middle of Alàgbà Šùpò Košémáníi’s Òwe ìtì Asòyán Òrò Yorùbá, a book that reverses the
convention of using story-telling occasions to exercise a stray proverb or two; here, proverbs are the primary subjects and stories serve as tools of creating contexts. Before I get to Kosémáníi’s handling of the “stone throwing” proverb, I want to say a little more about the book’s unique approach to proverb analysis. The book consists of six extended dialogues between an elderly male, Alábà Kosémáníi (literally Indispensable Elder), and two younger men. The conversations open with an obviously literate young man, Òmò Baba (child of the Older Male), seeking instruction from Alábà (Elder) on proverbs and idiomatic expressions. Unlike the insistence in many ethnographic works that proverbs cannot be genuinely elicited outside of a “natural” context, the old man gladly agrees to teach his young ward. He even encourages the young man to take written notes and bring along an audio recording device. These two characters are not social equals, although their interaction is dominated by sheer banter. The second young man, Adésinà, joins the conversation during the third session. The “transcribed” dramatic dialogues and situations began as a talk show on the radio network of the Òyó state government’s broadcasting service. The book is neither an anthology of proverbs nor a conventional scholarly analysis, yet the serious venture of gathering and analyzing proverbs occasions its being.

The young interviewers approached the right person to remedy their cultural lack, probably because they knew that “it is only in the mouth of the elder that the kolanut is ripe” (ẹnu àgbà lobi ńgbó). But because one does not take to monotheism without monotheism taking something away from the convert (“a kii gba igbágbó ki igbágbó má gba níkan lówó eni”), the age-appropriate informant asks his acolytes to create a permanent record of his expertise for future reference. In the give-and-take exchange, the orality/literacy scholarly axioms about things moving from voice to letter, the old to the young, and the past to the present, appear to have percolated down to the folk. The exchange dynamics also indicate that proverbs can be a topic of formal inquiry to the “folk” outside of “natural” conversational contexts. I have commented as much on Kosémáníi’s book’s milieu to highlight the flexibility of contexts and also to reiterate the point proved in the response of Yorùbá students to the University of London examination that the bald citation of a proverb can cause the elicitation (and possibly the creative invention) of a context. For the University of London candidates, as well as for Kosémáníi’s students, contexts are contingent and contrived; they may serve as backdrops for proverb usage just as easily as a quotation can instigate the creation of contexts.

I want to return to the stone throwing proverb and the topic of contexts. At the beginning of the third section in Kosémáníi’s book, Òmò Baba asks whether all proverbs are associated with long narrative accounts of real life contexts, whether proverbs are condensed records of events. The old man answers that “gbogbo òwe ti àwa ń pa pelú gbólóhün méji-méta wònyí ló ní igbésì kan
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tàbí méjì tó ñ su wón” (all these short sayings are caused by some events) and adds a few moments later that “awọn itàn tì ñ su awọn ọwọ wọnyí ni ibi tì okùn wọn tì fà wá” (the stories are the origins of the proverbs) (40-41). Kośémániit’s word choice implies more than a straightforward affirmation, however, because he does not admit that the events (iṣèlè) narrated in stories associated with proverbs are historical. He also does not say that they cause the proverbs, historically speaking, although his selected predicator, su, means to excrete as well as to birth. Although he suggests causality—okùnfà—in his expansion of the first answer, the responses indicate that the proverb’s primary relationship to past events is to the discursive transformation in stories that are probably best understood as allegories, itàn olówe.19

Adésinà asks the question about the “stone throwing” proverb: “Baba, mo tún gbó tì awọn ènìyàn màà n sọ pé, bí a bá sòkò sójá, ará ilé èni nií bá. Sé èni kan tì sòkò sójá rí, tí ó ọbọ ba ará ilé wọn ni àbi èwo ni àbúró màà sòkò sì ojá tì ópò ènìyàn wá?” (Sir, I also hear people say that if one throws a stone into the crowded market, it hits a relative. Was there a time a person threw a stone into the market and injured the person’s relatives; why the saying about throwing stones into a crowded marketplace?) (65-66). Because Adésinà is ordinarily a highly perceptive young person, his expression of confusion about the historical origin of this proverb in a form that almost tips over into a post-proverbial gains the reader’s attention. Kośémániit responds with a tale of origin—itàn tì ó bì ọwé yìí (66)—that contains nothing about stone throwing or the market; it includes, however, doing harm to blood relatives inadvertently when the malicious intent to injure an innocent party miscarries.

Kośémániit’s narrative speaks of a wealthy man who, because he detests beggars, decides to get rid of a particularly pesky mendicant to whom he gives a pouch of venomous snakes disguised as a bag of alms. The rich man’s children, who see their usually stingy father give away a bag they think is filled with money, waylay the poor beggar, steal the pouch of snakes, and get bitten themselves. These are not completely innocent children, the story indicates with a little detail; they harvested the snakes for their father. Stone throwing comes in at the end of the story when the village chief who adjudicates the case of snake poisoning brought by the rich man against the beggar rules in favor of the latter. According to Kośémániit, “Baálẹ ní ọrọ bàbá olówo dàbí ọrọ èni tì ó sòkò sì ojá, tó rò pé ọtọ ni èni tì yöó bá sùgbójün tì ọkò tì ó sò ọsàdèdè orí ará ile rè. [. . .] Láti ojó tì Baálẹ yìí tì sòrò yìí ni ọrọ náà tì di ọwé.” (The village chief says that the rich man’s case resembles that of a person that throws a stone into the market thinking that it will fall on a targeted person but watches it hit a relative. The chief’s words have been a proverb since then.) (68). In this account, the terms of the chief’s judicial warning (iikilò) that later became a proverb are, on their own, elements of an allegory. The stone throwing coda is a micro-narrative
that further allegorizes the longer story about two stereotypical characters, the wicked Rich Man (Bábá Olówo) and the Poor Beggar (Alágbe). The only historical (referential) relationship between them is Koşémáníi’s re-telling of the story of the chief who first used one illustration to conclude another. In the sequence of events, the alleged origin of the proverb is a narrative commentary within another narrative about inadvertent consequences of a deliberate intent to harm another person. It cannot be clearly established that the proverb, the chief’s quoted words, did not temporally precede the story of the wicked rich man. If the chief’s words—“the rich man’s case resembles” (ọ́rọ̀ bàbá olówo dábí)—are taken literally, his reference must be to something that happened before the case at hand. As such, the proverb does not issue from the story of the allegedly causal event, but from the chief’s admonition, a supplement that relies on an antecedent case. The purported ante-textual events of the stone throwing saying, the case of the Rich Man and the Poor Beggar proverb, supplement but do not cause the chief’s words. The chief’s words, now the stone throwing proverb, refer to another story and set of events.20

Following the imperative that most studies of proverb meanings observe, Koşémáníi’s sayings are used in context. But contexts here are less synthetic than the proverbs they explain. After describing his mission at the beginning of the book, and after Koşémáníi has welcomed him, Òmọ Baba ventures a proverbial opening, saying: “Wọn ní bí ń bá ń yá kì í tún pẹ̀ mọ̀” (if it unfolds briskly, the completion never takes long). The old informant completes the saying with, “òwe Láàńtètè” (Láàńtètè’s proverb), an attribution that the young man does not know exists. Òmọ Baba therefore follows up with “Kín ni Láàńtètè ṣe baba, tí òwe náà fi jé tìrè?” (what did Láàńtètè do that makes the proverb his). Koşémáníi supplies the context by telling the story of an enthusiastic father who, in anticipation of his child’s arrival, started preparing pediatric care potions soon after his wife became pregnant. Although the story does not clarify whether Láàńtètè invented the words or they were created by observers of his anxious behaviors who attach the saying to his acts, the alleged originator’s name, “Earnestness” in English, is an allegorical device for summarizing the contents of the proverb attributed to him. Láàńtètè, the agent of contextualization, refers not to a historical person but to a figurative invention.

Koşémáníi broadens the meaning of context to an extent not normally realized in proverb studies. For instance, he collapses what we generally call meaning and context into one unit. When asked to explain “èèyàn bí ịgbín ní ihe ịgbín, ọtụta ọgụta ní ihe ọgụta” (people like snail choose snails, people like tortoise choose tortoises) (13), Koşémáníi says, “ịtụmọ́ òwe yìí ni pé, nígbà tì dindinrin ati wére bá fẹ́ jà tábí ti ìwọ̀n àlámíìmọ̀kàn méjì tābí àlààbò lààkàyè méjì bá fẹ́ fí iše wọn dí ologbọn lówò ní àwọn àgbà tó bá wà nítòsì yóò pà òwe yìí fún wọn” (this proverb means that when an imbecile and a mad person are about
to fight, or when the habitual ignorance of two ill informed persons threatens to disrupt a wise person’s focus, elders around the situation use this proverb). Meaning equates context in this example. A short while later synonymy gets into the mix when Ko.sémánií adds substitute proverbs (13). Because Ko.sémánií uses one proverb as the meaning (ìtúmọ) of another on several occasions, it looks like meaning for him implicates substitution and deferment. He says, “bi a bá ń ki won n’iré, won kì kí jè lááláé, gbọnsóri òmọ oxú ni won fi i jè ni’ tûmọ si pé ‘a ki i yìnmú, ki a tún máa sùfèe’” (“if you greet iron workers in the forge, they never answer, they only tip their nose in response’ means that ‘the person who curls his or her lip to show disbelief cannot whistle at the same time’”) (7). The expressions on either side of “means that” are two different complete proverbs. Ko.sémánií also offers two contextual explanations: (i) the cultural situation of the blacksmith’s forge (7-8) and; (ii) an imagined conversational situation that justifies a speaker’s deliberately rebuffing a distraction that threatens to take him or her off course. Meaning, contexts, and synonymy—an array of substitution and supplementation—circumscribe proverb usage.

Going by Ko.sémánií’s words, context (àsìkò or ìgbà tí a ńlò ó), meaning (ìtúmọ), and function (ohun ti a ń lò ó fún) are all related. Contexts for him involve more than “natural” dialogue situations. That the exchange on the proverb about greeting blacksmiths at work occurs in a pedagogic context (èkọ, sè òwe [11]), and not within a “natural” forge, implies that contexts are not completely separate entities that proverbs visit only when invited. The prohibition in Akan societies of the “direct elicitation of proverbs” outside of natural conversations seems not to apply to Ko.sémánií’s Yorùbá community. As Yankah reports in “Do Proverbs Contradict?, “in Ghana, “one cannot sleep except in a dream,” that is, “without discourse, one does not tell proverbs” (4). To Alàgbà Ko.sémánií, the indispensable (Yorùbá) elder, dreams are ultimate discursive inventions and not the unvarnished natural facts that the surface meaning of the Akan proverb represents them to mean.

Perhaps the most important achievement of Ko.sémánií’s book is its handling of proverb meaning as performative speech acts, isè tí à nífsè (the task we use them to accomplish). Ko.sémánií recodes the transporter model that thinks of proverb communication in terms of actions fully formed in the past in more versatile ways. The blacksmith’s forge conversation referred to above further unfolds thus:

Ômọ Baba: Òwe wo ni a tún le lò dípò òwe yìí? (What proverb can we use in place of this?)

Alàgbà Supo Ko.sémánií: Etí kì kí gbéjì. (The ear does not take in two at a time).

Ômọ Baba: Sè ikilò ni òwe yìí tábí iháwí? (Is this proverb a warning or a reproval?)
The substitute proverb—etí kìí gbéjì (the ear does not take in two at a time)—says that physiological limitations recommend that a person in the middle of an utterance must resist distractions. The linear structure of timing in speaking and hearing, this saying notes, physically debars the stacking of spoken (or heard) sounds. Processing spoken words one at a time, as the fully engaged blacksmith in the forge does, is “natural.” Important as this observation about physical limits looks, its discursive transformation in a performative speech act is perhaps more important: “the ear cannot take in two at the same time” simply mollifies, it does not warn, says Koṣémánií. The supplement does not clarify a natural fact; it effects a desire.

PROVERB MEANING AND PERFORMATIVE SPEECH ACTS

When proverb scholars discuss meaning, do they speak of synonyms, syntax-dependent logical relations, or syntax-defying performative effects? Koṣémánií’s terms, words in accord with the spirit with which J.L. Austin exposed the inadequacies of construing ordinary language meaning as approximations of thoughts and acts fully realized prior to representation for meaning, make this question pertinent. In Austin’s formulation, performative utterances fit contexts for words and words for context, but do not describe or report something already done. In his famous example, the party that says “I do” at a marriage ceremony is not reporting the doing of a marriage but “indulging in it” (6); the saying is the doing. The speaker who says “pélépélé láà pa ámükùrù abé épòn” (the gnat nested in the folds of the testicular sac ought to be picked very gently) could not be reporting a unique experience, if the quotation is a proverb. Tense and syntax notwithstanding, if the meta-proverb that says proverbs do not lie is to be believed, the saying does not report something done in the past. The statement is also not “historical” in the ordinary sense of transferring verifiable facts about a specific event because its reference is co-present with the utterance. Were an earnest interlocutor to seek clarification by asking, “is that true?” the person would have misconstrued the utterance and would have opened the path to an inadvertent post-proverbial. It is remarkable in this regard that the thousands of lines of dialogue between Koṣémánií and his young students contain no line of “sé ọótọ ni” (is it true) regarding the meaning of a proverb. It seems as if a proverb may be incorrectly applied, but not falsely so.

Austin’s accounts of how words do things by their being spoken is very useful for addressing the trouble with proverbs. Humans do something by saying something because factors other than correctly spoken words guarantee the coming to pass of the desires articulated. Felicitousness rules and conven-
tions stipulate the correct words to be said by what persons, the right ways to put them, and under what conditions. Austin blurs the distinction between utterances that report already accomplished acts and those that bring reportable acts to life and demonstrates that every saying of words constitutes a doing of things: “the utterance of certain noises, the utterance of certain words in a certain construction, and the utterance of them with a certain ‘meaning’ in the favorite philosophical sense of that word, i.e., with a certain reference” (94) constitutes “the performance of a locutionary act.” Every meaningful utterance turns ordinary noises into linguistically significant sounds according to prevailing grammatical rules and effects a worldly act as the semiotic community permits. Of course, Austin excludes poetry and jokes from ordinary thing-doing words, an issue I would like to address below.

Locutions, or semiotically intelligible speech, consist of sound (noises), grammar (the instrument of subjecting of noises to the rules of a particular language system), and reference (distributing the rule governed grammar into directives that are to be followed within a specific language and socio-political environment). Thus, Austin says,

when we perform a locutionary act, we use speech: but in what way precisely are we using it on this occasion? For there are very numerous functions of or ways in which we use speech, and it makes a great difference to our act in some sense [...] in which way and which sense we were on this occasion ‘using’ it. It makes a great difference whether we were advising, or merely suggesting, or actually ordering, whether we were strictly promising or only announcing a vague intention and so forth. (99)

The locution, “can I have that piece of meat” could be a question, a request, an order (an illocution), or a complaint (a perlocution). A university dean who responds to his colleague’s report on students’ plagiarism with “fail them all” could be issuing an order to be obeyed, or he could be mocking an officious colleague. Austin’s point is that the link between well formed statements and the acts they effect is not completely subject to the strict dictates either of grammar or of sheer cultural antecedents.

I have no evidence either of Kòsémáníi’s formal academic credentials or of his camp among semantic theorists. Undeniable in the dialogues he anchors, however, is the tendency to think of the effect of proverb use in terms analogous to Austin’s. Almost every proverb Kòsémáníi explains is attached to a performativive act, a sample chart of which is offered here.
It is not uncommon for one proverb to perform more than one speech act and for different sayings to effect a common act. In one case, six different sayings are reported capable of being used to scold an unduly boisterous person:

(i) ohun tí ó bá jo'hní a  jí í wé 'hun; èèpo èpà jò pòsí ìlèrì; àtàn pòkò jò orí ahun (semblance is the basis of comparison; the peanut shell resembles a tiny mouse’s casket; the thumb resembles a turtle’s head)

(ii) ipasẹ làá mọ àrinjọ (footprints reveal the nature of the company)

(iii) èni tí yóò yá ègbèrún òkè tì kò ní bíyá (san), kó ti ibi òkè kan bèrè (the debtor who cannot afford to repay two million should try borrowing twenty thousand first)

(iv) iyàwó tí yóò gbórán, ki í fí ojojúmọ́ bù ópa (the obedient bride does not swear every time)

(v) a kí tẹ́ tufò ìjá (delivering the sad news of a dog’s death does not require a conference of elders)

(vi) a kí yò “bá mi kí iyá mí lókò” sò (“greet my mother when you get to the farm” need not be whispered) (22).

In an even more intriguing case, one proverb carries two contradictory speech acts of commendation and denigration.

Ọmọ Baba: Ò ní itó pé lẹ́nu, ó dí wárápá (He said the saliva stays too long in the mouth, it becomes epileptic foam)

Alàgbá ́Súpò ́Kóšémányí: Béé ni, wón pàrí rè báyíí pé, . . . egbó pé lèṣè ó dí jákùtẹ̀, bí obinrin bá pé nílè ọkọ àjé ní i dà. (Yes, the saying is completed thus […] an untreated sore becomes elephantiasis, a long married woman becomes a witch)

Ọmọ Baba: Baba kín ni ọrọ jákùtẹ̀ ńtè ńtè ti jè nínú ọrọ wárápá? (Sir, what has elephantiasis got to do with epilepsy) (36)
The old man explains that epileptic foam is to sputum as witchcraft is to a woman’s long time marriage because a cultivated habit becomes second nature over time. (Of course, the biology of the premise is not scientific.) In discussing the proverb’s meaning and usage, Kösemáníí says: “Nígbà tí wọ́n bá fẹ́ fi oniáwọ́ buburú tábi oniájangbọ́ kan ẹ̀yè yìí àwùjọ́ ní wọ́n í fì irúṣẹ́ òwé yiṣeṣè pé ó tún gbé iṣẹ́ rè dé [..] A tún le òwé yìí fún ènì míé jì tí wọ́n sì ní sàdà” (this type of proverb is used to publicly ridicule a habitual trouble maker who is about to start another one... We can also use this proverb to commend upright citizens) (37). As Kwesi Yankah has argued in another context, the proverb in question does not contradict itself. Unlike Yankah’s informants, however, Kösemáníí would accept the contradiction of the two perlocutionary acts as normal.

Invoking J.L. Austin’s performative to unify the three sides (context, function, and meaning) of Kösemáníí’s explanation of proverb meaning would be easily dismissed if I were to leave unaddressed Austin’s exclusion of poetry, stage acting, and joking from ordinary language. In his original thinking about performatives, Austin argued that “normal conditions of reference” are suspended in artistic usage because their ordinary signification is “hollow or void: “a kíí ran ọmọ tí kò gbọ́n” (one should not speak in ironies to an unwise child), Austin would have said, had he been working with Yorùbá expressions (22). The Kösemáníí dialogues afford us two counter-arguments without resorting to Derrida. First, as noted above, “natural” (ordinary for Austin) contexts are contrivances of speech-making and not just the other way round. Kösemáníí and his acolytes happily make up contexts as they go along without sounding extraordinary or unduly literary—Austin too does the same. Secondly, Austin’s very modern, axiomatic submission about literary uses of language does not consider proverbial texts wherein figuration and literality routinely accommodate each other. For Kösemáníí, the danger that ironic speech poses to unwise youngsters is a discursive (which is to say historical and cultural) formulation and not a “natural” fact. Ọmọ Baba and Adéṣína, not so wise at the beginning of the book, undertake the cultural education they needed. Most importantly, if the link between locutionary noises (sounds), their illocutionary effect (the production of an impetus to do something following the grammatically correct articulation of meaningful noises), and their perlocutionary consequences (on the “feelings, thoughts, or actions” of the hearers) is not organic but conventional, as both Kösemáníí and Austin show, there is no ordinary, non-historical, linguistic ground to exclude poetry, proverbs, and other allegedly “non-serious” genres from the class of impact-producing utterances. Austin sounds right only because historical, extra-linguistic institutions that set out the broad outline of how words should mean have excluded literary languages from ordinariness. I should say in conclusion that proverbs mean according to the standards of effecting perlocutionary consequences within particular speech communities.
They always say what they mean but never in the “face value” manner often attributed to them in cultural studies. They appear to never fail to mean what they say because they enforce propriety and not truthfulness. In the language of Alàgbà Kọsémáníí, Indispensable Elder, the individual for whom a “proverbial” use of language is meant cannot but recognize it (bí òwe bá jọ tẹnì à á mọ́ òjọ).

References


Notes

1. Like the proverb (òwe), comparison (àfiwé), riddle (àlọ́), narrative (ìtàn), interpretation and translation (ìtúmọ́) all imply folding, entwinement, comparing, and, in the case of meaning, unwrapping or unfolding.

2. The gnomic Akan proverb I have reworked here says “if the proverb could really sew, it would have no hole on its back.”

3. Here is the plot summary: conversation turns wayward; speakers use the proverb to chase it down; speakers return the conversation to its proper track.

4. The “word’s horse” saying is a rather strange statement, given that the horse is a prestige item of “conspicuous consumption” in traditional Yorùbá societies, including those closest to the savannah. Horses are not native to Yorùbá kingdoms. They were introduced from the North, used mainly by the cavalry in war and for ceremonial purposes at other times. (See Law) Proverbs, of course, are not luxury items. Ajibola records two other relevant proverbs about horses: “á ki ki ńyàgò ń fún ẹ̀ṣìn ń ń ọ̀” (the “make way” honor accorded a horse rider does not extend beyond that moment). There is also “ẹ̀ni ń yìn ń ẹ̀sin lò ń mbò (the horse rider is bound to dismount) (qtd. in Law 1). As the bulk of this paper argues, these socio-historical factors cannot preclude the horse bound proverbs from flourishing.

5. Another rendering says “èyin lóhùn, bí ó bá balè, fífọ́ ló ńfọ́” (the voice is an egg, once it falls, it cracks).

6. The difference between metaphor and simile is important only in the English translation because in Yorùbá both terms are àfiwé (comparisons).

7. The new elaboration of the proverb’s meaning seems to assume that the material word is not subject to these manipulations. While a directive might be retracted, the fact of its having been uttered (its ọ̀rọ́) cannot.

8. Ojoade opens his essay on proverbs about proverbs with a similar phrasing (20).

9. This is the only topic about which Owomoyela agrees with those he normally portrays as misguided readers of African sensibilities. See African Difference, pp. 143-163, especially the section sub-titled “Gender and Proverb Usage.” See also Yorùbá Proverbs (12-14). In several essays on gender in proverbs, Yusuf covers similar ground with the face value reading methodology. Olajubu too adopts face value signification in her use of proverbial evidence.

10. She admits in the opening page of her more comprehensive, transcultural, and supra-historical analysis of proverbs and women that “those who look for differences will only find differences, but those who look for similarities will find out what people experience or have experienced jointly” (Never Marry, 1). The book teases out the similarity of women’s general denigration. For a critique of unhistorical gender studies in Yorùbá societies, see Oyèwùmí.

11. Schipper, Source of all Evil (74). The Yorùbá original would be “àwári lóbinrin ńwá níkan ọ̀bè”

12. Proverb users are so constructed because their texts lack verifiable authors, although a quotation loving person who uses Shakespeare’s words is never thought to have ceded control to the Bard.
13. Proverbs stand apart in discourse flow, and because their contents are usually at odds with the subject matter at hand, they threaten topic coherence. (See Norrick, 16, 18, and 69.) However, because we assume that our own epoch bound unity ideal for conversations defines good speech across time, we tend to explain away the significant difficulties proverbs constitute for linear thought flow by focusing on how the hidden cultural meaning serves discursive and semantic unity.

14. Òkédijí makes his protagonist’s tragedy highly memorable with the “broken” proverbs Láwúwo mouths when he loses control of his labor union and, as a result, his mental faculties. The difference between those utterances, which the playwright calls “òwe Láwúwo” (Láwúwo’s peculiar proverbs), and post-proverbials is that the latter are clever manipulations of sound minds and playful hearts. Adéékò (64-81) discusses Láwúwo. Yusuf proposes a positive use of English and Yorùbá post-proverbials--he calls them “counter-proverbs”--for battling misogyny. See “Countering Mysogyny” and also “A Semantics Classroom Connection.”

15. The phrasing is originally from Derrida’s Of Grammatology, 18.

16. Thirty of the 201 scripts “are based on a written source,” the story of Ašeeremá, sèkà in a Yorùbá third grade reader; 45, the largest number, turn on the jealous co-wife motif; 23 are stories of “treachery inspired by envy, the hope of gaining an advantage” or revenge; 20 deal with the experience of a wickedly vindictive fellow; excessive cruelty stories are also another large class among stories that do not revolve around failure of recognition. Among 30 stories that depend on “failure of recognition,” 23 are traditional and 7 deal with contemporary experience.

17. As it stands, this conclusion looks weak without a contrastive analysis of how similar students responded to “essay” prompts in other languages.

18. Translation is Owomoyela’s; (Yorùbá Proverbs, 409-10).

19. My usage of allegory as “ìtàn olówe” refers to: (i) the storytelling genre that Deirdre LaPin identifies as specific to Ìbàdàn--ìtàn tá ni pòwe or the narrative “used to tell a proverb” (33); and (ii) the translation of the standard English form in the first volume of Yorùbá Metalanguage, edited by Ayọ Bámgbósé (3).

20. The origin story of the “amúnikọluni, alán ´gbá orí è .sù” (a-creature-that-pushes-one-against-others, the lizard on the Èsù shrine) saying reiterates the incidental--and not causal--relationship of stories to proverbs (45-48). See also 54-56; 61-62; and 66-68, where Ko.sémáníí shows that etiological narratives refer to perceived first time of usage.

21. I have not been able to consult Yisa K. Yusuf’s 1996 University of Lagos (Nigeria) dissertation on speech act theory and proverbs. Going by his published articles that I have read, however, he seems to favor the “face-value” approach to proverb meaning.

22. These issues have been thrashed out in abrasive exchanges between deconstructionists and speech act theorists. See Derrida’s “Signature Event Context” and “Limited Inc” and Searle’s “Reiterating the Differences” for the initial record of the debate. Searle expands on Austin in his chapter on figurative language in Expressions and Meaning. J. Hillis Miller describes the sources of the differences between deconstruction and speech act theory.
Chapter 10

PROVERBS AS NAMES IN YORÙBÁ: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC APPRAISAL

Harrison Adéníyí

INTRODUCTION

The socio-cultural significance of naming practices in Yorùbá, as against some known cultures in other parts of the world, cannot be over-emphasized. To the Yorùbá people, not to have a name is not to exist. Naming in Yorùbá is a system of verbal coding carefully put together with lots of linguistic and socio-cultural information. The array of information, according to Ògúnwálé is a bundle of people’s folk-psychology in its entirety, which includes among many things, politics, value systems, ethics, theosophy and more.¹ In their names, Yorùbá people conceptualize and categorize elements of their physical and psychological world.

Yorùbá names are quite unique to each person. According to Johnson “When the orúko (name), the oríki and the orílè (totem) are given, the individual is distinctive, the family is known, and he can at any time be traced.”² One unique way of naming a child in Yorùbáland is to express in most cases a variety of ideas, beliefs, and maxims. Some of these names are therefore expressed proverbially. In Yorùbá culture, as in many other cultures of the world, proverbs are seen as the most impressive and effective method of expressing one’s ideas and feelings.
This chapter therefore sets out to investigate and analyze some of those Yorùbá proverbs that have now been converted into personal names. In doing this, we examine all these names to determine if they fulfill all the criteria for derived words in the Yorùbá language. Lastly, we will examine the sociological classifications of these names. Òdúyoyè, Òjó, and Adéniyì classified Yorùbá names into various categories. These include Àmutorunwa (à mú ti órun wà) ‘brought from heaven’; Abíso (à bí so) ‘given after birth’; and Oríkì ‘attributive names.’ From our investigation, it is only in abíso that we discover those names that are expressed proverbially. Hence, our discussion in this chapter will center only on abíso names.

**Proverbs and Names in Yorùbá**

Proverbs, according to Haskins and Butts, contain the wisdom of nations. Every known society has a bundle of proverbs, which serve as social controls for the citizen. Jewish tradition even suggests that nine hundred years before Christ, King Solomon (973-933 B.C.E.) authored more than 3,000 proverbs. Regardless of the culture, proverbs teach children what to expect from life and what life expects in return. From a very young age, children are taught those proverbs that are generally accepted as truth. The persistent power of proverbs gives testimony to their impact on human behavior. Through the use of images in a compact and simple sentence, the proverbs capture what a culture deems important.

Proverbs in Yorùbá are indispensable in conversation; discussion or in supporting one’s arguments. In the words of Abiódún ‘the ability to use proverbs is a skill, and a person skilled in the use (of proverbs) is regarded as an orator; an intelligent discussant.’ In fact, ability to use Yorùbá proverbs accurately is considered the hallmark of good oratory. Delano claims in this regard that:

…..no one can be considered educated or qualified to take part in communal discussions unless he is able to quote the proverbs relevant to each situation.6

Yorùbá proverbs are very rich in humor, irony and imagery, and they range in substance from human anatomy to family relationships, from children and parents to husband and wife, and from abstract wisdom to life experience. Proverbs in Yorùbá are the most impressive method for expressing one’s thoughts, ideas and feelings about issues in the society. Yorùbá proverbs also support meaningful and positive cultural values within the society. It is little wonder, therefore, that they are equally often used in Yorùbá personal names. As we know also that Yorùbá personal names often reflect Yorùbá thoughts and worldview, this category of Yorùbá personal names are therefore expressed proverbially. In the expression of these names proverbially, a lot of morpho-
phonological modifications have taken place; hence they are at the end of the day rendered as a single word and not as sentences in the form of the original proverb. For instance we have:

1. *Omo kò láyólé, eni omo sin ló bímo* (‘child’ ‘neg. mk’ reliable ‘person’ child ‘bury’ ‘has’ ‘gave’ ‘birth’).
   ‘Don’t have absolute reliance on children until you are given a befitting burial by them.’ However, the name derived from the above proverb is *omólasyólé*.

2. *Àbá ni ikán ní dá, ikán kan kò lè mu òkúta* (suggestion is termites progr. make ‘termites’ one neg. mk. can ‘eat’ stone’ ‘termites only make attempts, but they cannot eat stone’).
   No matter what, you can’t change the unchangeable). *Àbanikannda* is derived as a name.

3. *A wo ìlú má tèé, ìwòn ara rè ló mò* (nom pr. enter city neg.mk disgrace level self him is known’).
   He who enters a city (without being disgraced) knows the limit of his status. Yorùbá personal name (YPN) derived from that proverb: *Awólúmátèé* or *Awólú*.

Yorùbá names, on the other hand, are a bundle of information regarding the bearer and his entire family. Olá-Orie, quoting Oyèláràn, put this rightly when she said that in a North American context, the equivalent is a Social Security Number. As it is well known, a social security number is a distinctive number that is uniquely assigned to one person, and all vital information about that person, including birth, health, education, profession, residence, tax history, vehicle ownership, and so on, is documented using the assigned number. Access to a social security number provides access to the life of an individual. We argue here that personal names in Africa, nay Yorùbá, perform more than the functions of a SSN. This is because a Yorùbá personal name not only personifies the individual, but it also tells some story about the parents or the family of the bearer and in a more general sense, points to the values of society into which the individual is born. Yorùbá personal names provide the necessary link to the future in terms of the parents’ hopes and aspirations for the child, and to the past in terms of the connectedness of the name to the child’s ancestors or identification with a particular community. More often than not, the name is a ‘repository of accumulated meanings, practices and beliefs and a powerful linguistic means of asserting identity’.
**YORÚ Bà PROVERBS AS NAMES**

We shall attempt in this section to broadly categorize and discuss some of these proverbs sociologically. In doing this, we shall sub-categorize those proverbs that express abstract and therefore general ideas and thoughts. Although an attempt is made here to categorize proverbs according to their subjects, some cannot be so classified. We shall therefore attempt to classify these proverbs according to the sentiments they express. Some of these include individual responsibility to the society; conduct; hope for a brighter future; various areas of human behavior; general values and absolute faith in God.

The first set of names derived from proverbs includes those that stress individual responsibility within the society. The society expects him not to be indolent or lazy, as we have in:


Your arm is your kith; your elbow is your kin. (You can only rely on your hard work before you can achieve success and not on any relations.) This proverb-turned-name stresses the need for hard work without relying on any relation, as human beings are not reliable and can disappoint at any time.

Another set of proverbs-turned-name touch on human conduct within the society. Some of these include:

5. *Ìjàòdolà* from Ìjà ò dolà; orúko ló ń so ni so ni.

You can’t get rich by fighting; you can only be stigmatized within the society. This aptly talks about leading a peaceful life with one’s neighbor(s). Any attempt to pick quarrels or fight with them can only make one to be unpopular and not the other way round.

6. *Àkejù* from À kéjù níí ba omo olówó jé.

The children of the rich get rotten from being over-pampered. This tells us that one should be very cautious the way and manner one pampers one’s kids as this may have negative effect on them later on in life.

7. *Sebíotimo* – *Se bí o ti mo, eléwà sápón*.

Cut your coat according to your size, just like sapon’s bean seller. The idea that this proverb is expressing is that one must not live above one’s means as any attempt to do this will be catastrophic.
8. *Awólú* or *Awolúmatéé* in *A wo ilú má tèé, iwon ara rè ló mò*.

He who enters a town and behaves well knows his bounds. This proverb talks about one’s conduct within the society. In essence, if one does not behave well within the society, maybe by engaging in unwholesome business or causing trouble within the society, one is bound to get into trouble. But conversely, if one behaves well, one will not get into any trouble.

9. *Bojurí* as in *Bí ojú bá rí, enu a dáké*.

When the eyes see the mouth keep shut. The kernel of the proverb is that it is not everything that one sees that one ought to comment on. One should be able to restrain oneself in the way and manner one talks about everything that transpires within one’s environment.

10. *Àbánikanndá* as in *Àba ni ikán ná dá, ikán kan kò lè mu òkúta*.

The termite only makes attempts, but it cannot destroy stone. In essence, it is saying that no matter the attempt, you cannot change the unchangeable. The lesson one is expected to learn from here is that there are certain things that are naturally immutable. Any attempt to change or destroy them are efforts in vain.

11. *Aìbínuroí* as in *Aì bíñú orí kí á fi filà dé ìdodo*.

You don’t despise the head and plot a cap on the buttocks. ‘Orí’ here is one’s creator and there are some things that one is destined to have. There is therefore no amount of grudges against another person that can deny him those things that he’s destined to have.

12. *Aberùàgbà* as in *eni tí ó berù àgbà ni yóò te ilè yìí pé*.

He who respects elders will live long on this planet earth. The Yorùbá culture does not permit younger ones to disrespect elders, because it is assumed that one day, the younger ones too will become elders.

Another set of proverbs turned to personal names are those that expresses hope of a brighter future if only one can persevere. Some of these are:

13. *Báòkú* as in *Bì a kò bá kú, isè kò tán*.

If we are not dead, we can still do tangible things in life. This is a universal truism that as long as there is life, there is hope of a better future. Another proverb that is similar to the above, though it cannot be converted to the
name, is *Bì a kò bá têté kù, a òò je eran tó tó erin*. If we don’t die young, we will eat meat that is as big as an elephant.

14. *Àsekún* as in *À se kún owó, ni kí i jówó ó tán*.
You don’t get poorer ‘by working extra hard. This talks about the reward for hard work which will bring more money or which will make one to be richer, additional positive efforts increases one’s wealth.

We also have certain class of proverbs turned names that comment on human character and behavior.

15. *Ànjùwón* as *À n ju won ko se e wí lejo, ìja ìlara ko tan boro*.
Rivalry about ‘another man’s progress cannot turn into open confrontation.’ Those who are envious about another person’s progress cannot only grumble, but there is no way they can confront the person openly.

16. *Ojúlarí* as *oji ni a rí, ore ko de inu*.
You only sees the eyes of your friend but you don’t know what’s in their mind. You are taught here not to trust anybody, even your closest friends.

17. *Òrúlébájà* as in *Òrúlé bo ájá môlè, awo félé bonú, kò jé kí a rí ikùn asebi*.
As the roof covers a house, so also is the skin that covers a man’s stomach. You may not know what’s in a man’s mind with only his outward behavior. This proverb is quite similar to a phrase in one of the Shakespearean plays, which says that ‘there is no act to find a man’s construction on his face.’

18. *Eniafé* as in *Eni a fe la mo, a ko mo eni to feni*.
You only know those you love; you can’t predict those who love you until you encounter a challenge. One has to know in his heart that it is not all those you come across in your daily encounters who will love you.

19. *Ànrìnnle* as in *À ń rìn ní ilè, inú ń bí elésin*.
Despite the fact that one is downtrodden, one is still being envied by the well-to-do. This shows that anybody within the society, no matter how lowly placed he is, can be envied.

20. *Àjùmòbí* as in *À jù mò bí ó kan tàánú, eni Olórun bá rán si ni ni i se ni lóóre*.
One cannot get favor or assistance based on pity; only God-sent blessings can favor you. One is being taught here not to expect any favor based on the
pity people have for one, even those you don’t know; though God can favor anyone.

We also have a certain category of names derived from proverbs that dwell on general values. The Yorùbá are of the opinion that elders are the custodians of wisdom and knowledge. Any gathering without the elders might not know peace. This is expressed in the following names and proverbs:

21. *Àgbàòsí* as in *Àgbà kò sì ní ìlu, ilú bájé, baálé ilé kú, ilé di ahoró.*

Just as a town is in ruin because there are no elders, when the elder of the house dies, the house becomes desolate.

22. *Bólódeòkú* as in *Bí olóde kò bá kú, òde rè kò gbodò hu gbégi.*

When the owner of a courtyard is not dead, his courtyard cannot be overgrown with weeds. The assumption here is that it is probably only in one’s absence that one’s property can become degenerate. As long as one lives, one is expected to watch over them.

The only one that we have that expresses absolute faith in God is,

23. *Àbáyòmí* as in *ò tā ì bá yò mí, sùgbón oba Olúwa ni kò jé.*

My enemy should have mocked me, but God disallowed it.

The last category of names derived from proverbs includes those that express facts about life such as:

24. *Omólayòlé* as in *omo kò láyòlé, eni omo sin ló bímo.*

Don’t have absolute reliance on children until one is dead and given a befitting burial by them. Until one’s chicken is hatched, one’s is taught not to count them yet.

25. *Àtòrilàyé* as in *átòri ni ayé, tó bá fì síwájú, á tún fì séyìn.*

Life is like a pendulum, it swings both back and front. Life is not full of beds of roses; life is full of ups and downs.

26. *Ìsaleoro* as *ìsale oro ní egbin.*

The base or foundation of acquiring wealth is usually suspect. One should not envy those who are rich as they may not genuinely be able to account for the source of their wealth.
27. *Afaségbójọ* as in *a fún asé gba òjọ ń tan ara rè je*.

He who draws rain-water with a seaver is deceiving himself. Those who are indolent or lazy with a task and are thinking of getting the best from that task are only deceiving themselves.

**YORÙBÁ PROVERBS: NAMES AS WORDS**

We attempt in this section to show with concrete evidence that these categories of names derived from sentences (proverbs) are indeed words immediately after their conversion. Our evidence is based on the following criteria: positional mobility, internal stability, non-referentiality, and some morphophonological processes.9

**Positional Mobility**

After the conversion of these proverbs to personal names in Yorùbá, they have now become single words which can be moved relatively easily within the sentence. Let us consider these sentences.

28. (a) *Won lu [Àbánikánndá]*

‘they’ beat ‘name’

‘they beat Àbanikannda’

(b) *[Àbanikannda] ni wón lù *

‘name’ foc. they ‘beat’

‘It is Àbanikannda that they beat’

(c) *[Àba] ni won lù [nikánndá] *

Nom foc. they beat VP

(d) *[nikan], ni wón lù [Àba] [n da] *

VP foc. they beat Nom. VP

(e) *[nikannda] ni won lù [Àba] *

VP foc. they beat Nom.

In example 28 (a) we do not observe any movement or extraction. The movement in 27(b) is the whole nominalization. This is however, not the case in examples 28 (c-e). This clearly shows that the personal names have now become atomic units, in which case no part of the elements can be moved. This, accord-
ing to Pulleyblank and Aklnlabí, means that no element internal to a word can be moved by a syntactic operation.10

Uninterruptability

However, as sentences, these proverbs can still accommodate extraneous materials into the sentence. For instance:

29. Ayé *yìí* ni ojà, òrun ni ilé
   Nom qualifier foc. mk, Nom Vb Nn
   ‘This particular world is a market place, heaven is our home.’

30. Apá *wa* ni ara, igúnpá wa sì ni iyekan
   Nom qualifier foc. Nom, Nom qualifier Vb Nom

31. À bá *má* yo mí, oba òkè ni kò má jé
   ‘Nom.’ ‘Vb’ ‘qualifier’ ‘Vb’ ‘pro’ ‘Nom’ ‘Nom’ ‘foc’ ‘neg’ qualifier Vb

Extraneous materials introduced into these proverbs are highlighted in 29–31 above, whereas their word counterparts in Ayélojà; Apálará and Àbáyomí, respectively, cannot have any extraneous elements inserted within them. Let us consider these examples which are unattested in the language.

32. (a) *Ayeyìíloja as name*
    (b) *Apaniiara as name*
    (c) *Àbatiyomí as name*

Examples 32 (a-c) are unacceptable because of the insertion of modifiers and particle *yìí; mi* and *ti* within the personal names whereas they are fixed and non-contrastive.

Non-Referentiality

Yorùbá personal names are referentially opaque. It is not possible to refer to their parts in isolation. While it is possible to refer to the entire word as an atomic unit, any attempt at referring to any part of the personal name will render it anomalous, whereas for its sentence counterpart, this is possible. Consider this example:
33. A rí Ojúlarí lanaa, a sì na an.

‘We saw Ojúlarí yesterday, and we beat him,’ in which an makes references to the entity Ojularí.

Both Oju and larí in the construction Ojularí are referentially opaque, therefore the pronoun an cannot refer to either of the two components with the compound. When such a situation arises, the output will be ungrammatical.

34. *A rí Oju; larí lanaa a sì na an

We saw ‘eye that we see’ yesterday and we beat him’ in this case, an refers to Oju ‘eye which we see.’

**MORPHO-PHONOLOGICAL PROCESSES**

The morpho-phonological evidence for the claim that Yorùbá personal names are words are more glaring when we put them side-by-side with their phrasal counterparts. In Yorùbá, certain word-formation process such as prefixation, compounding and nominalization are very productive in the language. Simultaneously, we also have deletion of vowel segments at morpheme boundaries in conformity with the new status of these personal names. In Yorùbá language, these morpho-phonological processes can only derive a word-level (X₀) category. It is therefore possible for some word derivational prefixes to derive a single word from almost any verb phrase without recourse to its internal structure. Most of these verb phrases used as stems for personal names derivation are obtainable only after the operation of syntactic transformations like adjunction, deletion and replacement for relativisation.

Let us consider the following personal names which are derived through the morphological processes of compounding, prefixation and lexicalization.

35. (a) isálè orò (isálè + orò)
bottom–wealth ‘The base of wealth’

(b) Àgbàòsí (àgbà + kò + sì)
‘The absence of elders’ elder + Ng mk + available

(c) Ìjaodola (ì + jà + ò + di + olà)
‘Fighting is not profitable’ pre. fight Ng mk + make + wealth

(d) Àsekún (à + se + kún)
‘Additional efforts’ Prefix-do-fun
Another productive aspect of morpho-phonological evidence is the obligatory use of the reductionist principle as enunciated by Ekúndayò. This principle indirectly eliminates complex sentences which are associated with Yorùbá personal names derived from proverbs. Since no personal name can be unnecessarily long, it then means that names constitute an infinite set of elements. This principle then becomes important in making the personal names finite and consequently manageable in the Yorùbá noun phrase. However, the length restriction does not forbid the occurrence of S on the right of the rewriting arrow in the categorical section of grammar. All the examples given above are reduced in conformity with this rule.

**Conclusion**

Our discussions above have demonstrated clearly that Yorùbá proverbs are a rich source of personal names in the language. These names not only portray the roots, structure and perspectives of Yorùbá civilization and world-views, but they also provide valuable information that are lexicalized or linguistically put together as personal names: The ability to understand clearly the structure of these proverbs-turned-names puts one in a vantage position to be able to comprehend, to a large extent, the grammar of the whole language.

As discussed above, when these words are lexicalized, they do not become a morphological entity which is now an atomic unit that can be separated by movement rules, nor can any of their elements be pronominalised.

**Notes**


Chapter 11

OWOMOYELA AND THE MODERNIST INFLECTIONS OF YORÙBÁ PROVERBS: THE CRITIQUE OF AESTHETIC INCLUSIONS

Aderemi Raji-Oyelade

Proverbs are the poetry and the moral science of the Yoruba nation. Many of them contain traditional observations on the nature of things; some educational, deal with man’s duties; and a few are simply an ingenious play upon words.

—Bishop A. B. Akinyele, “Foreword” to Ajibola’s Owe Yoruba (vii)

Perhaps it pays, momentarily, to exact an obvious conclusion from this essay: that Oyekan Owomoyela has contributed immensely to the currency and significance of Yoruba proverb scholarship, pushing its database beyond the five thousand mark. His major essays, dating back to 1971, attest to the depth of his scholarly interest, and its sustenance, in the usually devalued sub-field of proverb discourse in African studies generally. Having committed so much time to the collation, transcription and analyses of proverbs, culminating in the publication of Yoruba Proverbs¹ (2005), he commands a referential hermeneutic position to which students and other scholars of African proverbs must respond and react.

The earliest written reference in Yoruba paremiography dates back to 1843, when Samuel Ajayi Crowther’s A Vocabulary of the Yoruba Language
reproduced over 500 proverbs to explain concepts and worldview, and to aid understanding of specific words in the Yoruba language. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, A.B. Ellis included over 250 Yoruba proverbs in English translation (treated as “answers to” or “equivalent” to a couple of English sayings) in his historical book, *The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa*. However, the first major compilation of Yoruba proverbs in the twentieth century is J.O. Ajibola’s *Owe Yoruba*, which also contains 500 traditional proverbs and their English translations. Of many other publications since Ajibola’s work, three other significant collections include Isaac O. Delano’s *Owe L’Esin Òrò: Yoruba Proverbs: Their Meaning and Usage*, S.O. Bada’s *Owe Yorùbá àtì Òkèlàlè Wọn*, and R.A. Areje’s *Yoruba Proverbs*. There are other less well-known but standard collections like S.R. Ladipo’s *Egbokanla le Ogorun Owe Yoruba*, Olatubosun Oladapo’s *Egbeta Owe ‘A*’, and more recently, A.A. Kila’s *Owe: Yoruba in Proverbs* and Adebayo Ojo’s *Steed of Speech: Yoruba Proverbs in English*. Both Kila and Ojo supplement their compilations with commentaries on the sources, functions and values of the proverbs, in the similar way to S.O. Bada’s pioneering history of proverb origins in *Owe Yorùbá àtì Òkèlàlè Wọn*.


No doubt there are numerous and increasing textual references on the form, value and function of proverbs in Yoruba culture, yet it must be noted that the larger percentage of these collections (and their analyses) have been typically functionalist, with very little concern for the analysis of structure or for the discourse of variations and transformations in proverb structure. However, the honour of the near-total compilation of contemporary Yoruba proverbs rests in Owomoyela’s *Yoruba Proverbs*, to date the most extensive collection of both traditional and standard(ized) wise sayings in the field of Yoruba paremiography and paremiology.

In the early 1970s, Owomoyela partnered with Bernth Lindfors, the American African literary historian, to produce *Yoruba Proverbs: Translation and Annotation*. The slim volume contains 150 Yoruba proverbs, some of which
Owomoyela and the Modernist Inflections of Yorùbá Proverbs

are selected from Ellis’s *The Yoruba-Speaking People* and Delano’s *Ōwe L’Esin Òrò*. In that collaborative work, Owomoyela drew attention to the dynamic nature of Yoruba proverbs in which he noted that new proverbs are constantly being coined. They are at most times profoundly philosophical, sometimes expedient, sometimes mischievous, sometimes funny; but, always, they are refreshingly efficient in placing contemporary incidents within the continuum of tribal tradition.9

A decade later, in 1988, Owomoyela would publish *A Ki i: Yoruba Proscriptive and Prescriptive Proverbs*, in which he focused on the range of proverbs marked by the parallel negative form and signalled-off with the lexical phrase “A ki i”, or containing the “ki i” phrase in either the simple or complex sentence structure pattern. At the time of its publication, the book achieved inventive originality for its close and selective formalist reading of conventional Yoruba proverbs. Still working within the consistent and traditional scholarship of the proverb form, Owomoyela emerged more recently with *Yoruba Proverbs*, arguably the “most complete” of any dictionary or anthology of proverbs in Yoruba literary history, the most exemplary in terms of its scope and sheer number, and unique for its incorporation of a number of modernist and “radical” proverbial sayings which ironically challenge the traditionalist conception of the proverb form. In a recent review of the book, Alexis Books de Vita precisely notes that the author “facilitates an experience of cultural immersion in the Yoruba fine art of assembling proverbs that are multi-faceted, thought provoking, and enlightening.”10

Clearly, it can be stated that in his expansive work in Yoruba proverb scholarship, from the experimental text to the *magnum opus*, that is from *Yoruba Proverbs...* (1973) to *Yoruba Proverbs* (2005), Owomoyela consistently reflected on the fact of change without necessarily defining or naming the dynamism of that verbal art.

**Holistic Inclusions**

Given the examples of the three major collections of Yoruba proverbs by Owomoyela, there are two parallel points to be noted: (a) his scholarly awareness and declaration on the dynamic projection of Yoruba proverbs, apparently unaccounted for in early African paremiography, and (b) his conventional interpretive latitude to contain all variations and transformations in Yoruba proverbs within the traditional scholarship of the subject.

My critical observation on the development of Owomoyela as a major African/Yoruban paremiologist avers that between *A Ki i* and *Yoruba Proverbs*, there is an apparent transformation from a scholarly scepticism for the scholarship of invented/modernist proverbs to a receptive, holistic and encompassing
study of the range of developments in the field. Whereas in *A Ki i*, Owomoyela focused mainly on a range of conventional proverbs with a specific formulaic pattern, in *Yoruba Proverbs* there are transgressive inclusions of a remark-
able number of modern or modernist proverbs which are best understood as powered by an urban/metropolitan imagination.

The inclusion of modern/modernist proverbs in Owomoyela’s last collection is a graphic sign of a readiness to contend, albeit closely and sympathetically, with other contemporary scholarly works—which employ alternative tools in the discursive aesthetics of the Yoruba proverb. But then, in the composition of the impressive list of over five thousand proverbs, *Yoruba Proverbs* (2005) allows little or no distinction between conventional and subversive proverbs, between traditional and modernist proverbs, or between precolonial and (post) colonial proverbs. Whereas this method is not indicative of Owomoyela’s pio-
neering work in the transgressive, modernist aesthetics of African paremiology, it is ironically the evidence of the consistency of his own intellectual conviction.

**The Diachronic Supplement:**

**Proverbs and Metroproverbs**

In 1986, Adegboyega Alaba addressed the subject of transgressive, modern and modernist Yoruba proverbs by establishing a distinction between the system of thought that produces conventional, pre-colonial Yoruba proverbs and the paradigmatic shift which eventuated the production of colonial and modern Yoruba proverbs. To Alaba’s diachronic and synchronic delineations of “òwe àbáláyé” (traditional/conventional proverbs) and “òwe ìwòyí” (modern proverbs), I shall add “àdàmòdì òwe ìwòyí.”

If we were to follow the track further in order to reflect on the diachronic (and synchronic) possibilities of the Yoruba or indeed the whole African proverb context, it would be beneficial to imagine three major historical stages/phases of production, viz. the pre-colonial (prehistoric), the colonial (modern) and the postcolonial (post/modernist). In other words, there are three major cultural epochs which mark the domains and distinctions of Yoruba proverb production. There is the broader pre-modern epoch which accounts for the larger percentage of proverbial sayings considered to be indigenous and authen-
tic to Yoruba mythic imagination. This timeless, immemorial epoch is otherwise called the pre-colonial domain of traditional proverbs, marked by the general characteristics of anonymity, ingenuity, and timelessness. Secondly, there is the group of remarkable proverbs which came into existence on account of the contact between Yoruba culture and Western and Oriental cultures—precisely speaking, proverbs whose origins or material contents can be traced or con-

connected to European and Arab/Islamic colonialisms in Africa. The lexicon of
the recipient culture is thus transformed to include materials, events and experiences considered alien to Yoruba traditional culture. The colonial encounter had its irreparable influence on the language use, such that even in the present time code-switching and code-mixing are the sociolinguistic realities of that indelible colonial influence, causing or provoking the emergence of a related but distinctive third epoch of unique Yoruba proverbs which are powered by a deconstructive, postmodern consciousness.

Indeed, the third domain of Yoruba proverb production is an extant and dynamic one in which one immemorial conventional proverb is supplemented or corrupted by other unconventional, protean proverbial saying(s). The collective of this incidence of African proverb modernity has entered critical discourse, theorized and analysed as postproverbials. As it were, the postproverbial is almost always an addictive desire to rupture the logic of an indigenous thought system, a deconstructive process which in itself retains a crucial link to the old text which it seeks to suspend in the first place. I should add that in conception, but not exactly in their forms, there is a closer link between colonial/modern proverbs and postcolonial/postproverbials so that they can be generally described as *metroproverbs*—that is, the set of proverbial statements which owe their production to shifting acts of transgression, revision, subversion, and dislocation. To speak about *metroproverbs* and dis/location, I refer to those proverb formations that decidedly belong to the urban imagination, in composition of the city, which reflect on aspects of the living experience(s) of city dwellers in an African setting. On one hand, these proverbs are diachronically connected to the making of the African colony and its attendant offsets of oriental and Western industrialisations, religiosities and other transcultural perspectives. On the other hand, they are synchronically located within the larger and metropolitan ambience of the city. Indeed, the possibilities of metroproverbs (more specifically, postproverbials) get larger in the wake of a general indifference to the welter of the conventional lore, and on the heels of that unconscious loss, the enthusiastic interest and circulation of new social registers which yield to new (conscious or unconscious) formations and deformations.

In his urban memoir, *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt*, (Ann Arbor, 2005), Toyin Falola reflects on the notion of urbanity and the devaluation of Yoruba traditional idiomatics as early as the 1960s, describing the general attitude towards the indigenous language and its use:

[The] rich Yoruba, laden with idioms, spiced with proverbs, and seasoned with epigrams, became a source of ridicule. To use pidgin, a bastardized combination of Yoruba and English, was even regarded as more respectable in the new city. After all, the population was mixed, and whoever wanted to participate in life and communication must move away from the rich, pure Yoruba that was harder to understand.
The deliberate or inadvertent movement away from “the rich, pure Yoruba” was what prepared the ground for the provision and privileging of distended proverbs. The overlapping cross-cultural influence of languages on one another within specific interpretive communities of Africa must not also be discountenanced in theorizing the metropole of transgressions in Yoruba proverbs. Such is the experiential interrelation, exchange, flow and appropriation of Hausa and Arabic in the Yoruba language in the centuries preceding and following the colonial encounter. Part of the diachronic reality under discussion here is what Owomoyela classified as “historical markers” in which the formation of a proverb or the identity of a proverb can be located in specific time-space, associated with events and/or connected to particular experiences in history. As he noted:

Embedded in some proverbs are bits of dating information that reveal approximately when they came into being. These are usually references to identifiable historical events, sometimes to historical personalities, and sometimes to items whose advent is associated with historical developments, such as the introduction of foreign religions (Christianity and Islam) or the arrival of Europeans.

As can be inferred, the majority of Yoruba modern/modernist proverbs were produced or created within a wide time range, apparently as remote as the 16th century and as recent as the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They are in relatively small but contextually significant numbers. In the example of Owomoyela’s book, such metroproverbs, infinitesimal but symbolic as they are, they account for not more than 1.51% of the 5,235 entries. Given further definitive consideration, there are at least two main categories of modern/modernist Yoruba proverbs depending on the xenolithic source, origin, and character of the proverb under scrutiny, viz (a) Europhonic Yoruba proverbs, and (b) Arabesque Yoruba proverbs.

Europhonic proverbs are sayings which bear their creations on the crest of intercultural relations with early European civilisations. Specifically, there is a range of europhonics which contain direct reference(s) to the white person’s presence in Africa, proverbs in which the referent “Òyìnbó” (white person) figures as an archetypal proper noun/subject with heavy accent on the corporate presence and authority of the Empire in the colony. In this case, we say there is an “archetypal europhonic” strain of Yoruba modernist proverbs. These include Proverb #2187 (Kí òyìnbó tó dé la ti nwọ aṣọ = Long before the white man came, we were wearing clothes) p. 219; #2326 (Òyìnbó baba ọ`nájà; ajé baba téní-téní = The white man is the past master of trading; money is the guarantee of fashionableness) p. 230; #2746 (Ilé kan-án wá l’Ọ́yọ̀ ngbá àtijó tì à npè ní Àkíìjẹ́; òyìnbó kú níbè = There was a house in Òyò in ancient times called...
One-that-does-not-acknowledge-greetings; a white man died there) p. 269; and #3797 (“Háó fò dúú” l’òyìnbon fí njèbà l’Óriógo = “How for do?/What else can one do?/ is the white man's rationalization for eating a cassava meal at Orígo)15

On the other hand, there are proverbs which can be defined as “lexical euraphonics” given the nominal retention, transference or appropriation of one or two or more objects or ideas generally regarded as alien and European to the indigenous culture. Some examples of lexical euraphonics contained in Yoruba Proverbs include #196 (Àp ónlé ni “Fómànnù”; èníkan ò lè se èèyàn mérm = Calling a person a foreman is only a mark of respect; nobody can be four men) p. 56; #380 (Írèjè ò sì ninùu fótò; bí o bà sè jòkóó ni o ó báà ara-à re = There is no cheating in photography; it is just as you sit that you will find your image) p. 72; #2942 (Òrán gbogbo, lóri-ì sílè ní ndà sí = All matters resolve themselves around a shilling) p. 288; and #4914 (Dì èndì lópin-in sinimá = “The end” marks the end of a film show) p. 475.

The other main category of Yoruba modernist proverbs – Arabesque proverbs – refers to the welter of proverbs which are composed generally around and about Arabic, specifically Islamic philosophy, imagination and perspectives on the African continent. References include such proverbs as #498 (Ónibátá kí i wọ mósáálási ko ní “Lèmámù nkó?” = The bàtá drummer does not enter a mosque and ask, “Where is the imam?”) p. 82; #897 (Ebi ò pàmọ`le ó ní òun ò jẹ àáyá; ebi pa Súlè ó jọ`bọ = The Muslim is not hungry, and he vows he will not eat a red colobus monkey; hunger gripped Suleiman, and he ate a monkey) p. 114; #2531 (Ímálè gbààwẹ ò lóun ò gbéétò mi; ta ni nse èleèìì fun un? = The Muslim fasts and swears he did not swallow his saliva; who is to corroborate his story?) p.247; and #4449 (Ojú kì í pọ́n ààfáà kó má nìí tẹ̀sùbáà kan soṣọ = A Muslim priest is never so hard up that he does not have a solitary string of telling beads) p. 434.

**Other Metroproverbs**

Such similar examples of modernist proverbs as highlighted in Yoruba Proverbs, and recoupable in Alaba’s “Agbeyewo Ode Iwoyi”, also abound in other informal and quotidian encounters. I will give three inventive illustrations, all derived from or encountered as materials employed in Yoruba popular music. First, there is the modernist proverb “Ọkọ́ tó ti lọ, ni wón n juwó sí” = “It is the departing vehicle that gets a goodbye wave,” popularised by the maestro of Apala music, Harun Ishola. Here the semantic reference is to the finality of an action, or an event which is irreversible once it is taken or initiated. However, the signification here is on the reference to the motor vehicle as a product of western technology which finds its way into the proverbial song-text of the musician. The second illustration is the modern proverb, “Olópàá tó yinbon
sí Olúmọ, iyà ló ra ọwọ lé” = “The policeman who aims his gun at the Olumo rock, he is aiming at trouble.”16 The modernist allusion to the duality of “police” - “gun” is more pronounced when juxtaposed with the symbol of nature and traditional authority. Another illustration of modernist Yoruba proverb is “Mékà ọ şe b’ińú lọ bí Èkó” = “Mecca is not a journey that can be taken in a hurry as one travels to Lagos.”17 Apart from the referent of this proverb being Arabesque, the comparative modelling pattern of the statement is an inventive way of achieving balance between the secular location (Èkó/Lagos) and the spiritual, distant space (Mecca) in the performance of a modernist lyric.

Finally, it might be useful to note a crucial difference between the intelligence of the typical metroproverb which merely draws from other cultures and civilisations in order to radicalize the conventional text and as a corollary, the aesthetic philosophy of the typical postproverbial which almost always depends on the fantastic and blasphemous in its imaginative response to both pre-modern and modern proverbs. For instance, a proverb like “Iréjé ọ sí nínú fótò; bí o báṣe jókó ni o ó bàá ara-à rẹ = (There is no cheating in photography; it is just as you sit that you will find your image), a variant of which is entered in Alaba’s 1986 essay as “Iréjé ọ sí nínú fótò, bí a ti ọṣojú la a b’ara ẹni, “ is clearly a metroproverb (that is, òwe ìwòyí tó jẹ tuntun gn-an).18 By contrast, the modernist saying “Bí òkétè bá d’àngbà tán, kíkú ní i kú!” = “When the bushrat matures into old age, it surely dies!” is a sententious bluff of the traditional proverb, “Bí òkétè bá d’àngbà tán, ọmú ọmọ rẹ ní i mú = (When the bushrat matures into old age, it draws nurture from its young one), and is as yet a direct blasphemous reference to the syllogistic sequence of death after life.

**Conclusion**

In his works, Oyekan Owomoyela directed the discerning reader to the immemoriality of proverbs and their coinages. Of the numerous works in Yoruba proverb scholarship, very few have been as deliberative, encompassing and metropolitan as Owomoyela’s *Yoruba Proverbs*. In acknowledging his remarkable significance as a cultural and literary scholar, I respond to the range of unique and modernist sayings which, together with other indelibly conventional proverbs that he collated and interpreted in a magisterial style, form an eternal textual gift to African paremiology.

**Notes**

3. A. B. Ellis, *The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa,* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1894). Ellis’s book is one of a series of a colonialisht historical account of West African kingdoms and peoples including the Ewe, the Ga, the Tshi and the Yoruba.


6. R. Ladipo, *Egbokanla le Ogorun Owe Yoruba,* (Ibadan: Adebänke Commercial Press, circa 1955). This was noted by Bascom as one of the “36 major collections of 500 or more African proverbs and other aphorisms” in the 1950s. See William Bascom, “Folklore in Africa,” *Journal of American Folklore* 77 (1964), 16.


11. For reference to Alaba’s crucial essay, see “Àgbéyẹwọ Òwe Ìwòyí,” 55; for and a discussion of the relation between modernist proverbs and postproverbials, see Raji-Oyelade’s “Posting the African Proverb: A Grammar of Yoruba Postproverbials, or Logophagia, Logorrhea and the Grammar of Yoruba Postproverbials” in *Proverbium* 21 (2004): 299-300.


14. Ibid. 27.

15. Owomoyela, *Yoruba Proverbs*, 372; for the contextual explanation of this euphonious proverb, see the Introduction of the book, p. 4.


17. This proverbial statement is contained in one of the musical recitations of the Islamic gospel singer, Ahmed Alawiye, (Dec. 30, 2005).

18. See Alaba, Àgbéyẹwọ, 60.
Part II

LANGUAGE, TEXTS, AND TRANSLATION
Chapter 12

POLITICS AND PROVERBS IN SELECTED YORÙBÁ POLITICAL NOVELS

Lérè Adéyémí

INTRODUCTION

The Yorùbá novel was born during the colonial period, a hostile milieu which paid witness to the deformity in fundamental ways of pre-colonial African social relationships, communitarian values associated with the village mode of production, and the Yorùbá culture in general. Colonialism introduced capitalist ideology, which greatly influenced the early Yorùbá novelists. Colonial literature in Africa, according to Christopher Wauthier, is divided into four types. These are the politically committed, the pro-colonial, the conformist and the neutral. The politically committed literature negates colonialism forthrightly. The pre-colonial literature admires, supports and encourages colonial ideology without question. Conformist literature is not involved in the colonial controversy, but reflects the teaching of missionaries and colonial officers in their works. The works of those writers who neglect the temptation of political claims are considered neutral.¹

As far as the Yorùbá literary scene during the colonial era was concerned, the first category which is politically committed literature had poor representation. Òlábiyi Yai categorizes writers like Fágúnwà, Ọdúnjọ, Ògúndélé, Fátànmi, and Adéoyè as pro-colonial writers who defended the colonial ideology.² We feel, however, that this would be a grave injustice to those early Yorùbá writers
who in practice have proven to be forerunners of a true national literature. Given the very cultural framework within which they were working in order to exercise their literary creativity, should they not be given credit for attempting to assert their “Yorùbáness” however rudimentary their attempts might have been? Fágúnwà and his followers did not only project Yorùbá cultural values, they endorsed Yorùbá political ideology in their creative works, rather than the colonial ideology. They attempted to recreate traditional life as it was before European intrusion through the use of Yorùbá language, and especially Yorùbá proverbs. It is against this background that Karin Barber emphasizes that, “In the colonial period Yorùbá written literature...was never either purely oppositional (inverse ethnocentricism) or purely imitative (colonial mimicry).” Berber’s comment portrays the early Yorùbá writers as ideologically liberal.

However, as contemporary Yorùbá writers like others at the beginning of the 21st Century confront the challenge of mapping out the path for the future from the debris of the past, they cannot afford to be liberal in their ideological standpoint, and they have to be politically committed. Thus, they produce novels that are politically committed. Political novels do more than present or reflect political events. They involve participation in political life as constructors, organizers and permanent persuaders not just as political commentators. In political novels, the theme, the plot construct, narrative techniques and language use are creatively woven together to reflect political issues and political actors.

In Yorùbá literary scholarship there is hardly any complete literary criticism on Yorùbá novel, play or poetry without a comment on the use of proverbs by the authors. Bámgbósé states that the use of proverbs in a discourse is a traditional stylistic device in Yorùbá speech making. While analyzing the use of proverbs in Fágúnwà’s novels, he concluded that Fágúnwà merely followed the traditional convention and unconsciously set a pattern for future writers. Contemporary Yorùbá writers always make creative use of Yorùbá proverbs not only as aesthetic ornaments but to bring out their themes and vividly portray their characters, plot construct, setting and narrative techniques.

Scholars that have examined the aesthetics of proverbs in Yorùbá literature are numerous. Critical works abound on proverbs all over the world. Wolfgang states that philologists, literary critics, folklorists, sociologists, anthropologists and others have investigated proverbs in the Western World. He located 144 proverb investigations of Anglo-American authors, 112 of German writing authors, and 69 of Roman authors. He argues that “about 325 investigations of proverbs in the works of authors writing in a Western language represent an impressive number.” In Yorùbá literary studies, proverb studies started in 1852 when Samuel Ajayi Crowther collected many Yorùbá proverbs in his published book entitled *The Vocabulary of Yorùbá Language*. Bishop E. Vidal examined some of the proverbs with detailed explanations on their functions.
For many years after this work, there were no critical works on Yorùbá proverbs, even though collections of proverbs in book form increased. However, Bámbógbóso revived the interest of scholars on Proverbs. His article titled “The form of Yorùbá proverbs” focused on the structure and forms of Yorùbá proverbs. Some of the studies on Yorùbá proverbs are Ogundeji, Ògùnsínà, Adékéyè, Ojoade, Adewoye, Owomoyela, Yusuf, Àlàbí and Òdèbùnmi, among others. All these works centre on themes ranging from the functions, form and structures to pragmatic analysis of proverbs. They all contribute greatly to the study of proverbs but to the best of our knowledge none of these studies have focused on proverbs and politics in Yorùbá political novels. Our aim in this chapter, therefore, is to fill this seeming gap by examining the pragmatic functions of Yorùbá proverbs in selected political novels.

**Yorùbá Political Novels**

Yorùbá political novels could as well be categorized as historical novels, because all the Yorùbá political novelists are equally interested in the documentation of Nigeria’s political history. The “New Historicism” critics, according to Wolfreys, regard literature as a vehicle for the representation of political history, which reveals the processes and tensions by which historical and political change come about. Yorùbá political novels do not just mirror Nigeria’s political history rather, they re-create and re-evaluate active parts of particular historical moments in Nigeria’s political system from the perspective of insiders. A narrative in novel form characterized by an imaginative reconstruction of political events and actors is a political novel. Such a novel is an imaginative recreation of political events, political actors and their effect on the people. Real political events are reduced to fiction thus, it combines fiction with political facts.

Yorùbá political novelists have written and are still writing novels that depict every stage of the Nigerian political process. The first known political novel is *Aiyé Daiyé Òyìnbó*, written by Delano and published in 1956. Ògùnsínà states that *Ayiye Daiye Òyinbo* attempts a presentation of pre-colonial life in contact with colonialism on Yorùbá traditional politics. Fálétí’s *Ọmọ Olókùn Esin* is another novel in the category. It was published in 1969. In the novel, *Àjàyì Ọmọ Olókùn Esin*, the young freedom fighter supported by three others, Àyowí, Kọlápọ and Òbíwúmí, decide to free Òkè-Ògùn from the political domination of the Olúmokò, and the oppressive tendencies of the Òkò Àrẹmọ (first born princes). Convinced of the negative effect of political domination, Àjàyì and his comrades endure a series of physical and psychological sufferings to launch a resistance against the Olúmokò rulership. Even though the resistance is a failure, the masses support the freedom fighters. The novel is a literary tribute to the memory of the Òkè-Ògùn peoples’ struggle for independence under the Aláàfin of Òyọ.
There are other Yorùbá political novels which cover the colonial and the
decolonization of Nigerian politics. Examples are Owolabi’s *Ọtẹ Nibò* (Election
is Rebellion), Yemitan’s *Ghobaníyi* and *Orúkọ ló Yàtọ* (It is the name that differs),
Olábímún’s *Baba Rere* (Good Father) among others. Olábímún’s *Orílawẹ Adigún*,
and Owolabi’s *Bòbabà Oníégé Ọtẹ* (Bobade, the petition writer) cover
Nigerian’s political experience in the second republic, while others concen-
trate on the military in politics, such as Abiodun’s *Adiye bá Lókùn* (The fowl
perches on a Rope), Bámiyín Ojo’s *Ọba Adikuta* (The King with loaded Pebbles),
Owolabi’s *Ìjáibá Sélù* and Adéyémi’s *Ákúkọ Gàgàrà* (The Giant Cock), among
others. All these novels depict the different phases and stages of Nigeria’s politi-
cal history. The novelists are products of colonial and neo-colonial legacies,
thus, through the powerful use of Yorùbá language, they portray, attack and
reject the socio-political reality of the colonial and post-colonial periods.

The Yorùbá political novels do not just mirror Nigeria’s political history,
rather, they create and re-evaluate Nigeria’s political system in order to stimulate
political consciousness in the readers.

**Theoretical Framework: The Speech Act Theory**

Mey divides the study of language into two parts: one, a description
of its structures, and two, a description of its use. Traditional linguistics con-
centrates on the elements and structures such as sounds and sentences, while
pragmatics focuses on the language using humans, i.e. the way the individual
goes about using language. Pragmatics explicates the reasoning of speakers and
hearers. The Speech Act Theory is therefore an attempt to answer the ques-
tion, “what do speakers and hearers do when they are discussing?” The answer
to this question came from John Austin. He observes that when a speaker says
something he is performing a locutionary act.

We use language or speech (locution) to perform rather limitless func-
tions, using performative verbs like “promise,” “warn,” “behave,” “threaten,”
and “declare.” A locutionary act may therefore have the force of a question, a
promise, a warning etc. and it will often or normally produce certain conse-
quential effects upon the feelings, thoughts or actions of the audience, or of the
speaker or of other persons. Such effects are called perlocutionary acts, while the
act is perlocution.

An illocutionary act can be direct or indirect. In a direct illocutionary act
(speech act), the speaker means what is expressed by the words and structures
of the sentences, while in an indirect illocutionary act (speech act) the speaker
means more than what he says and relies on the assumed mutual background
knowledge that he shares with his listener for the understanding of what he
says. Such mutual background knowledge refers to contextual variables that
Politics and Proverbs in Selected Yorùbá Political Novels

are present in both the immediate and wider context of discourse between the speaker and his listener.

Many scholars of pragmatics, Jacobson, Sinclaire, Coulthard, Searle, Dore, and Humes, among others, have listed various categories of functions and uses of language. Although the categories share certain critical assumptions, the individual terms as well as the classification of these terms have always been different. For example, in his pragmatics model, Jacobson suggests six categories in terms of six situational factors of communication. These are:

Addresser: emotive/expressive, Affective, Directive
Addresses: Constative Referential/cognitive/Denotative
Message: Poetic
Contact: Phatic/interaction management
Code: Metalinguistic

Sinclair and Coulthard mention such functions as informing, eliciting, checking, and directing at different degrees of delicacy in classroom discourse. Searle identifies five categories of functions or acts as follows: expressives, directives, commissives, representatives and declaratives. Dore lists his categories as requestives, assertives and expressives.

In this chapter, we shall examine the functions and uses of proverbs in the selected novels bearing in mind the contextual factors such as participants, topic, setting, and socio-cultural context. Also, Yorùbá proverbs may perform more functions than the “informative,” “directive,” “expressive,” and “assertive” categories it may be used to entertain, to greet, to intimidate, to express hatred, love, desire, pain, etc. So, while we adopt the model of Searle we shall not restrict our discussion to the five categories based on specific verb or verb phrase, to avoid what Mey calls “illocutionary verb fallacy.” He states that we can do many things with words without ever having to resort to a specific verb or verb phrases.

Proverbs In Yorùbá Society

Scholars of paremiology and folklores have done a lot of research on proverbs. Mikiko says that one of the major problems accompanying a study of proverbs is definition. The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs (1957), Bartlett J. Whitting’s Proverbs, Sentences and Proverbial Phrases from English Writings Mainly Before 1500, and Morris’s A Dictionary of Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, are comprehensive. Proverbs, proverbial facts, observation of generation, warnings, admonitions, guides to conduct and accumulated wise sayings are all included. These dictionaries’ meanings are very
useful, but in criticism of literature which contains proverbs, an all-inclusive definition is inadequate.

Habenicht sets up a definition of the proverbs and frees it from Aristotelian theory. Aristotle viewed the proverbs as a figure of speech which resembled the simile, the metaphor and the hyperbole. Each figure conceals “another meaning.” Habenicht points out that many proverbs are not dark enigmas and he also insists that a proverb has to have a form: namely, it is a complete statement.22

A proverb is a complete statement in itself and usually it is a pregnant saying. To the Yorùbá people, “proverb is word’s horse, word is proverb’s horse, if a word is lost, and we will use the proverb to search for it.” Proverbs relate to all aspects of life, using proverbs to emphasize the words of the wise.

Many proverbs come out of old people, authority figures, who having seen life in its entirety feel qualified to explain its meaning to the younger generation in proverbial form. Proverbs are the stock in trade of old people, who use them to convey precious moral lessons, warnings and advices since they make a greater impact on the mind than ordinary words. In Yorùbá society, the judicious use of proverbs is always regarded as a sign of wit. Proverbs are sentences of wisdom, usually figurative statements which assume specific meanings determined by the context in which they are used.

Ojoade explains that proverbs are mirrors of the cultures of the various people who use them.23 Yorùbá proverbs embody the norms and values, thoughts, ideas and beliefs of the people. Proverbs reflect and articulate the Yorùbá philosophy of life, their mythology and religion as well as their empirical observations of their physical and social environment, thus, each Yorùbá proverb is a crystal of experience. In this chapter, I shall regard Yoruba proverbs as short or long expressions which are associated with the wisdom of the Yorùbá people, which are used to perform numerous social functions. For example:

\[
\text{Aàyàn fẹ jó, adìyẹ ní kó jẹ.} \\
\text{The cockroach wants to dance, but the fowl does not allow it.}
\]

This is a short proverb pregnant with meaning and wisdom. The proverb expressed the inability of the speaker or the person the speaker is talking about to attain one height or the other but he could not, due to some difficult problems or inhibition. It is a statement of defence in support of the person.

\[
\text{Ēni eégún ń lé kó má bara jẹ bó ti n rẹ ara ayé bèč lo ŋ rẹ ará ọrun.} \\
\text{The one that is being pursued by “eégún” (masquerades) should not give-up, as the person being pursued is losing his strength; the pursuer is also losing his strength.}
\]
The second proverb is a long sentence unlike the first one. The speaker is giving advice to the hearer. It is a proverb of encouragement in the face of difficulties. Some Yorùbá proverbs emanate from myths; for example:

Àlọ ni ti ahun, 'àbọ ni ti àna rè.
Oore ìṣejù ni ọgún se tó fi pà lórí.
The going-out is for the tortoise, the coming back is for his in-law.
The vulture became bald-headed because of its excessive charity.

Other proverbs have their sources from stories of wars in the past, historical events, human relations, cultural values and environmental experiences. Yorùbá proverbs are used for different purposes. They can serve as confidence builders or shakers, mobilizers or demobilizers. There are many types of proverbs namely moral proverbs, religious proverbs, feminist proverbs, and proverbs as vehicles of culture, sexual proverbs and obscene proverbs, among others.24

**Politics and Political Language**

Politics is usually defined in different ways by scholars. In most cases, what informs their definitions hinges on the fact that they have a different background, orientation or interest. However, as Ọlániyì observes, if politics should be regarded as a scientific field of study, then, it should be viewed from the perspective of the Behaviorists.25 Behaviorism represents a scientific approach to the study of political phenomena which became popular shortly after the end of the Second World War.

Behaviorists argue that political studies should not be premised on the study of institutions of government and constitution of political systems as was the case under the traditionalist approach. Instead, focus should be on the individual behavior as a unit of political analysis on one hand, and relationships between the individual and other members of the society on the other hand. However, this should not be to the negligence of the study of activities of government, its institutions and constitution. This explains why most political theorists e.g. Geoffrey and Duvenger state that politics is concerned with power and its use in the society.26 There is competition for benefits, in which case there will be a “winner” and a “loser.” In other words, politics has to do with power.

Power can either be exercised through coercion or through consent. The manufacture of consent is a language-based process of ideological indoctrination. Language is the life-blood of politics. Political struggles and the legitimization of political policies and authorities occur primarily through discourse and verbal representations. Politicians do not usually use clear, literal language; rather, they use metaphorical language. They use proverbial language to express their beliefs in order to mobilize and inspire their followers.
Politicians have their own language. Political language, as Geis points out, conveys both the linguistic meaning of what is said and the corpus, or a part of it, of the political beliefs underpinning any given statement. According to Awonuga political language has several facets. For instance, it subsumes some sub-varieties, such as parliamentary language, the language of political campaigns, the language of cabinet meetings and the language used to talk about various aspects of political life.

Certain linguistic features tend to stand out in political language. These are: the use of political jargon; the use of proverbs, the use of metaphors, vagueness and ambiguity. Politicians use language in different ways, to talk about fellow politicians in the same party with them as well as those in other parties. Non-politicians, too, use language in certain ways to talk about politicians and their parties. This has resulted in the generation of clichés over the years. Some of the terms used by politicians to describe their opponents are: “Banditry,” “Capitalists,” “Reactionary,” “Communists.” Yorùbá politicians are used to clichés such as “ọdàlẹ” (traitors), “adálúrú” (troublemakers), “Jàndùkú” (thugs), Alátakó (opposition groups) etc. Chilton and Schaffner state that politicians and political institutions are sustained by “persuasive” or “manipulative” uses of language of which the public is only half-aware. In their joint article titled: “Discourse and Politics,” Chilton and Schaffner identify four types of approaches to the study of political language. These are:

1. **Social-Psychological Approach**: This approach combines the quantitative and qualitative methods to demonstrate the non-rational and non-explicit aspects of political behavior.
2. **French Approach**: This is a computer-aided statistical approach to the political lexicon. This approach is called “Political Lexicometry.”
3. **German Approach**: This approach is based on the analysis of words of fascism.
4. **Anglophone Approach**: This is the use of linguistics to analyze political language. This is called linguistics approach. It involves three levels namely pragmatics, (interaction among speakers and hearers), semantics (meaning, structure of lexicon) and syntax (The internal organization of sentences).

I adopt the pragmatics approach, and especially the Speech Acts Theory of Searle. Searle’s models of illocutionary acts have direct relevance to political discourse. The indirect illocutionary acts are: representatives (truth claims) directives (commands, respects), commissives (promises, threats), expressives (praising, blaming), declaratives (proclaiming a constitution, announcing an election, declaring war).
Politicians use metaphors to put their ideas through, when they need to convince their audience on a particular topic. Some form of political language common among the Yorùbá political class is proverbs. The late M.K.O. Abíọlá and Samuel Akíntọlá are still remembered today for their oratory style and particularly in their use of Yorùbá proverbs.

Yorùbá literary writers not only portray or reflect the political experience and the role of the politicians in their novels, but they also usually bring to memory how politicians of Yorùbá descent make use of proverbs to achieve their political goals. However, as Mikiko states, a writer does not hesitate to change the original proverbs if context, rhyme and rhythm requires such a change, and from age to age the vitality and effectiveness of the proverbs varies. In accordance with the current idea of the day, the author changes the saying which he has inherited. The proverbs may reflect not only the author’s way of thinking but also contemporary usage. Thus, when proverbs are incorporated in literary work, the proverbs provide a clear reflection of the times.

Yorùbá political novelists are generally conscious that they are telling political stories, and they always make a deliberate attempt to be eloquent in the use of Yorùbá proverbs and proverbial expressions. The standard of use however varies from writer to writer. Some of them are more concerned with the facts of the story they are telling and do not seem to pay special attention to elegance of proverbs, for example, Kọlá Akínlàdé’s Sàngbá Fọ does not show interest in the aesthetic use of Yorùbá proverbs. His concern is to evaluate the politics of Nigeria under the civilian government between 1979 and 1983. The fabric of his language is not tidy enough to show the beautiful patterns of Yorùbá proverbs.

However, there are other political novelists that are distinguished by their special attention to elegance in their use of Yorùbá proverbs. They love the use of proverbs among other stylistic devices. They re-animate proverbs that have gone out of use and recreate proverbs in line with modern life. This second group manipulates proverbs in many ways. Writers in this category are many, namely: Adébáyọ Fálétí, in Ṙọmọ Olókùn Èsin, Olú Owólábì in Ìjamba Sèlù, Ìjá Ìrẹ, Èni Òlorun Ò Pa, and Bòbadé Oníègèègê Ìrẹ, Afolábì Olàbímtàn in Orílawè Àdígún, Bamiji Òjó in Òba Adìkúta and Adéyémi in Àkúkọ Gàgàrà. They make use of proverbs in their novels to the admiration of readers and critics. They modify, beautify, pile up and elaborate Yorùbá proverbs to bring out vital information or themes, to portray their characters and to construct their plots. It may be too ambitious to examine the use and functions of proverbs in all these Yorùbá political novels within the scope of this chapter, but we shall focus attention on just two of the novels, namely Afolábì Olàbímtàn’s Orílawè Àdígún and Olú Owólábì’s Bòbadé Oníègèègê Ìrẹ.
Politics and Proverbs in Afólábí Olábímítán’s Orílawè Àdígün

Afólábí Olábímítán is one of the finest Yorùbá literary writers. He was born in 1932 in Ilaro, Ogun State, Nigeria. He had a Ph.D. in Yorùbá Literature from the University of Lagos in 1974. Olábímítán rose to the post of professor before retiring from service in 1988. Olábímítán was a politician of great repute. He was Commissioner for Local Government and Information in Ogun State from 1976-1977. He was greatly involved in party politics. He was a staunch member of the Action Group in the First Republic, a member of the Unity Party of Nigeria in the Second Republic and he was a Senator under the Alliance for Democracy until his death in 2003 through a motor accident.

Olábímítán’s literary works are remarkable. He has written more than one hundred poems, three plays and eight novels. Five of his novels are political novels, two of which are written in English. Orílawè Àdígün is selected for this study because no critic has examined the functions of proverbs in the text. To make the pragmatic analysis of the proverbs more accessible, a brief summary of the plot might be helpful.

The Plot Construct

The story in Orílawè Àdígün revolves around the protagonist, Orílawè who; early in life is exposed to and trained in the knowledge of African metaphysics. At a very tender age in primary school, he practices his magical art with ease on his classmates for amusement and before his teachers to prove the efficacy and reality of magic to them. He is nicknamed “Lawẹ Wonder.” After his secondary education, he becomes a journalist and later a political correspondent for a national newspaper in Lagos. At this time, the political setting is democratic with two political parties in contest for power (Ẹgbẹ Nínálowó and Ẹgbẹ Motótán) (Money is for spending party and I am up to the Task party). Ẹgbẹ Nínálowó wins the election and forms the national government. Orílawè’s constituency in Owódedé is controlled by Ẹgbẹ Motótán which Orílawè has sympathy for; but by virtue of his work, he becomes a member of the ruling party. The struggles for power and the overthrow of the civilian government constitute the plot of the novel.

In the text, the number of proverbs and proverbial expressions is substantially smaller, while some of his proverbs are popular proverbs. The low number of proverbs and the simplicity of his proverbs is not indicative that he is not rich in the use of Yorùbá rhetorical devices. Rather, one suspects that he uses simpler and fewer proverbs because of a particular audience. It is to make his creative work accessible to all categories of students, particularly secondary school students.
Ọlábimtán uses proverbs to bring out his themes and send messages to his readers. He depicts and satirizes the civilian government of post-colonial Nigeria. The ruling party is called Ẹgbẹ Nínálowó (Money is for Spending). He satirizes the party which preaches “one nation, one destiny,” but adopts the principle and practice of alienation and hegemony. The ruling party wears a national outlook but it is controlled by a tiny group of powerful people. The Olórí Ijọba looks simple but he is selfish and greedy. In the appointment of ministers and other public officers, he appoints five Ministers from his region, two from the East and only one from the Southwest. The writer used a proverb to summarize the greedy nature of the political class, through one of the fictional characters. He says:

Ẹran kí í fì ènu ba ń kó tún ń fì è sínu.32
The goat does not taste the salt and want to leave the rest.

The setting of the proverb is a political meeting where public offices are to be shared among the political actors. A member of the party whose region is short-changed in the allocation of political positions uttered the proverb to condemn the greediness of the head of government. The illocutionary acts of the proverb are both direct and indirect.

The direct illocutionary act is that “A goat does not taste salt and want to leave the rest.” The indirect illocutionary acts contain two metaphors— the goat and salt metaphors. The goat is a greedy domestic animal. It is never satisfied with little, so the head of the government is likened to a goat, greedy, selfish and stubborn. The salt metaphor symbolizes the perquisite of office or the positions of ministers which the head accrues to his region alone. For example, Alhaji Salimonu is Minister for Petroleum, with no previous knowledge in the industry. Alaaja Suwebatu is in charge of commercial banks, the Emir of Awera is Minister for Central Bank while other regions take ministries that have no direct relevance to the needs of the people. The indirect illocutionary acts is dissentives. It is a statement of dissent and opposition against the greedy leader. The perlocutionary act of this proverb is immediate reactions leading to misunderstanding. Some of the leaders have the opinion that politics is all about authoritative allocation of values and that the head of the government has done nothing wrong in allocating more positions to his region than to other regions. The belief is that:

Bi a bá fún wèrè lókó, ọdọ ara rè ni yóò roko sí.
If a mad man is given a hoe, he will draw the gains to himself.

The other group within the party caucus opposed the explanation and one of the elders in the group says:
Don’t let us deceive ourselves. It is one’s character that will manifest, when one is drunk, if one does not have ulterior motive before, politics cannot plant one there.

The speaker uttered this proverb to negate the earlier speaker’s idea. The explanatory proverb functions to portray the political leader as greedy and selfish. The indirect illocutionary acts as a dissentive. It rejects the proposition of the supporter of the leader.

Olábímtán makes an asymmetrical arrangement of his characters to illustrate the oppressor/oppressed syndrome in *Orílawè Àdígún*. Such a construction patterning shows class contradictions as contrasted in the lives of the people of Àwèrè where power resides. A majority of the people of Owode where a Federal Minister comes from wallow in poverty under the stinking affluence of political office-holders and business men who are mainly government contractors. Whenever the electorates ask questions or show their intentions to protest against government policies, the response from the government leader is usually in proverbs:

*Sọ mí ní à n gbo ní ilé Kábíyèsí a kì i gbo gbérù mí.*
The language of the king’s palace is help me to put down the load, we never hear carry it away.

In the traditional Yorùbá society, kings are respected, honored and cared for by the people. Kings are not expected to be laborers. All segments of the society give them gifts and tributes. It is this metaphor that the speaker uses. Ministers and government leaders are like kings; people should not expect anything from them. The indirect illocutionary act is a prohibitives. The minister enjoins the listeners to forget dividends of democracy because they are supposed to serve the government leaders. When the minister sees that the perlocutionary effect of his speech act is not desirable, he resorts into what Adégbijà calls “support-garnering tactics.”

The pragmatic presupposition of this proverb includes the following:
1. The addressee has an entity that we may refer to as support or co-operation.
2. The addressee is entitled to dispense with and deploy such co-operation as he deems fits.
3. The support of the addressee is vital for the success of the ruling party.
4. The support of the addressee is not certain.
5. There is a possibility that the support of the addressee may not be granted.

The reactions of the listeners after the minister’s speech show that his request for love or solidarity was not granted. The chairman of Nínálowó’s party in Owode reacts with another proverb. He says:

Èwo ni ká fini joyè àwòdì ká má lè gbádiẹ?
Should one be made the chief of hawks and unable to carry chicken?

The hawks-chicken metaphor is an indictment on the part of the minister. The minister is put in a position of influence. He controls the wealth of the nation and there is no limitation to his influence. He is expected to bring back the gains of his exalted position to his people. The hawks have free access to the unguided and unprotected chicken, so the minister like the chief-hawk is expected to hunt for the dividends of democracy to satisfy his people. The indirect illocutionary acts of the proverb is assertive, even though in question form. As far as the people of the minister’s constituency are concerned, the minister has created an impression that he is not in full control, and probably he is a figurehead or mere titular head in the Federal Executive. The dialogue between the minister and the electorate shows that politicians and political institutions are sustained by persuasive or manipulative uses of language of which the public is only half-aware. Politicians are able to hoodwink citizens by specious talk. The type of proverbs given by the minister is a form of dissimulation. This involves the political control of information, which may be quantitative or qualitative. When information is given but quantitatively inadequate to the needs or interests of hearers, it is quantitative dissimulation. Qualitative dissimulation is simply lying. The persuasive proverbs of the minister were not enough to convince the hearers because he too does not give the exact and correct picture of the government. He could not make a positive self-presentation of the government to the people through the type of proverbs he used.

Olábímtán not only depicts the ruling class (i.e. the politicians and the military) but he also depicts the middle class and the lower class through the use of proverbs. Prominent in the middle class is Orílawè, a journalist by profession, a defender of justice (Akọyà), a social and political crusader. The narrator does not give us the physical description of Orílawè, neither does he give us details about his strength. However, we recognize him through the roles he plays and
the proverbial import of his name. "Orílawè" is taken from the following proverbial statement extracted from lineage oríkì.

Orí la wè
A ó wèṣẹ
Kàninkànín la wè
A ó we Ejinrin
Kò se ni tó mọ ọn di, kó gün
Bí ó se Elédürárè.
It is the head we wash
We wash not the soap
We wash not with sponge
We wash not with Ejinrin (climbing medicinal herb)
No one knows how to parcel things
But the Almighty.

In the Yorùbá world-view, whatever one becomes or achieves, or the extent of one's greatness or otherwise, is anchored on destiny. The proverbs in the name of the major character are: (1) "The success of man on earth is tied to his destiny. Man does not need to wash the physical head with magic soap; rather, he should worship his inner head." (2) "No one knows how to parcel things or plan his life-success except the almighty God." Thus, the social, cultural and political struggles and exploits of Orílawè in the text are not mere coincidences, they are destined by God. The indirect illocutionary acts of the proverb is expressive. It is an acceptance or acknowledgement of the greatness of God and the role of destiny in the affairs of man on earth.

There are other characters whose names are drawn from proverbs. For example, the Minister of customs from Ìmírin state is called "Àbániwọn-ńdá," the original proverb is:

Àbá ni ikán n dá, ikán o lè mòkúta.
White ants (termites) may try, but they cannot devour rocks.

The novelist creatively modifies the content of the popular proverb to suit his purpose. "Àbániwọn-ńdá" is in-charge of the customs whose responsibility is to arrest and punish smugglers. There is no physical description of this character, but through his proverbial name we recognize his role. The inability of the smugglers to devour his men on the border just like the termite cannot devour the rock makes his proverbial name realistic.

When Salimọnu and Àlàájá Suwebatu have some misunderstandings due to the unhealthy political atmosphere, one of the party officers from the Odùrúyà state uses proverbs to locate the tribe of the two characters. They come
from the Northern part of the country. The speaker says: “Gànbàrí pa Fúlání, ẹran ọba lo fisu ọba je.” There are two embedded proverbs in the statement which the speaker creatively modifies for his own use:

Gànbàrí pa Fílàní (kò ọfọ nínú).
Ẹran ọba lo fisu ọba je (oi:102).

If a Hausa man kills a Fulani, there is no need for a trial.
The King’s goat has eaten the King’s yam.

The two proverbs have the same pragmatic function. Since both the Hausa and the Fulani live in Northern Nigeria and are to most Nigerians indistinguishable one from the other, and the goat and yam belong to the king, the proverbs say that whatever they might do to each other is within the family. The indirect illocutionary act is a constative verdict. The speaker is of the opinion that where someone close to oneself is responsible for one’s injury there is no need for conflict.

Most of the characters in Orílawè Àdìgún use proverbs as elevations to their desired linguistic heights. However, Olábímtán simplifies some of the known Yorùbá proverbs. An example is when Adé says, “Ọbẹ tó dún là n bọ wa gbà, a sì mọ pówó ló máa pa à” (oi:35) (We are coming to get the delicious soup, and we know that it costs money). We know that the novelist is trying to make comprehension easy by splitting the verb. The more popular and more poetic form is “Ọbẹ tó dún, owó ló pa à” (A delicious soup costs money). The indirect illocutionary act is predictive. Adé wants a magic charm for security and he knows that he would spend money. The delicious soup he is talking about in the proverb is a metaphor i.e. the effective and efficient magic charm he intends to get from Lawe’s father is money.

In another example, a popular Yorùbá proverb is rendered in a simplified structure. “Bí a bá n sötá, bi ki a dá ina sì lú ẹni kó” (oi:61). One wonders if this is not patterned on the popular saying, “Bí a bá n já, bi ká kú kó” (That we are fighting does not mean we should eliminate each other). There is no doubt that Olábímtán knows the popular form of the proverb; the twist is deliberate. The popular form, if used, may not be able to capture the picture he wants to paint. The indirect illocutionary acts of the proverb are assertives. The proverb asserts that the politics of post-independence Nigeria is not just a fight for power; it is politics of hatred. It is politics of vendetta and extreme wickedness. The proverb is used by the interlocutor to appeal to politicians to eschew bitterness and political thuggery.

From the brief pragmatic analysis of Olábímtán’s use of proverbs, we see a demonstration of a compelling creative power, vividness of imagination and rhetorical prowess manifested in his use of recreated and simplified Yorùbá proverbs to portray the politics of Nigeria during the Second Republic.
Olú Owólabí is one of the most prolific Yorùbá political novelists. He was a teacher, a school administrator and an influential politician in Egbádò land for many years. He was a strong member and supporter of the Action Group (AG) in Nigeria’s First Republic and an active member of the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) in the Second Republic. He wrote eight novels and four plays before he died in 1991.

The Plot of Bọbadé Onígégé Ọtẹ

The story revolves around Bọbadé the main character. Bọbadé is the last born of his parents. He is huge, hearty and ruggedly handsome but intellectually incompetent to complete his primary education. He drops out at primary three and enlists in the army during the Boma war due to his enormous strength and dauntless courage. After the war, he is discharged and he comes back home to participate in the local politics of his town. Since money is so crucial in the politics of his country, he engages in gambling, pool-betting and debt-collecting and through these, he becomes financially sufficient to participate in the local government election.

Bọbadé solicits moral and financial support from his close friends during the election which he eventually wins. After his success at the poll, he sees the opportunity to amass wealth and build a political empire for himself. He makes use of the police, the sanitary inspectors and tax collectors to terrorize his perceived enemies. He also loves petition writing against individuals and against the legislature which he belongs to; this earns him the nickname “Bọbadé Onígégé Ọtẹ” (Bọbadé the Petition Writer).

With the demise of the king of his town, he contests for the throne but loses to his neighbor Adéwùmí. He embarks on series of petition writing so as to nullify the candidature of Adéwùmí but all his efforts end in futility. His failure to remove the king through petitions creates a sorrowful bitterness in his heart and he conspires against the king which leads to the latter’s untimely death. Bọbadé and his co-conspirators namely: Àdisá Bेwàjì, John Agbọmábiwọn and Kàrımù Àgbàntara are fished out by the police and summarily sentenced to death.

In Bọbadé Onígégé Ọtẹ, proverbs are used to speak the message. Owólabí creatively weaves proverbs into the plot of the text with strategic selection in a variety of ways. Through the creative use of proverbs, the listeners and readers join in active dialogue. The power then in the use of proverbs in the text lies in the combination of the authority of the past as spoken in proverbs to summa-
rize a moral message and the narrator’s ability to craft the message creatively by choosing just the right proverb. Owólabí uses proverbs to bring out the message of the novel. A close reading of the novel would reveal a deeper understanding that it is not a story about a fictitious petition writer, but a portrayal of a society undergoing a political as well as economic transformation, a society whose political economy is based on capitalism.

There is an extreme emphasis on material wealth, accumulation of objects and an ongoing demonstration of power. Rather than extolling humility, this system celebrates displays of power and self-aggrandizement. In such a society, coldhearted, ruthless and single-minded people like Bọbadé and Bẹwàjí are celebrated as heroes. The public’s seemingly insatiable obsession with stars and stardom are reflected in the way Bọbadé and Adewūmí are brought into the political limelight. Making money is the most important value in a capitalist system. Bọbadé confirms the importance of money in politics:

\[
\text{Sebi owó ni mo ná ki n tó lè dibò wọlé, òbí ofe lẹlẹdẹ dọyọ ni? Òjà tá a bà lè owó rà, se bí owó lá à fí pa (oi:30).}
\]

Is it not money that I spent before I won the election, or can the pig get to Òyọ free of charge? Whatever we purchase with money must bring money.\(^{36}\)

The participants in the discussion are all politicians and friends of the main character Bọbadé. The topic is on how to maximize the gains of the political office of Bọbadé. The place where the speech act is going on is the house of the Speaker. The state of mind of each of the interlocutors is that of excitement and joy because their candidate has just won an election. The direct illocutionary act of the speech is that “Whatever we purchase with money must bring money.” The indirect illocutionary act is a constative verdict. It approves and deems it good to make politics a venture for making money. Politics is seen as a business venture which must be financially fruitful and rewarding. Thus, the speaker is trying to convince the listeners that he has every right to embezzle or misappropriate government funds. The perlocutionary act is immediate, the political associates of the speaker quickly ask him to give them money so as to carry out the next assignment, and that is terminating the life of Bọbadé’s political opponents.

Humanitarian values associated with African culture like notions about goodness, fairness, oneness, love and integrity are dismissed in the interest of amassing and exhibiting wealth and positions. The intimidating influence of money is reflected in the following proverbs used by the political class in the texts:
Too much of talking is a lie, tell us where we are going, it is lack of money that makes one to talk with timidity, a rich man talks straight.

He-that-comes-with-a-solution is the name of money, any matter concerned with money is no longer a joke.

There is no medicine for concubines like money.

The proverbs are uttered by the political associates of Bọbadé when he is set to send them on an errand to terminate the lives of his opponents. The direct illocutionary acts are that: “It is lack of money that makes one to talk with timidity, a rich man talks straight,” “He-that-comes-with-a-solution is the name of money,” and “There is no medicine for concubines like money.” The indirect illocutionary acts of the proverbs are suppositives. The interlocutors all postulate and theorize the relevance of money in the affairs of man. They all see money as all in all. These views negate the thoughts and beliefs of the Yorùbá people concerning money. The Yorùbá people believe that it is good character combined with destiny that make one to succeed in life and not money alone. The political associates of Bọbadé use proverbs to promote their own ideological cause and justify their excessive love for money and accumulation of wealth. Proverbs are used in this context as strategies for dealing with political situations which depend on money. The first proverb is alienating while the last two proverbs are deceptive. To an average Yorùbá man, money is not everything. These types of proverbs reveal the psychological make-up of Nigerian politicians who are kleptomaniacs. They are always unsatisfied with little, and they love to accumulate money and material prosperity. The proverbs also reveal the insatiable craze for money by the electorate during elections in post-colonial Nigeria.

Owólábí uses proverbs to aid his mode of characterization in the text. Proverbs are creatively used to portray and expose the vindictiveness of the political class in the text. The failure of Bọbadé to clinch the kingship of Dásọfúnjó during the shadow election inspires him and his supporters to revenge. The following proverbs show the degree of vindictiveness and the revengeful spirit in the character:

If the fowl threw away my medicine, I destroy its eggs.

If you have a thousand naira, I’ll destroy you.
The first offence is not as disastrous as the revenge.

*Sàngó ki i já ki o mọ ojú ààlà* (oi:56).
*Sàngó* (the god of thunderbolt) does not fight and knows the boundary.

*Bí apá kò se e sán, a ka a rù ni, bí kò sì se e kárù, a ge e ni. Bí ighá bá dojú dé a a sí i ni, bí kò sì se e sí, a fọ ọ ni* (oi:60).
If one *cannot* swing the arms, they can be lifted up, if they cannot be lifted up, we cut them off. If the calabash tumbles, we can open it if it is impossible, we have to break it.

*Afi kí a fi oro ọhún se kákà kékù má je sèsé, a a fi se àwàdànù* (oi:61).
For the rat not to be allowed to eat the beans, the rat will waste the whole beans.

The tone of Bọbadé’s proverbs differs from his followers who are merely working for money and perhaps recognition. Bọbadé uses proverbs for incitement and deadly conspiracy. The followers and associates of Bọbadé do not take these proverbs figuratively, but they apply them literally and act them out. The proverbs have both direct and indirect illocutionary acts but the followers are manipulated to believe and act on the literal meanings of the proverbs.

The first, second, fourth, and fifth proverbs are directives to his followers to embark on retaliation and revenge missions against Bọbadé’s opponents. The third proverb is a directive imploring his followers to waste and destroy as many people as possible without restriction. The proverbs are no longer ordinary metaphors under Bọbadé but crude reality. The close associates of Bọbadé like Bẹwàjí, Àgbàntara and others do not notice how the political and propaganda machinery of Bọbadé manipulates them with such proverbial expressions. The fact is that Bọbadé negates the metaphorical nature of Yorùbá proverbs.

The proverbs that refer to parts of the body especially for example the 4th proverb is interpreted not metaphorically but realistically. The result is a brutality and inhumanity of language that becomes worse. The followers take the proverb literally and actually murder the king of the town following the proverbial directive of their leader.

Speech acts that help to indicate that Bobadé is in control, especially when he is still a member of the legislature, are performatives, particularly the category of performatives referred to by Austin as “exercitives” and by Searle as “directives.” For the performance of such, the speaker needs to possess the appropriate authority. Examples of such direct or indirect performatives in the proverbs of Bọbadé include the following:
A ti wa ki ọjé bọ olósà lowọ o wa ku baba ẹni ti yóò bọ ọ (oi:31).
The brass bangle has been slipped on the wrist of the fetish priest, where is anyone bold enough to take it off.

The direct illocutionary act is that the brass bangle is an insignia of office, a life-time office. Anyone who would slip it off has a monumental struggle ahead of him. Undoubtedly, such exercitive speech acts are intended to demonstrate or at least create the inference that the speaker has to be recognized, respected and obeyed, because he is still in charge of power and authority, and no one can take over from him.

A famous politician, S.L. Akíntọlá was said to be fond of this proverb when he was engaged in a fight to keep control of the Western Region while his party supporters wanted to oust him. Bọbadé, because of his closeness to the regent and his access to vital documents relating to the kingship, makes use of the “historical” proverb. The indirect illocutionary act is that having got his hands on the reins of power, nothing but a colossal upheaval could dislodge him. Those who fail to recognize him as the authentic candidate obviously do so at their own peril.

The use of proverbs to give prudent counsel to the politicians during elections reveals the didactic nature of Yorùbá proverbs in the text. Each point of advice is expressed through proverbs. For example, a common feature of political campaigns in Nigerian politics is its negativity. Each political party by all means at its disposal tries to show the weakness of the other political party rather than show her own strength. Bọbadé always makes campaigns of calumny against his opponent (Adéwùmí) until the elders of his own party calls him to order. When the elders are talking, one of them asks Bọbadé to stop the negative portrayal of his opponent. He says:

*Wọn ni Alásejù, ọjọ wo ni o fẹ bọ láti irinajọ tí ó n lọ, ó ni ojọ tí óun bá tẹ (oi:58).*

They ask an obstinate and self-witted person, when would you return from your journey, he says, he would not come back until he is disgraced.

The indirect illocutionary act is requestives. The elder statesman is pleading and imploring Bọbadé to stop the campaign of calumny against Adéwùmí. It is a wild directive meant to counsel the speaker. The point is that if he refuses to change, he will be disgraced like the “obstinate-self-willed traveler.”
Comparison of Use of Proverbs in *Orilawè Àdígún* and *Bọbadé Onígègé Ọtẹ*

The creative use of proverbs and the number of proverbs in the two novels, *Orilawè Àdígún* and *Bọbadé Onígègé Ọtẹ*, should interest scholars of paremiology (study of proverbs) and paremiography (collection of proverbs). The pragmatic analysis of the proverbs in the selected texts should also be of great scholarly interest to pragmatic and speech act theorists. Both writers use Yorùbá proverbs to bring out their themes clearly, and to aid their mode of characterization and narrative techniques. They use Yorùbá proverbs in various dimensions— to soothe, to excite, to energize, to mobilize, to counsel and to sensitize the masses.

However, not all the politicians use proverbs to mobilize; rather, some use them to cause tensions, conflicts, division, disunity and to intimidate and destroy their political opponents.

In *Orilawè Àdígún* and *Bọbadé Onígègé Ọtẹ*, proverbs are used to depict characters and to bring out the themes of the texts. For example, proverbs are used to satirize and depict the party which preaches “one nation, one destiny” but adopts the practice of “winner takes all.” Proverbs are used to condemn the vindictive and selfish nature of Nigerian politicians in the Second Republic. In *Bọbadé Onígègé Ọtẹ*, the theme of the growing interest of the political class in the accumulation of material and financial assets is brought out clearly through the judicious use of Yorùbá proverbs. Through proverbs, readers are able to know the evil effects of capitalism in a “consumer country” like Nigeria.

The use of proverbs in the two texts is harmoniously united to the contents of the novels, and proverbs aid the presentation of ideas and the novelists’ mode of characterization. Both novelists are creative in their use of proverbs. They adopt what Isaac and Rosemary Levy call “creative selection” of proverb. This is a process by which the writers try to reshape, and reinterpret proverbs. Creativity in the texts lies in three categories namely:

1. The creation of new proverbs.
2. The timely invocation of an effective proverb in a fitting rhetorical context.
3. The manipulation and adaptation of existing proverbs.

Olabimtan is a specialist in the creation of new proverbs, which are simplified explanatory proverbs. He is also good in the manipulation and adaption of existing proverbs. Olú Owólabí however loves to use age-old proverbs, tied to
some historical events. The timely invocation of an effective proverb in a fitting rhetorical context is noticed in his text.

Owólabí employs proverbs as sub-titles. Each chapter in the text begins with a proverb. Most of the time, the proverbs are not written in full. The proverbs’ already condensed forms are subject to further abbreviation on the assumption that both the speaker and listener share the same socio-cultural history and do not require the use of elaborated codes for mutual understanding. Examples are as follows:

*Abẹrẹ bọ ọlọwọ adẹtẹ ó dète...*

The needle drops from the hand of the leper, to retrieve it becomes an impossible.

*Kàkà kéku má je sésé*

For the rat not be allowed to eat the beans.

The two proverbs are incomplete, and the full proverbs are rendered as follow:

*Abẹrẹ bọ ọlọwọ adẹtẹ ó dète, ọrọ bále o dèrò*

The needle drops from the hand of the leper, to retrieve it becomes an impossible, and there is a critical matter, it calls for deep thinking.

*Kàkà kéku má je sésé, a fí se àwádàmú*

For the rat not to be allowed to eat the beans, the rat will waste the beans.

The narrator used the two proverbs as a way of summarizing the wisdom of the tale. The first proverb has a metaphor (leper metaphor). The leper has presumably lost his fingers and holding a needle becomes a difficult task. The proverb makes reference to people who make impossible tasks out of what other people easily accomplish. The second proverb summarizes the vindictiveness of the main character in the chapter. The proverb exposes the revengeful heart of the speaker. The proverb is used to indicate that if the interlocutor is not allowed to do certain things, he will destroy whatever it is that opposes him.

While Olú Owólabí uses proverbs to summarize each chapter in his text, Olábimtan chooses to open this narrative with a formulaic phrase which serves to alert the listener that a story is to follow, and always sandwiches proverbs in the midst of the narration.

**Conclusion**

The functional use of proverbs by both novelists shows sensitivity to context of interaction. This enables the readers to understand the texts. In other
words, the selected novelists use proverbs with creativity. The creativity process includes inventing of proverbs, and timely invocation of effective proverbs in a right rhetorical context, make their texts accessible to readers who desire to learn about Yorùbá oratory. The use of Yorùbá proverbs in the novels under consideration has prove that Yorùbá language is usable, developed and capable of addressing contemporary socio-political problems in post-colonial Nigeria.

Notes


31. Mikiko, “Joseph’s Proverbs in the Coventry Plays,” 47.


35. Chilton and Schaffner, Discourse and Politics,” 213.


37. Austin, How to Do Things with Words; and Searle, “A Classification of Illocutionary Acts.”

Chapter 13

TEXT AND INTER-TEXTUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY YORÙBÁ LITERARY WORKS

Arinpe Adejumo

INTRODUCTION

The transposition of oral tradition for aesthetic satisfaction and thematic purpose in African literature has been one of the pre-occupations of some African literary and cultural scholars. Most of these scholars are of the opinion that there is an inter-relationship between the oral and the written traditions because they constantly nourish each other. Hence, many of their works have focused the interface between the written literature in Africa and the oral tradition. However, little attention has been given to the reliance of contemporary Yorùbá written literature on the oral tradition forms. The reason for this neglect could be traced to the medium of expression of these literary texts. Many of the written texts with Yorùbá expression are locally bound. Therefore, many African scholars could not get access to them, whereas a diachronic study of text and inter-textuality reveals that there is a binding relationship between the oral tradition and the written tradition in Yorùbá literary forms.

The Yorùbá literary tradition finds its base in the spoken words. The written culture is alien to the Yorùbá. Norms and values of the society are transmitted through the use of the various poetics forms like Ìjálá, Òwe, Èsà-Pipé, songs and oral narratives like folktale, myths and legends. Earlier attempts of adaptations of the oral narratives into the written forms have not yielded the desired result
because many of the Yorùbá writings ended up as mere reproduction of oral narratives. For instance, Ogunsina describes A. K. Ajisafe’s Enia Sòro as a mere reproduction of Yorùbá folktales. Fagunwa and the novelists in his tradition also adapted the Yorùbá folktales to write their novels; there are instances where such are stylized to bring a characterization effect. In some cases, Fagunwa does a mere reproduction of some folktales and stories. The deployment of oral tradition to bring out fantastic realism in the novels of Fagunwa’s tradition corroborates the fact that the oral tradition is a living tradition. Hence, the contemporary literary artists also rely on the oral tradition for the creation of their literary works. Therefore, this chapter examines the nexus between the oral and written traditions in select works of Akinwumi Ìsò lá, Gbémísóyè Àyànó and Débò Àwe. The literary works selected represent a remarkable period in the Yorùbá literary history. They belong to the middle course and contemporaneous writings. The thematic issues addressed in their texts also focus the global agenda for the development of all nations.

A Representation of Generic Border Crossing in Yorùbá Literary Texts

Oral forms are purposively used for thematization effect in the texts examined. The use of the poetic genre is prevalent in them. For instance, Òwe (Proverb), Ese-Ifá (Ifá divinatory poetry) and Ofò (Incantation) are used for aesthetic purpose, plot development, and thematic expansion in the texts. Proverbs occur informally in everyday communication. Thus, Kehinde views it as a vehicle for thematic presentations in literature. The role played by proverbs in literature owes to the fact that it occurs freely in the discussions that take place in the texts under study. For instance, in Olóunlúgo, a satirical novel, Awe’s use of proverb affirms Mackenzie’s view that the traditional storyteller develops a story around a proverb. In this novel, proverbs are used as sub-titles to encapsulate the theme and sub-themes, that is, the gullibility of some fanatical Christians. The oppressive and manipulative nature of some fake religious leaders is also exposed to ridicule through proverbs. In the novel, seven proverbs are used to give vivid descriptions of some oppressive exploits of Apápá, the protagonist of the novel. Two of the proverbs shall be examined in this analysis. Chapter Eight of the novel is entitled “Akéyínje kò mò pé ídí nro adìe” (The egg consumer does not know that the hen experiences pains while producing eggs), while Chapter Sixteen is titled Ohun tí Akátá n je (What the jackal eats). ‘Ohun tí Akátá n je’ is derived from the Yorùbá proverb that says “Ohun tí Akátá bá je’ ni fíi lo omo egbé rẹ” (A jackal prepares what it eats for its peer group). The two proverbs are for satirical, thematisation and characterization effects. Akéyínje in the first proverb and Akátá in the second proverb signify Apápá, a hypocrate,
who oppresses members of his congregation at will. The story narrated under “Akéyinje kò mò pé ìdí n ro adìe” is about a naming ceremony for the baby of Apánpá, the protagonist of the novel. Apánpá, a fake prophet, has hypnotized members of his congregation. His wife, Monísólá is barren. Suddenly, Monísólá becomes pregnant and later gives birth to a baby boy. The naming ceremony is done in a grand style. On the ceremony day, Apánpá declares his affluence as he puts the church fund on musicians’ and audiences’ heads at the party (41). Above all, to show his oppressive nature, he declares that everybody in the congregation should give the new baby money. A ridicule of the attitude of placing money above the welfare of people as the scripture commands is satirized as Apánpá wants his members to donate to the child under duress. This is captured in the following excerpt.

Àwon omo ijo náà kò sàìta Wòlíì Apánpá, lóre omo. Àwon egbé okùnrin da owó, ó férè lé ní eédégbèta naira, wún fita omotitun lóre. Wòlíì Apánpá, kóó. Òní enìkòòkan ni kó wáá maa ta omo lóre. Òlóún ìjé ore alápapò...bí wón sin nmú ore elénikòòkan wá ni Wòlíì nkoó silè... Enikan tilè wá nibe, tí owó títówó láskò ti a neyi. Èwònbá naira mějí tó rí níbí okó ìgháro ló dá fún ore alápapò tí àwon okùnrin se... Èsomolóríku ku ojó mérin ni eni náà tí fi ara re so fí sì okó ‘bírísopè. Ègbá tó si mía tí padá dě ogún naira ló fi lé Wòlíì áti iransé Olòrun Apánpá lówó (41-42).

Members of the congregation also give gifts to the new baby. The men’s fellowship contribute money well over five hundred naira, and it is given to the new baby. The money is rejected by Prophet Apánpá. He insists that each man should bring an individual gift... As they bring the gift individually, Prophet Apánpá opens a ledger where he records their donation... There is a man among them that is very poor at this time. The two naira he gathers from his laboring job is initially contributed for the corporate men’s fellowship gift... Four days to the naming ceremony, he has to go and serve as a pawn in a block making industry. By the time he comes back, he gives Prophet and God’s servant Apánpá twenty naira.

The description of the hard labor the man undergoes before getting money is comparable to the pain a hen undergoes while producing an egg. Prophet Apánpá is metaphorically described as the consumer of the egg, who does not care about the pains members of his congregation go through before they get the money they give as offering. The second proverb, “Ohun tí akátá bá jé,” is to satirize Apánpá’s adulterous practice. Above all, Apánpá is portrayed as an adulterer, a glutton and a cheat. He uses his position as prophet and founder of the church to abuse Sade sexually. As a result of this, he begins to suspect any of
his deacons that have discussion with women in the church. Thus, in the story that follows that sub-title, Apánpá visits Sadé, a member of his congregation and his secret lover. The following day, he goes to church and sees Gbádéga, a Deacon, discussing with Bósè, and Eésítà, two ladies in the church. The semantic relevance of the proverb is encapsulated in the interior monologue that goes through Apánpá’s mind as soon as he sights them:

Kò pè púpò rè ti oko W òlíì àti ìrásé Olórun Apánpá yo lóòókan. Bi ó tiri Dìkùn Gbádéga àti awon òdóòminrin to dóóyí ká a ló ti paná ojú pirá. Èrò mííràn nso lókàn rè bii kúlusó. Abí Díkin ti ndán nnkan wò lára awon omoge wonýí? Njé kò nií so ijo mi di ijo alágbèrè báyìí? (96)

In a short while, Prophet and God’s servant Apánpá drives in. The moment he sights Deacon Gbádéga and the ladies surrounding him, he becomes furious. A thought begins to roll in his mind like a mole. Has Deacon started abusing these ladies sexually? Won’t he turn my church to an adulterous one?

The above statement is a paradox. Gbádéga’s discussion with Bósè, and Eésítà is with a pure heart, whereas, Apánpá, who is accusing him falsely, is the one that has turned the church into an adulterous one. However, the novelist wants to emphasize the fact that like a jackal, Apánpá equates himself to all men.

In the same manner, the rhythm and structure of Ese-Ifá is relied on for the creation of storylines in the texts examined, Ese-Ifá, a divinatory poem is embedded in the day-to-day activities of the traditional Yorùbá people (Abímbólá 1976). Ifá is consulted before decisions are taken on several issues. Therefore, the Yorùbá authors carve it for the creation of their literary works. In Bellows in my Belly—a refraction of Odù Òkànñà méjí, an Ifá literary verse which is believed to be the primordial source of Sàngó and his mystical power of emitting thunder, lightning and fire, recited by Òrúnmílá when Sàngó goes for àdórààn, a mystical power that Olódùmarè bestows on him—the representation here is in line with the myth surrounding Sàngó as a deity. Òrúnmílá, in the play, says:

Háà! Òkànñà méjí
Òkànñà kan nihin
Òkànñà kan lóhùn
Òkànñà ìn méjí
Won a dire
A difá jùn Sàngó
Bambi Aríghaota ségun
Nígba tó nlo láàrìn ọtá
Kí l’Aríra ọ sítè
Igba ọtá
The rhythm and structure of the verse as recited in the play do not deviate from the norm of recitation of Ese-Ifá. However, in Olóunlúgo, the rhythm of Ese-Ifá is stylized to compose ofo for deconstructive purposes. There are several instances where Ofò and Ese-Ifá are either chanted or recited in the novel (29, 30-33, 74-75, 81). The deployment of the above poetic genre is presented in the traditional mode as the novelist juxtaposes Ofò and Ìyèrè Ifá; the combination is now used as Ofò. An example is seen when Apánpé goes for empowerment with Ewébíntàn, a traditional herbalist. Ewébíntàn says:

Ó ya künlè ki n wí gbólóhùn méjì fún o o tóó mó on lo
Gbònwewe-gbònwewe níi sewé ori igi
Hen en...
Gbònwewe-gbònwewe níi saso ori ǎstá
Hen en...
Kíkí là á kibon
Hèn en...
Kíkí láá ki gaári ká tóó yan án
Hèn en...
Komodé gbònwewe ki o Apánpé
Hèn en...
Kawon àgbálagbá gbònwewe bùn o lébùn
Hèn en...
Kobinrin máa ki o
Kókùnrin máa ki o o o

Kneel down let me say two sentences on you before you go.
Blowing, blowing is the characteristic of the leaves on a tree
Blowing, blowing is the characteristics of a flag
The use of the refrain “Hèn en” betrays the fact that the novelist juxtaposes the rhythm of Ìyèrè-Ifà, Ifá literary chant with the structure of Ofò, to form his own manipulative Ofò poetry.

According to Olatunji, assertion is one of the elements of Ofò. An assertion is an assumed truth or belief. Thus, in the Ofò, cited above, the in-controversible statements are found in the fact that, as a flag and leaves that are on a tree are bound to be blown by winds, men and women are bound to be drawn to Apánpá.

Ofò is also deconstructed in Olóunlígo for aesthetic effect. Usually, the assertion in Ofò is based on truth and incontrovertible statements within the culture and mystic context of the Ofò. However, in this novel, Ofò is composed for humorous and satirical effect, as he deviates from the norms of using mystical statement and uses contemporary imagery to create the assertion in his poetic form. He says:

Igba èèyàn níí wojá lòójò
Igba èèyàn níí wolé lójúmo...
Esè girigiri nilé oninááwó
Kó ’kùnrin máa da girigiri wa
Kóbinrin máa da girigiri wa
Ki dúdú máa sáré tete wolé
Ki pupa máa sáré tete wolé
A kii be òkú kó tó wonú pòsi

Two hundred people enter the market daily
Two hundred people enter the house daily...
Many people go to the venue of ceremony
Let men rush in
Let women rush in
The dark complexion should rush in
The fair complexion should rush in
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We do not need to beg a corpse before he enters into a coffin...

The researcher in her investigation of the structure of the lexical items used as assertion was told that the above lexical items are the author’s creation.

The novelist in Olóunlúgo parodied the rhythm of Ese-Ifá in his narrative for the purpose of imagery. For instance, when the narrator describes the performance of the choir at the celebration that accompanies the ritual usually done for the spirit carrier, he says:

Àwon egbé akorin náà ti fohùn orin bonu. Wón n fogo kígbe, won n faleluyà se ohun aró láti fi pàdé àlejò tì a n retí. (p. 18)

Members of the choir are singing. They were shouting glory, the dirge of halleluyah fills their mouth as they prepare to meet their expected guest.

In the above excerpt, “Wón n fògo kígbe, Wón n falelýà sohùn arò” is a parody of Ifá literary verse that says:

Ó mékín, ó fì digbe
Ó fìyèrè sohùn arò.

He replaces weeping with shouting
He chants iyere as a dirge.

The above Ifá verse occurs when an Ifá priest is overwhelmed with a situation. In Ifá, the Ifá priest is not supposed to weep physically. In case of any challenge, he is supposed to chant Ìyèrè-Ifá, no matter the seriousness of such a challenge. The overwhelming situation of the members of Apánpá’s church as they expect the descending of the spirit-medium is likened to that of an overwhelmed Ifá priest.

Parody is not restricted to Ifá literary verse in Olóunlúgo. Many Christian songs are parodied in the novel for satirical effect. For instance, the song:

Be e ba ngbó wóó wóó
Orí àjè ni baba nwó
Bé e ba ngbó wóó wóó
Orí èsù ni baba nwó. (p. 15)

is sung at the Glorious Holy Church where Apánpá and Monísólá first worshipped. The song is used here to ridicule worshippers that go to church to attack witches and wizards and Satan all the time. Instead, they are supposed to look inward as they face their problems and worship God in truth and diagnose the root of their problems.
The deployment of songs in Àyànò’s *Ayédàadé* is different from the above. In *Ayédàadé*, songs are used as a prologue to the play. The main and sub-themes of the play which are female emancipation and empowerment, gender equality, gender discrimination, and family planning are encompassed in the following songs.

1. *Ako ko lolù omo*
   *Abo ko lolù omo*
   *Omo tó bá yàn lolù o mo.*

   A male child is not the best of all
   A female child is not the best of all
   A child that makes it in life is the best of all children.

2. *Tako tabo ni o máa sèlú*
   *Tako tabo ni o maa selú*
   *Bawa okùnrin bá n lídú*
   *Kábo ó máa jò*
   *Bawon obínrin bá n lídú*
   *Káko ó má jo lu o.*

   Polity belongs to both the male and female
   Polity belongs to both male and female
   As the men drum
   Let the women dance
   As the women drum
   Let the men dance
   Polity belongs to male and female.

3. *Irún kó lolú omo*
   *Igba kó lolú omo*
   *Bó sókàn bó séjì omo ni*
   *Irún kó leyín oge*
   *Igba kó leyín oge.*

   Three hundred children do not make the best of children
   Two hundred children do not make the best of children
   Either one or two children are enough
   Three hundred teeth do not amount to beauty
   Two hundred children do not amount to beauty.

Excerpt One condemns gender discrimination, an evil that has bedeviled the average African man. Traditionally, the girl child is not accepted as the best child. Hence, in the play Adégbíté is not ready to sponsor his female children.
Despite the fact that Bùkólá, the eldest of them, is brilliant, and she is the best among her peers. In the end, Bùkólá’s performance earns her an award, and it is shown to the men in the play that a person does not need to be a male before he/she can be great in life.

Excerpt Two focuses the fact that there should be gender equality in human societies. Men and women are to complement each other. The exploits of the Association of Ayédáadé, an organization meant for the promotion of women and family support, is used to stress the above in the play. The association through its leader, Tólání, a female medical doctor, enlightens the men who are anti-women, and at the end, the men realize that they have been playing fools all year.

Excerpt Three is sung to deride people who believe they must have many children because they want to have the best of all. A Yorùbá maxim that says “Iye omo téniyàn bá bí ni yòò wo yàrà rè” (It is the number of children somebody has that will enter his/her room) betrays the fact that Yorùbá are lovers of many children. If a woman has many children without a male child among them, she is assumed not to have any as in the case of Morénikè and Adégbité in the play. As a result, they end up having nine female children, and Adégbité is still looking for the best of children, a male child (40). Thus, the song in that context serves derisive and educative functions as the men are enlightened, and in the end they all embrace family planning methods in the play (83-84).

Akinwúmi Ïsolá, in Bellows In My Belly, uses songs for thematic purposes. Bellows In My Belly, a mythico-didactic play, is based on Oya, a Yorùbá goddess. The Yorùbá myth about the quarrel between Ògún and Sàngó over Oya and how Ògún eventually lost Oya to Sàngó because he was a male chauvinist is reconstructed to bring to the fore the issue of female emancipation and empowerment in contemporary times. The songs used in Bellows in My Belly could be categorized into two. One, folksongs that are adapted in the story and songs that are original composition of Ïsolá. In the first category is the following song:

Ó dàbí nma lo mo
Ó dàbí npadà sèyìn
Araka Oya, Oriiri
E wobì òré sin òré dé.

I feel like not going
I felt like turning back
Araka Oya Oriiri
This is where friends take leave of friends.

The above song is adapted from Ekùn Ìyàwó. The context in which the song is sung in the play conforms to the cultural milieu in which it is usually sung.
among the Yorùbá. *Oya* is to leave her parents in order to go to the earth with her betrothed, Ògún. Oya while departing, sings this farewell song to her maiden as it is always the case with a bride in Yorùbá culture.

In the same vein, many of the actions are expressed through the use of traditional musical rhythm, drum and dance. For instance, when Sàngó is making advances to *Oya*, as he works the bellows, he starts to make music with the bellows:

\[
\text{Ohun towó mi o to} \\
\text{Ma fi gògò fà á} \\
\text{Fà á fà á fà á} \\
\text{Ma fi gògò fà á. (p. 18)}
\]

What my hands cannot reach
I will pull with a hook
Pull, pull and pull
I will pull with a hook.

The musical effect of the song helps in the development of the plot of the play because it is the sound of Sàngó’s music that synchronizes Ògún’s hammer on the anvil. This entices Ògún into paying a total attention to his work, and it affords *Oya* and Sàngó the opportunity to consummate a relationship in the presence of Ògún without speaking a word to each other. This aids the conflict that arises in the play.

The second category of song is more prevalent in the play. Love songs are composed by Akínwùmí Ìsolá to portray the deep affection between *Oya* and Sàngó. For instance, the following excerpt unveils the unconditional love between *Oya* and Sàngó, as he (Sàngó) sings:

\[
\text{Oya māa bo, Oya māa bo lódò mi o} \\
\text{Tété tété māa bó} \\
\text{Ìwo ni mo yán o di témí títí ayé} \\
\text{Tété tété māa bó} \\
\text{Ògún oníre ko padà léyin rè} \\
\text{Tété tété ma tété māa bó.}
\]

Oya come to me
Come quickly
I have chosen you, you are mine forever
Come quickly
Let Ògún leave you alone
Come quickly.
Women’s subjugation and the oppression of women by men are also decried in the song as *Oya* replies thus:

*Sàngó gbà mi o, kí n dì́yàwò rè o
Ìwo ni mo fè o
Ôgún oníre, o ti fìyà je mi
Ìwo ni mo fè o* (p. 21).

Sàngó let me become your wife
It is you I love
Ogun has mistreated me
It is you I want.

Ìsolá’s use of love song in the play is revolutionary, because the songs are employed to uproot the conservative ideology on marriage in the Yorùbá setting. In his perception, love is supposed to be the bedrock of marriage. The marriage between Ôgún and *Oya* in the beginning of the play is based on parental consent. *Oya* agrees to marry Ôgún because she wants to please her parents. The altercation between *Oya* and her maidens reveals this.

Maiden 2: You are not leaving us
Oya: I have just been thinking about our parents
Maiden 3: Parents cannot help us today
Oya: But you know they love us...
And yet they want to send us away!
Maiden 1: I don’t understand parents!
Oya: My parents will be very sad if I do not follow my husband
Maidens: Oh! What a shame!
Oya: Parents are a burden.

After marrying *Oya*, Ôgún does not appreciate her, and he feels a woman should be an object of physical molestation and abuse. Ôgún’s attitude to *Oya* could be ascribed to the fact that love which is supposed to be the bedrock of marriage does not exist between them. On the other hand, the genuine love between *Oya* and *Sàngó* motivates both of them to take a risk. *Oya* could not even hide her feeling as she narrates her new experience in excitement to her maiden; she bursts into song with *gbedu* music:

Call: A dream come true, I love a new man!
Response: Excitement and hope for a life full of fun!
Call: The man of my dream is handsome and bright.
Call: Rejoice with me and wish me all the best!
Response: Excitement and hope for a life full of fun!
Maiden call: We rejoice with you and wish you all the best!
Maiden response: Excitement and hope for a life full of fun!

The conservative idea of marriage which makes a woman to be under permanent maltreatment from her husband within the traditional context is questioned in this mythical character, Oya. She sets herself to seek freedom for women, and she eventually achieves her aim as she leaves Ôgún and marries Sàngó, who sees her as a jewel and someone to be adored. Hence, her action concretizes the playwright’s view that the excitement and expectation of a blissful marriage could be solidly found when women are given the chance to take a husband of their choice unlike in the traditional settings where parents chose husbands for their female children.

**Conclusion**

Finally, it has been argued in this chapter that Yorùbá literary writers have deployed oral and poetic forms to explain and critique the social, political, and historical situation in contemporary times. The authors under study have stylized the various oral and poetic modes for aesthetic values. The thematic concerns, as well as characterization and settings in the texts are also presented in style through the use of myths, ofò (Incantation), ese Ifá (Ifá verse) and proverbs. The deployment of the above genres and their effectiveness in the texts under study affirm Na Allah’s (2002) submission that African oral performances are as contemporary as any form of African writing. However, the genres could be deconstructed by the authors as they use them to combat the conservative ideology in order to launch global concern for development in every part of the world as it is seen in Bellows in my Belly and Ayédáadé respectively.

**References**

Notes


9. *Ekùn Ìyàwó* is a traditional Yorùbá nuptial chant, which is chanted by bride on the eve of her wedding ceremony, when she is to be led to the bridegrooms, house.

In this chapter, I propose to explore the prospects and challenges of translation in a multilingual culture such as Nigeria, composed of oral literatures before Western colonialism. To this end I propose to examine how the works of D. O. Fagunwa and Adebayo Faleti have been translated, and how they might be fruitfully translated in the future to take cognizance of the use of orature in the source texts and strategies that might be employed to deliver an effective translation to a target English audience conversant with a written culture.

Questions such as the structure of orature and its relationship to meaning will be foregrounded, as well as the ways of ensuring that structural changes that accompany translation into target language will not result in loss of meaning. This will enable me to enter into the discourse of translation, which is still in its infancy in African cultures, and to posit the benefits that can be derived from taking translation more seriously as a cohesive vehicle of cultural transformation across the African continent and beyond.

Perhaps no other Yoruba writer has been more translated than Fagunwa yet only a few of his works have been translated. His translated works include *Igbo Olodumare*, *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmole*, *Irinkerindo Nine Igbo Elegbeje* and my translation of his *Aditu Olodumare*.

On the other hand Faleti and his fecund literary offerings have attracted a minimal attempt to take advantage of the polyglossia of the indigenous Nigerian and African literary scenes, to expose contiguous literary cultures to his
literary insights and talents. I have made exploratory gestures in this direction with my translations of his historical drama, *Won Ro Pe Were Ni*, as well as *Itan Ilanuye ti Gaa* (to be hereafter referred to as *Gaa*). These efforts are geared toward eventually provoking a culture of literary translations in Nigeria and Africa more generally.

The three translations of Fagunwa’s works that I examine in this study have adopted the hermeneutic translation strategy. Whereas in other cultures each of these works would have received multiple translators from which the field of translation studies could be provided with adequate data for comparative translations, the tendency in Africa is that once a particular translation has been made of a particular work, the translator is given the sole privilege and monopoly over the lone translation. Other prospective translators seek other fresh untranslated works by the same author or seek work by other authors to translate. In the case of an overlapping trilogy, this raises the problem of how a translator might approach the second volume when the first was translated by a different translator. This, perhaps, was the problem Dapo Adeniyi tried to solve in his forenote when he stated:

> Likewise a Fagunwa forest in one story will likely be a geographical neighbor to other forests in another, not to even mention events. So a translator strives to keep faith not with the one immediate work alone but with unity of space, time and events enclosed in a collective world of five novels. Therefore, it serves the purposes of both convenience and propriety to keep the English alternatives of names of people and places as they occur in Soyinka’s work in order to affirm these interlocked consanguinities.

This is not imperative according to translation theory. An attempt to do this would mean that Adeniyi’s title would translate *Elegbeje* as One Thousand Four Hundred Daemons. As he notes below, he does not do this but instead supplements his title with One Thousand Four Hundred Deities, avoiding the trap of Judeo-Christian bias against the African pantheon of deities. Perhaps the problem Adeniyi hints at can be best addressed by a consideration of how to treat allusions and avoid the charges of plagiarism in translation as Eugene Eoyang suggests in a similar problem encountered in translations of Chinese literature. Adeniyi’s recasting of the title is similar to Eoyang’s analysis of Seidensticker’s rendering of the translation of *The Tale of Genji*. According to Eoyang, “Seidensticker’s rendering of the opening passage in the *Genji* is not merely a corrective to Waley, not just a replacement of a faulty version, but a complement to it. This view would be supported by reception theory since Adeniyi’s translation, published in Lagos, is produced predominantly for a Nigerian audience, while Soyinka’s translation is produced for an international audience, part of
which includes intra-national Nigerian ethnicities. For the Yoruba audience in Nigeria, Soyinka and Adeniyi’s translations are what Eoyang categorizes as co-eval, while for majority of the Hausa, Igbo and the over two hundred other Nigerian nationalities, both translations are surrogate to one another.

The other matter brought up by Adeniyi’s quoted forenote above relates to intertextualities and influences in literary studies. Because three of Fagunwa’s novels are composed as a trilogy, intertextuality is a given. Also, in view of the Judeo-Christian reworking of Yoruba myths and belief systems, Fagunwa’s source texts exhibit influences from Western culture.

As in the translations of Fagunwa’s novels, casting the translated title is quite revealing of the strategy of the translator in accessing the target language. Wole Soyinka’s pioneering work in this regard in The Forests of a Thousand Daemons, rather than capture the neutral word, Irunmale, plays into the demonization of the African jungle in Western literary imagination as a place of negative supernatural experience, full of only fear of evil rather than the fear of the unknown and foreboding, and the milieu of surpassing wonder which, in my view, was the thrust of the message in the source text. Thus, it is only an appreciation of this tone of the source text that can guide a title cast that would reflect the role of the hunter’s inimitable courage in overcoming all odds, which seem to be the overarching goal of Fagunwa in the source text.

However, the title might be Soyinka’s attempt to access the Western Christian universe of discourse as a means to locating the translated work within the Western canon. Irunmale in the Western literary universe of discourse is suggestive of the pantheon of pagan gods that are representative of evil, but within the source culture, before Western colonialism, the oratorical nuance of Irunmale is suggestive of the beneficial collective of the metaphorical four hundred deities whose awe-inspiring presence assured the people of the continued influence and power of the supernatural over the mortal for good or for ill. They are the presences that the living dare not ignore except at their own peril. This is therefore an instance in which the oratorical and illocutionary effectiveness in the source text predicated on a polytheistic universe of discourse has been lost in the foreignness of the transition/translation to the target written language constructed on a monotheistic universe of discourse, in a situation similar to the one I discussed relative to the given name of Fagunwa in the The Foundations of Nigeria.

Adeniyi’s casting of the title of the second in the Fagunwa trilogy also betrays the lacuna from source text based on the dynamics of oral culture to target text based on written culture. Irinkerindo Ninu Igbo Elegbeje is translated as Expedition to the Mount of Thought. Here the thread of continuity purposely inserted by Fagunwa in the source trilogy by the key word “igbo” (forest) is totally lost, by the translator’s change of focus from an overarching quest motif to a teleological focus geared toward the end of the novel in the rendezvous...
between the protagonist and the landlord of a mountain-top mansion retreat in the first part of the trilogy, *The Forests of a Thousand Daemons*. It seems as though Adeniyi has been influenced by the title of the dramatic adaptation of the first novel in the trilogy named *Langbodo*¹⁶ written by Wale Ogunyemi. In other words, the opening phrase in the source text of “Irinkerindo” chosen to amplify the uncertainty of the quest motif is subverted in the target text by the phrase “Expedition to.” The final word in the title of the source text of “elegbeje” is further indicative of Fagunwa’s open-ended strategy, which is again subverted by the self-assured expedition to a predetermined mountain as it is implied in the casting of the title in the target language. “Elegbeje” is nuanced in the oral culture from which it emanates to be an illocutionary phrase¹⁷ suggestive of myriad of possibilities. Egbeje is one hundred and forty, and the prefix “Ele” without a modifier is meant to arouse the sense of wonder of the reader, who begins to ask, “Elegbeje of what?” Adeniyi seems to be aware of this in his forenote, even though this awareness did not lead him to an apposite title. He says:

> is it egbeje iwin, egbeje eranko, egbeje anjonu or what? Hence my introduction of the supplement, imale, deities; igbo elegbetje thus reading in English: Forest of a thousand and Four Hundred Deities = igbo elegbeje imale, a subtle hint at its relationship with Igbo Irunmale.¹⁸

The preceding observations will therefore inform prospective translators of the texts discussed on pitfalls to avoid in the casting of the title, and perhaps also invite commentaries and translators’ notes on future translations on why certain titles have been chosen and why certain strategies have been adopted. Soyinka attempted something toward the latter in his *The Forests of a Thousand Daemons*, but this was at a phrasal level rather than at an overarching philosophical level. Both translations seem to be based on hermeneutic translations. It is my future goal to embark on fresh translations of both texts in the future, taking these observations into consideration and situating the texts within my overarching philosophical strategies of translation of the Fagunwa novels—a strategy one might characterize by extending on DRaz-Diocaretz as Active-Translator-Function. Robinson explains DRaz-Diocaretz Translator-Function as manifested in the fact that she is most centrally concerned in her book with her own work (of translation) and he goes on to link this to a Lacanian notion of subjectivity.¹⁹ My concept of Active-Translator-Function extends this further by a concern that provokes the insertion of the translator within the actions narrated in the work. By this means, Active-Translator-Function is juxtaposed to Translator-Function or (Latent) Translator-Function. This would also further the goal of the viability of African translation studies in the milieu of multiple translations of the same text.
I now turn to my translation of *Adiitu Olodumare*. I chose the title of *The Riddle of the Divine* (which will hereafter be called *Riddle*) because of the dual role of the title of the source text which reveals the unpredictable fate of the world as well as the unpredictable fate of the protagonist. Here the illocutionary conjunction of Adiitu (that which is inexplicable), the given name of the protagonist, and Olodumare (which is the Yoruba neocolonial approximation of Western notions of a monotheistic God) gives the dual sense that God’s ways are not subject to rational scrutiny, and that the events in the life of the protagonist Adiitu defy rational explanation in their twists and turns and various vicissitudes. Thus Adiitu the protagonist is the enigma created by God (in the Western monotheistic sense), and God’s will as revealed through his fate is enigmatic. The choice of the word “Divine” instead of “God” leaves a dialogical cross-current of discourse between a pre-colonial polytheistic and the neo-colonial apprehension of divinity. Next, I compare my translation strategy to the hermeneutic strategy of the two earlier translations.

 Whereas Soyinka and Adeniyi tried as much as they could to leave the plot unaltered in the target text as they were in the source text, I have taken the poetic license to introduce a few innovations to the target text to underscore stylistically the African world-view espoused by Fagunwa in the source text, of the unborn, the departed and the living, and to situate the translator’s role within this continuum. This is to introduce to the target text what Walter Benjamin has described as “the unfathomable, the mysterious and the poetic, something that the translator can reproduce only if he is also a poet.”

 The position of the writer to whom the protagonist relates the story has therefore been taken by the translator who is both inside and outside the text in a Derridean twist. The author of the source text promptly takes up his position in the world of the departed, where communication with the translator’s father and Fagunwa’s son is amply facilitated.

 I have also taken advantage of the fact that the translation is now to be read by a far more multiculturally diverse and multiracial audience than in the days of the publication of the source text, so the locale of the publication and the time of publication have imposed the imperative of restructuring of the plot, consistent with reception theory. This is very similar to what Femi Osofisan did in his premiere of *Weso Hamlet*.

 The demonization of the God Esu has therefore been taken out altogether and a substitute passage of a continental pilgrimage is inserted. The demonization was necessitated by Fagunwa’s need to secure a niche in the prevailing universe of discourse of a neo-colonial Nigeria, eager to demonstrate its civilized credentials to agents of a departing colonial overlord. The skopos of my translation is therefore as the Osofisan play did for Shakespeare, to bring Fagunwa to the multicultural, multiracial, postmodern world.
Indeed the choice of which Fagunwa text to translate is based on which text easily fits into a multicultural, multiracial context, by virtue of the experience of the characters and the contemporary way of life portrayed in the text. And the organic relation of the author of the source text to the translator of the target text is demonstrated in the following passage:

I am Orowale Fagunwa who resides in the city of Oke-Igbo. I am here to recount my tale for another land in another season; the earlier version was meant for another audience; the world has since moved on and we need no longer be timid of our cultural heritage, and now I think the whole world must hear Adiitu’s tale as he actually recounted it to me. This is how the gentleman’s story went: My father is Obiri Aiye, and my mother’s name is Iponjudiran.24

This is the author of the source text speaking to the translator of the target text, and encouraging the translator to make necessary changes deemed fit to reflect the zeitgeist. This is somewhat similar to the way Virgil made a symbolic connection between the Greek world of Homer in *The Odyssey*25 and his own Roman world in *The Aeneid*,26 albeit the transition here is mainly temporal.

The translator has taken up the fictive narrator’s role (Beyioku’s son) in the source text, and thus the author of the source text has taken the narrative position of Adiitu in relation to Beyioku’s son (fictive narrator of Adiitu’s story) in the target text. Thus the translator recounts his meeting with the author of the source text, and fulfils the goal of translation as a means by which the source text enjoys an afterlife.27

Presently he caught up with us, since we beckoned him to come. As he saw me, he smiled and said, “Olayinka, let me into your car, I was sent to you, I am headed to your place.”28

Here the link between the author of the source text and the translator of the target text is complete, and the source text begins its new life in which equivalence then no longer features between the two. Also, it is noteworthy that the author now bears his given name of Orowale29 in the target text, as opposed to Olorunfemi. Next I turn to the comparative translation strategies used by Soyinka, Adeniyi and myself in the three Fagunwa texts translated, and after that I shall go on to examine translations I made of chosen Faleti texts. Afterward, I compare the use of orature in both source text writers, and how prospective translators might negotiate these in future translational transactions.

In *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*, Soyinka has employed what appears to be a free translation of the text, trying as much as he can to find linguistic equivalence in the target language for expressions in the source text. His title,
apart from the Judeo-Christian bias mentioned earlier, is focused on the importance of the forests as the vehicle for driving the plot rather than the protagonist. It is the wonder of the forests that is foregrounded, and this is perhaps why it is seen as a fitting example of a magical realist novel. Fantastic actions take place, woven into human logic and the intrusion of the supernatural. Akinwumi Isola has clarified the strategy used by Fagunwa to advance the plot. He categorizes these into two: believable stories which the reader readily identifies as true, and stories inserted merely to advance the plot which the reader knows cannot be true. Isola calls this fantastic realism. As he explains,

While the Yoruba man believes that egbe can really carry Akara-sgun from far away in the forest back to his own room at home in the twinkling of an eye, he does not believe that the king’s dog can have golden teeth and brazen hairs. There are certain things he believes are probable which can be explained by his world view, and there are others he knows are just impossible but which he accepts as falling within the literary convention of the folktale (my italics).30

The courage and bravery of Akara Ogun is measured by his reaction to and ability to surmount the odds confronted, including supernatural obstacles. As incantatory prowess and the power of the spoken word is crucial to victory, orature plays a crucial part in the rhetorical devices in the source text, and Soyinka puts his mastery of the English language at the service of the reader so that the poetic nuance of great incantatory speeches that challenges the supernatural beings comes to the fore. Next, I turn to the strategy used by Adeniyi to cope with semantic translation of equivalence, and evaluate the success of the enterprise through examination of excerpts from the source and target texts.

The source text begins with a seeming formulaic evocation of the wonders of creation and gratitude to divine providence. “The weather changes; a growling thunder results in a spate which heralds his august personage to his presence. They agree to turn in for the night and fix their tryst for the following day for a narrative of the visitor’s adventures.” The first paragraph in the source text reads:

Aiye kun fun ibugbe iyanu, Oba bi Olorun kosi, Olodumare ni nse alakoso ohun-Gbogbo ti mbe ni ode aiye ati ode orun, iyanu ni aiye papa je: aiye kun fun enia Elese meji ati eranko elese merin, ejo afaiyafa ati eja ti nkakiri inu omi, eiye ti Nkorin bi fere ati alagemo ti Olodumare wo ni oniruru aso. Oke ati petele, orun Ati osupa, awosanmo ati erupe ile, gbogbo iwonyi je iyanu.31

Here follows Adeniyi’s translation of this excerpt:
Marvels fill the world over, there is no king as God. He has in his charge all things on Earth and the Heavens; the universe itself is cause for wonderment. The earth is filled with men with two limbs and four-footed animals, snakes which tread on their breasts and fishes of the rivers, birds that chirp as flutes including also the chameleon whom God clothes in the colourful tweed. Highlands and lowlands, the sun and the moon, the clouds of the sky and earth’s soil, these all remain wonders.32

In the first sentence an obvious descent into almost transliteration is obvious from the beginning, and although the translator trumpets the translated text as free translation, it seems that a free translation qua free translation would be more adventurous and daring by definition. The dependent clause, “the universe itself is cause for wonderment,” reveals that this is not a translation targeted at native English speakers, for this syntactic arrangement is peculiarly Nigerian. What is more, the choice of the word wonderment is indicative of a low register of narrative voice. This does not carry across to the target language my observation on Fagunwa’s narrative style as deliberately constructive in high register formal Oyo Yoruba.33 The next sentence also demonstrates transliteration. The clause, “the earth is filled with men with two limbs and four-footed animals, snakes which tread on their breasts and fishes of the rivers, birds that chirp as flutes including also the chameleon whom God clothes in the colourful tweed,” also demonstrates excessive transliteration and low register, so that it is obvious this translation can only thrive in the local market. The phrase “ejo afaiyafa” is translated as “snakes which tread on their breasts,” to suggest that snakes have visible feet. This is a disservice to the source text, since “fa” in Yoruba indicates crawling, and Fagunwa made the unmistakably right choice of word, as an apposite translation might be: “snakes which slither around.” If “men with two limbs” is acceptable as Yoruba oratorical device, it does not follow that a transliteration into the target language would fare as well, since the dynamics of acceptable English idiomatic expression differs from Yoruba. A higher grasp of English idioms and culture is therefore needed for a successful translation of this clause for native speakers. As Lefevere notes, “Students of translation need knowledge of linguistics, literary history, literary theory, and cultural theory”34 of the target language. But in a case where the target language is the second language of the translator, and there is not enough scholarship of the dynamics of the language, transliteration of the sort displayed here is the stop gap, which as I have argued elsewhere is erroneously defended as acceptable Nigerian English.

Furthermore, the translator’s choice of “tweed” as the garment in which the chameleon is clothed is problematic. It is as incongruent as the children’s song that states “row row row my boat right along the street.” Boats are not rowed along the street! The point that bears reiteration is that translating a text written
in oratorical idiom into a written genre like the novel in English requires special handling and acceptable choices within the target language.

Perhaps I should examine another excerpt, the closing of the source text and the translation of this segment. The protagonist and his fifty comrades have roamed the Elegbeje Forests, climbed the Mountain of Thought, received the boon for their quest and made their way home, and the protagonist returns to the narrator, concludes his tale and vanishes. The source text reads in the penultimate paragraph:

Bayi ni okunrin na wi, bi o si ti dake oro re, ako rii mo. Sugbon okan ninu awon ologbon ti won pejo si ile mi ti nwon gbo itan na, wi fun mi pe riri ti a ko ri okunrin na mo ko ya on lenu, nitori ko yato si Akara-Ogun ju be lo, on ati omulemofo, okanna ni.35

The translated text presents this excerpt thus:

So did the man speak, and when he had paused thus, we saw him no more. But one wise head among the people who assembled in my house to hear him said his vanishing gives him no surprise whatsoever for the man and Akara-Ogun were closely alike, that he and the one who fathers Born-Losers were of like make.36

The closing formula in the source text and the translated text are again very similar to the end, and transliteration is superimposed on free translation for the most part. In addition, the translation of “omulemofo”, which is a surrogate name for Akara-Ogun as father of Born-Losers is not at all clear, for if the source text had been written as “baba omulemofo” this translation might be justifiable. The last clause of this excerpt, “were of like make,” to say the least is pedestrian elementary English by whatever standards and does no credit to the use of English even in Nigeria. The fact that it took more than ten years (by the translator’s own admission) to secure a translation of this nature is a testimony to the amount of rigor and scholarship needed for an acceptable translation. I now examine the strategies I used to translate Riddle.

I took my point of departure from the audience to which the source text was addressed by the narrator. This is the first and perhaps the only novel in Fagunwa’s oeuvre that is specifically addressed to a multicultural and multiracial audience. As the narrator indicates in the source text:

Enyin ore mi l’omode, ati papa enyin omo ile iwe, enyin ore mi agbalagba, enyin enia wa l’okunrin, enyin enia wa l’obirin, enyin ara aiyे ni dudu, enyin ara aiyे ni funfun, enyin ara aiyे, e ba sai dudu, ki e sai funfun, akoko ojo no oro yi sele o A! ojo na po gidigidi, ni inu
moto ayokele ti a wa ni ojo na, se ni ojo yi nlu ilu le wa lori ti o ndun winniwinni bi omele ilu dundun. (my italics)\(^37\)

I have translated this passage as follows:

Well-wishers, young and old, particularly you students, my comrades, women as well as men; *I address myself to blacks as well as whites, and I do not exclude people of mixed race*. This incident transpired during the rainy season. It was an unrelenting storm. The storm made a resounding beat on the roof of our car, like the dundun drum tap. (italics added)\(^38\)

As indicated in the italicized portions, this is the first novel addressed to an international multiracial audience, and this indicates that it was primed for translation sale and consumption in the international forum. At the overarching structural level, this suggests that it would be amenable to further experimentation in translation to fit into different international domestic audiences. It is therefore the task of the translator to gauge the demands of the different universe of discourses in various times and spaces, cultures and climates, and to make the stylistic and plot adjustments necessary to create meaning at each location. This means the novel is potentially the most “translatable” of all Fagunwa’s works. To this end, I have made exploratory moves by inserting some of the characters into a different Nigerian locale and an African location that shared a similar African past with the Yoruba, in Egypt.

This of course makes it more accessible to those parts of Nigeria and Africa, and promotes pan-Africanism. The strategy holds out the promise of a similar translation for the South African audience based on the three novels in the trilogy fused into the warrior tradition of the Zulu. It imagines a future translation that strides across the Niger, eastwards and backwards in time to Ezeulu’s time where Oke Ironu can have a salubrious ensconce in the Obudu ranges in the Southeast. It bridges the gap in the African spatio-temporal continuum in a manner similar to Ayi Kwei Armah’s strategy in *Two Thousand Seasons*, Osiris Rising, and Soyinka’s *A Dance of the Forests*. It tantalizes with the prospect of crossing the ocean and nesting in the diasporic ambience of the Ohio valley where Iyunade can hold hands with Baby Suggs in her hoary phase; prospects of a pilgrimage to Beverly Hills where Iyunade and her groom would be hosted in the hall of fame. Finally, the world view in the trilogy opens a collaborative translational vista transversing space and time to Confucian China. They hold out the promise of a translation-fest in African scholarship, and the foundations of a truly multilingual culture.

In translating the first excerpt from the source text, I have chosen not to dwell too much initially on the nodal word “enyin” (plural “you”) that provided
for the oratorical parallelism in the first three lines, but instead I employed the hermeneutical strategy of recasting the three lines to enhance illocutionary effect in the target language. Changing the literal meaning of “ore mi” to “well-wishers” also enhances a higher register, as it also did in changing the register in “ore mi agbalagba” (grown up friends) to “comrades.” Also “eba sai dudu, kie sai funfun” (even if you are neither black nor white) was discarded for “I do not exclude people of mixed race” to guard against transliteration. This strategy informs much of the translation except when parallelism would advance the plot in its illocutionary power, for example in the incantatory or quasi-incantatory passages or for poetic effect where powerful emotional outpouring is involved. A case in point is the incident where a flood washed away Adiitu’s bundle of matches and he is faced with the prospect of starvation:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ha! Eleda mi, temi to je?} \\
\text{Olodumare, temi ti je?} \\
\text{Olojo Oni, temi ti je?} \\
\text{Temi ti je larin omo enia?}^{42}
\end{align*}
\]

This was translated as the following:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ha! My Creator, why has this befallen me?} \\
\text{Olodumare why has this befallen me?} \\
\text{Creator of the day, why has this befallen me?} \\
\text{Of all people, why has this befallen me?}^{43}
\end{align*}
\]

I remarked at the beginning of the chapter the reordering of the narrative structure, so that the translator is a part of the concentric ring of narrators, of the classic Fagunwa narrative strategy. Not only is this narrative structure modified to accommodate the role of the translator, but the locus of narration is also shifted from Yorubaland in Nigeria to London in the diaspora. Here the narrator serves as a go-between for source text author and son living in the diaspora as the source text author serves as a link between the translator’s departed father and the translator. I now examine the prospects and challenges of translating Adebayo Faleti.

Adebayo Faleti is perhaps the most prolific and most experienced living Yoruba writer across the genres. It is a wonder that the formal training of this literary giant is in English, but he chose to write in his national language of Yoruba, guessing correctly that this is his first and native language, where he would thrive the most. Faleti’s drama is at home on the television screen catering to popular taste as it is in academia. He has gone into cinema production, and his poetry is chanted or sung on the radio network as much as it is used in the classrooms. His prose works are also read in classrooms in the Yoruba speaking states of Nigeria.
I examine the translation challenges and prospects of two of his plays, *Basorun Gaa* and *Won Ro Pe Were Ni*, and highlight the oratorical devices and follow up with a comparative analysis of orature in his works and the works of Fagunwa.

*Basorun Gaa* is a historical drama that is staged during the period of a powerful Yoruba minister of defence in the precolonial days of the Yoruba confederal kingdoms. As the minister of defence in Oyo kingdom, he also acts as the constitutional spokesman of the Oyomesi, the powerful kingmakers, cabinet cum senate of the Oyo kingdom. In this position, it was his unwritten constitutional duty to demand the resignation via ritual suicide of any king found unfit to rule for a host of reasons including bad governance, tyranny, bad harvests, excessive tragedies on the populace, etc.

Perhaps it is apposite to note a biographical detail about Faleti from the outset; his father was one of the team of praise poets for King Ladigbolu, one of the most remarkable Alafins of Oyo kingdom in the 20th century, so he brings to bear on his works, and particularly this Oyo historical drama, a pedigree of talents in oratory which he has shared with the Yoruba over the broadcasting network in which he has played various roles, rising through the ranks to the post of chief executive. This is necessary information, for the author must be seen from the psychoanalytic perspective as putting the best in this play, to realize in art the role he was destined for had he not taken advantage of Western education to go to school and seek employment in the Civil Service. The high poetic speeches and praise chants of the royalty were taken from a historical corpus and lent for use in art. A necessary strategy of translation must take this into consideration, and the language used must demonstrate high register of the sort used in the Theban plays, particularly in *Oedipus Rex* and *The Bacchae*. I have sought to translate the play along such parameters. The play begins at the point where the Gaa led Oyomesi, and had just pronounced the rejection sentence on the incumbent King Majeogbe:

*Egungun kekere wọle, Oba Majeogbe tele e*

(*Lati ehin itage*)

Oyo ko o! A ko o! A ko o!
Oyo ko Majeogbee-e-e-e-e!

This is translated into the following:

*A young masquesrave dashes in, followed by King Majeogbe*  
“Oyo disowns you! We disown you! Yes, we disown you! Oyo disowns Majeogbe!”

Here, to use the word *disown* indicates a higher register than the word *reject*, and it also signifies a finality of relations that is suitable to suggest the impend-
ing ritual suicide of the deposed king. Note that the democratic implication of
the Oyomesi’s action is that they had taken the action on behalf of the citizenry,
and Gaa, in abusing his position in the Oyomesi to teleguide their decision
against any Alaafin toward whom he is ill disposed, becomes the real king maker
and as such the puppet master of any reigning Alaafin until his nemesis catches
up with him in the highly diplomatic Alaafin Abiodun, who negotiates his fate
away from that of his predecessors in office. It is therefore not surprising to find
his colleagues in the Oyomesi referring to him as “Kabiyesi”, for in the period
of the interregnum he is the de jure Alaafin, as indeed he is the de facto Alaafin
in the reign of any of his puppets. So in the following dialogue he chides them,
tongue in cheek, to refrain from referring to him as “Kabiyesi.”

\[
\text{Gaa} \quad \text{Kabiyesi to! O to!}
\]
\[
\text{E ma se mi ni Kabiyesi mo}
\]
\[
\text{Emi ii s’oba, eyin na si mo.}
\]
\[
\text{Mo le l’ola kin’ n’ipo ninu ijoye, e timo}
\]
\[
\text{P’enit’a bi l’Osorun ‘o le gori Oba.}\]

I have translated this segment in the following:

\[
\text{Gaa} \quad \text{Enough of Kabiyesi!}
\]
\[
\text{This is sacrilege.}
\]
\[
\text{Do you forget I am not a royal?}
\]
\[
\text{Yes, I may be influential, and paramount among you.}
\]
\[
\text{Yet it is certain the lineage of Osbrun is barred from the throne.}\]

The second line of my translation tightens the syntax to hint at the grievous sin
of usurpation, which Gaa knows he dare not aspire to, but in lieu of which he
dispatches disliked incumbents to the great beyond. It is also aimed at empha-
sizing the cosmogonic dimension in the situation. The king represents a semi
divine order and the decision to relieve him of his position is to pre-empt a
disruption of the cosmic order which his misrule represents. Gaa must therefore
be portrayed through orature as desirous of maintaining that cosmic order, even
though before long the audience realizes that he in fact is truncating the order
through his abuse of power. The real position of the Alaafin is unmistakable in
the following speech by Alaafin Abiodun:

\[
\text{Abiodun: Iya wa! Kudeefu, eru mba mi}
\]
\[
\text{Mo joba lasan ni, ng’o l’ase oba l’enu}
\]
\[
\text{Gaa l’o fi mi joba,}
\]
\[
\text{Nijo t’oba wu Gaa, o si le yo mi l’oba.}\]
The preceding was translated as the following:

*Abiodun:* Queen Mother! Kudeefu, I trepidate
In vain am I king, I lack the authority of a monarch.
I remain on the throne at the pleasure of Gaa.
He it is who enthrones and dethrones.51

The word *trepidate* is used here to represent the king’s fears, and the register as well as the gravity adequately capture the mortal danger in which he finds himself. In the next line, the words *in vain* also represent a higher register than the alternative, “I am king for nothing,” and rather than transliterate “ng o l’ase oba lenu” as “I do not possess the command of a king in my utterances,” “(I) lack the authority of a monarch” seems of a higher register and sounds more poetic.

The last two lines have been syntactically rearranged so that part of the semantic content of the third line in the source text spills over to the last line to complete the thought unit, and the phrase *enthrones and dethrones* puts a poetic varnish on the construct. I now turn to the translation of another Faleti play, *Won Ro Pe Were Ni*, which I have translated as *Schizophrenic*.52

This play deals with the belief that it is possible to become rich through magical means, and that by tapping into the cosmic energy of youngsters, their future can be exchanged for instant fortune by the beneficiaries of the unscrupulous magic. It features a young girl who went on an errand for her parents but was kidnapped and made the victim of such magic, but she escapes before the magic could take full effect, and when she is seen in public, she appears to be a lunatic, because of the frenzy provoked by the fear brought on by her ordeal and because of her disheveled appearance.

This play poses a great challenge of ideology and universe of discourse if (a native speaker of) English is the target language.53 The idea that a person can be kidnapped and used in some ritual to amass stupendous wealth will not cross the ideological Rubicon into the native English speaking target culture, so the text may be an example of an untranslatable text for certain cultures. In order to translate it for such cultures, so much material would have been excised from the text that it would bear very little resemblance to the source. The idea of the central couple joining a cult is acceptable to a native English cult, if the cult is some Satanic cult with supposed links to the biblical Satan, that can produce some power to affect the behavior of human beings through psycho-cultic magic, but not produce hard currency. Citizens of industrialized countries are too well versed in the process of minting money to be hoodwinked by such fantastic tales.

However, if the plot is radically changed so that the couple, like the West couple in England of the 1970s did, kidnap the girl and attempt to sexually assault her and she escapes and the plot line is well orchestrated with appropri-
ate stages of suspense, and surprise in the get-away bid, this would easily pass over the hurdle of ideology and universe of discourse; but the translator would have ended up writing a totally different story from the story in the source text.

If however the translation is meant for the African English speaking market, or former British colonial possessions, then the translation is still viable and it is for that reason that I have undertaken to examine the translation strategy to be deployed. The following excerpt is taken from the scene where Baba Rama has decided to join a cult in order to put an end to his financial problems:

Baba Rama: Asiri l’o fe tu ni mofi wa.
Mo fe d’omo egbe,
Mo was sa di yin ni
Mo mo pe ti mo ba ti de ‘nu egbe yin,
Mo mo pe n ko tun jiya mo...  

The passage has been translated as follows:

Baba Rama: I was driven here by nagging problem.
I want to become a member of your cult
I am seeking refuge under your wings
And I am sure that once you accept me
I would not suffer again.

The language used here is down to earth, to reflect the low level of the status of a man who would want to join a cult in order to enhance his financial position. The lack of self esteem is also reflected in the phrase, “I am seeking refuge under your wings.” The euphemism in the first sentence in the source text is translated with an equally euphemistic phrase, “I was driven here by a nagging problem.” The word *drive* seems to convey the sense of urgency much more than the use of the phrase “I came here because.” However, when Baba Rama realizes the demands made by the cult in exchange for riches, he gets cold feet and remarks:

Baba Rama: Too, emi o s'egbe mo o.
Se mo wi tele-
Ohun yoowu t’o o ri ti won n bo heheche,
Ti won n se l’ookun
Ti won n se l’oganjo-oru,
Ohun ibi ni...  

I have translated the speech as follows:

Baba Rama: Well, this is the end of my membership!
I’ve said all along-
Whatever’s done in secrecy
Done under the cover of darkness
Done in the unholy hours,
Is evil.57

Here the subject intensifier, Too, has been translated as Well, and a commensurate exclamatory mark has been provided at the end of the sentence. The onomatopoeic “hehehe” is redundant in English syntactical arrangement, so it is left out in the translation. In the “l’oganjo oru” in the penultimate line becomes “in the unholy hours,” since “in the middle of the night” would appear to be a transliteration. In the last line, “ohun” (thing) is also rendered redundant in the translation since its inclusion would detract from the illocutionary effect of the speech.

However, the illocutionary effect of such words as “l’ookun” and “l’oganjo” remain lost in translation, since these effects are the very qualities that give orature and literatures based on orature their distinct flavor. Attempts are made to recoup them by using contractions in the English translation such as “I’ve” and “whatever’s”.

At this point a comparative use of orature in Faleti and Fagunwa is due. Fagunwa’s use of orature is achieved through suffusion of parallelisms and unparallel descriptive power, contractions and apostrophes, systematized opening and closing formulas of the practiced folklorist, anecdotes, recapitulation, direct address and didactism. Faleti also uses parallelisms, descriptive power (in his novels), contractions, and apostrophes. Perhaps because of his poetic background, Faleti uses a lot more songs and chants. He uses songs in his many plays and he chants as well as sings his poems on the radio. A translator of these oratorical devices will be well advised to find suitable strategies of representing these oratorical devices in written translations, particularly into English.

This chapter has examined the state of translation and translation scholarship in Nigeria and Africa. It notes the paucity of translated works, which has severely affected the emergence of translation scholarship. Suggested ways of overcoming the deficiency of translated works include, but are not limited to, a realization of the beneficial effect of multiple translations of the same text by several translators, a more aggressive translation strategy for as many texts as possible, and a realization that the same text can be translated into several languages as possible by the same or several authors. It is only when such a plethora of translated works is found on the continent that translation studies can come into their own in Nigeria and Africa. I have also subjected a few of the translated works of Fagunwa and Faleti to extensive analysis, in order to provide a guide to the kind of scholarship needed in African translation studies, as well as to offer some of my translation projects for analysis to show what is involved in the practice of scholarly translation, as well as its scholarship.
Notes

7. Andre Lefevere, *Translating Literature: Practice and Theory in a Comparative Literature Context* (New York: MLA, 1992). Lefevere writes about the translator being a mediator between two texts, and the translator as interpreter. This is a useful summation of what I have taken as my translational philosophy in the texts I have translated for this chapter.
9. Adeniyi, forenote to *Expedition to the Mount of Thought*.
18. Adeniyi, forenote to *Expedition to the Mount of Thought*.
24. Olayinka Agbetuyi, *Riddle of the Divine*, 5. This is the yet to be published manuscript of my translation of D.O. Fagunwa’s *Adìitu Olodumare*. 
27. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings I*, 256.
33. Agbetuyi, “Representing the Foreign as Other,” 340.
47. Agbetuyi, *Gaa: The Tragedy of Overambition*, 1. This is the provisional title of the manuscript of my translation of *Itan Ibanuje ti Gaa*.
52. Olayinka Agbetuyi, *Schizophrenic*. Being the provisional title of the manuscript of my translation of Faleti’s *Won Ro Pe Were Ni*.
ON TRANSLATABILTY: THE LOSS OF HUMOR AND LAUGHTER IN AKÍNWÙMÌ ÌSÒLÁ’S “WON PÈ MÍ JERÌÌ”¹

Pamela J. Olúbùnmi Smith

...the same things uttered in Hebrew and translated into another tongue have not the same force in them.
– (Ecclesiasticus, Prologue)²

...humour is the first of the gifts to perish in a foreign tongue...
– Virginia Woolf (The Common Reader)³

I

“Èrìn ò yátọ tó fì dé ilè Kaduna. Ènì káwó lóri, a ti mò pé èkùn nìi sun,”
(literally, laughing/laughter is no different [from one place or culture to another] even as far away as the northern town of Kaduna;⁴ a bowed head in cupped hands, we know, is a sign of sadness). This Yorùbá adage sums up the Yorùbá belief in the universality and essentiality of the physiological act of laughing. Similarly, political novelist Arthur Koestler (1975) defined humor as “a universal human response,” noting, “[h]umor is the only form of communication in which a stimulus on a higher level of complexity produces a stereotyped, predictable response on a psychological reflex level” (p. 96). Despite the differences in the stimuli that elicit laughter, laughing in response to the humorous is
believed to be universal, transcending race and gender. It pervades every sphere of human life, from the social, political, and economic to the religious.

Defined as “a comic, absurd, or incongruous quality causing amusement” (Random House Webster’s College Dictionary), humor is culture specific in its creation and appreciation as is the case in its categorization according to disciplines. By its very nature, humor is as multifaceted and culturally idiosyncratic as it is elusive. What elicits laughter or is intended to be humorous and comic in one culture is different from what is comic or amusing in another culture. Yet, generally, despite its complexity and characteristic elusiveness, the role of humor as “an important part of social communication and regulation” Haig, (1988, p. 5) is hardly disputable. As a connecting “agent” at the core of a culture’s social intercourse, humor uses language as its main ingredient and the evocation of laughter as its end result.

This essay’s focus, therefore, is on the language of humor and how this language and the laughter it evokes fare in the translation of Akínwùmí Ìsò lá’s (1990) short story “Won Pè Mí Jerìí.” Framed within the context of Virginia Woolf’s 1925 essay on translatability, the essay discusses the loss of humor, wit and laughter—the story’s central features—and identifies the problem of loss of cultural specificity in the story’s translation from Yorùbá into English.

Translating the language of humor and laughter is challenging and often problematic as Woolf unequivocally stated in her brilliant essay, “On Not Knowing Greek:” “[h]umour is the first of the gifts to perish in a foreign tongue” (p. 57), engaging quite boldly the issue of translatability. In it she avouched the vanity and foolishness in the very idea or “talk of Knowing Greek, since in our ignorance...we do not know how the words sounded, or where precisely we ought to laugh, or how the actors acted...” (p. 39, my emphasis). Such an unequivocal statement not only affirms the ecclesiastical assertion on the impossibility of an exact translation, but it further suggests that even near “native speaker” fluency in both the source and target languages (SL and TL) might not necessarily guarantee sufficient access to the “essence” of the literatures and cultures of the source language.

While translations of ancient cultures in modern times do indeed bridge the “chasm of times and climes”, Woolf argued, they only provide, at best, “some notion of the real meaning” of the work: in other words, a hypertextual translation. Noting the core differences between the English and the Greek, comparing the former’s reserve with the latter’s “lightning-quick, sneering, out-of-doors manner” (p. 41), she implied a reader-beware approach to literary history (in translation) by posing the million-dollar question: how does one translate the “climate,” the peculiarities of language and culture, “the enduring elements, the essence” of what has drawn translators “...back and back to the Greeks” (p. 44). For example, she pondered the question, how does one translate the literature
and life of a people in which “there is not only difference of race and tongue but a tremendous breach of tradition” (p. 39)? How does one capture the “nimbleness of wit and tongue peculiar to the Southern races, which has nothing in common with the slow reserve, the low half tones, the brooding introspective melancholy of people accustomed to live more than half the year indoors?” (p. 41)—in short, the cultural specificity?

Woolf was by no means averse to the act and function of translation. Rather, as one who not only studied and read Greek fairly well, but also had a lifelong passion for translation, and whose works, as many scholars have noted, bear the marks of the heroic Homeric epic, her statement on translatability is at once as blunt as it is ironic, and as current in translation theory today as it was in the early twentieth century. The translator’s dilemma and responsibility could not be clearer.

It appears the caveat linguists and semanticists offer, generally, in response to the talk of “problems” and “malfunctions” in translation studies is that meaning should supersede all else, perhaps even at the expense of style and other rhetorical considerations. Integral to meaning, of course, is language, that is, the form of the language of the original text. The translator who not only understands the linguistic and semantic paradoxes of languages, their being at once intranslatable and translatable, but who also approaches the ST/SC with humility, reverence, and appreciation, stands to experience “some certainties,” notwithstanding his/her speaker status, as Woolf avouched. Nowhere is the ecclesiastical predication more crucial and applicable than in literary translation, particularly in the translation of humor, as Woolf discovered.

Humor, like poetry, is difficult to translate. Although lacking the precision of poetry, with its form, meter, rhythm, tone, and register, humor is just as complex. As Raphaelson-West (1989) noted, unlike poetry in which one can “produce a gloss of the poem” with something akin to the “syllable and rhyme structure” of the original, translating humor poses challenging problems, mostly of connotations—specifically the transference of codes and interpretation of signs (p. 28). Understandably, the tendency in literary and linguistic translation circles is to express concern more for what is lost than in rejoicing in what is gained. Fortunately, the gloom and doom pronouncements of losses have yet to deter the “ordinary translator,” who, unaware of, or perhaps because unschooled in linguistic theories, fortuitously forges forward, fully aware of the limitations of the craft of translation. Thus, the question has never really been about whether or not to translate. The issue of translatability has always been about the translator’s level of competence, particularly his/her awareness of linguistic limitations and the stranglehold in which language holds him or her.
Akínwìmí Ìsòlá and the Role of Humor and Laughter in Yorùbá Culture

Akínwìmí Ìsòlá, leading contemporary Yorùbá writer in all genres by all accounts, is a master manipulator of Yorùbá language—a writer in whose hands the language yields pliably. As I have argued elsewhere,9 Ìsòlá’s preoccupation lies in his love affair with “beautiful language” and the “strict demands of literary elegance,” two of the four major qualities or values by which a writer and literary works are to be judged, in his estimation. These qualities, essentially, are the rudiments of the Yorùbá literary canon, what Ìsòlá (1998) calls “the pleasant turns of phrase” which constitute “the fabric of the language” (p. 87). By “elegant language,” Ìsòlá unmistakably means the mastery and manipulation of language, which is the hallmark of creativity. The Yorùbás celebrate their linguistic ingenuity, thanks in part to the genius of the language itself and its vast linguistic treasury. Yorùbás themselves take great pride in this linguistic acuity and acclaimed love of rhetoric, their generation of famed, gifted conversationists10 often admiringly said to descend from the ‘tree of words’ (bè l’órí igi ọrò) “to give bony thoughts/the flesh of airy idioms,” in the words of Nigerian poet, Nìyì Òsúndáre.11

In Yorùbá culture and discourse, the adage, “Èrín níí dun éégún alákìisà” (Nothing shows up the ragged masquerade worse than laughter/ridicule) accentuates the bittersweet role of laughter, at once a harmless humor/mirth (ìpanilérìín), whose aim is to entertain, and laughter (èrín èébú, èrín ibani ninú je) as the humor of “cruelty and boastful self-assertiveness,”12 which is intended to ridicule the misfortune of others. Yorùbás use humor to encase the “serious” in lightheartedness, believing that long after the event or cause might have been forgotten, the core of the message remains because the “mirthful” telling keeps it alive. Thus, while humor is used to entertain, it is also used to educate. In Yorùbá language humor/the humorous (ìpanilérìín/apanilérìín) often takes numerous forms and functions in interpersonal communication, including: ifà, àròfò (satire), èfè (mirth/banter), ewo, àpárá (joke), àwàdà (jest), èébú (playful insult), àmúlúmálà-èdè (language mixing), èrè àmérìn-in wa (comedy/comic), ifòròdárà (word play/pun), èsnje (parody), kikánlò èdè (idiomatization), etíyerí (songs of social satire), inàgìje (jocular nicknames/aliases), and òwe (proverb).13 In addition to their characteristic wit, one often finds humor embedded in proverbs to hone the import of messages. It is this love of rhetoric and verbal jokes that informs and undergirds Ìsòlá’s Yorùbá prose and poetic works, which, unfortunately, when translated into English, lose their punch, their cutting edge, and their force, like the Hebrew or the Greek14 of Woolf’s discourse. Such is the case in the translation of his short story, “Wón Pè Mí Jèèrí,” from Yorùbá into English.
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Even though the literal, full-text English translation is given here simply to contextualize the essay’s arguments about loss of cultural specificity in translation, only a few examples will suffice to illustrate the degree to which the verbal brilliance of the ST narrative is dulled and the culture specific humor is lost in transference from Yorùbá into English. The story follows.

II

“Witness”

Ládépò and his warring wife, Àsùnlé, lived in our village all right. What a quarrelsome, noisy pair they were! Hardly a day ever passed without them quarreling about one thing or the other. Àsùnlé was a shrew, no doubt—a truly cantankerous woman, always ready for a fight. Ládépò himself was no small-time fire breather—really a tough one to live with. It was always a case of duel to the death between them. Every single day turned up much of the same old arguing and shouting from Ládépò’s compound. The daily din was assuredly served up with aplomb. The neighbors had now grown accustomed to the daily drama, welcoming each day’s dawning with the first rumbling noises from Ládépò’s compound. “There they go again!” they would shake their heads knowingly, and shout, as if on cue.

Some swore it was Ládépò’s impetuosity to blame—and was he ever impetuous. Others swore Àsùnlé, his wife, was the insatiable trouble monger. So, Ládépò’s buddies drummed up a plan; a solution they promised that’ll surely fix his worsening domestic affairs. They advised him to take another wife. A much-needed rival, they coaxed, would soon put Àsùnlé in her place; such a scheme will tame her fiery tongue and quarrelsome disposition, they assured their friend. “That’s it,” Ládépò agreed, springing into action, “that ought to do the trick!” It seemed, much before the idea had had a chance to hatch, Ládépò himself had announced that he had taken Àtóké to be his second wife.

But as it turned out, Àsùnlé’s impetuosity paled beside Àtóké’s. Could this be the case of a shrew and a termagant under the same roof? Even the neighbors now were perplexed. A good potion for disaster, some said, while others chucked it up to bad luck. People shrugged off this worse choice to Ládépò’s attraction to mean-spirited women; my, how he drew them to himself like bees to honey. ‘This ineptness must be a curse indeed,’ some swore. The minute Àtóké set foot in Ládépò’s compound, all hell broke loose. Gone were the infamous Ládépò-Àsùnlé fights; now, an all-out warfare between co-wives, Àsùnlé and Àtóké, had merely replaced those interminable, early-morning husband-wife dueling the neighbors had grown accustomed to.

It so happened that senior wife Àsùnlé had two children, one, an elementary school-aged boy, and the other a toddler girl. The school-aged boy, a first grader, had just begun elementary lessons in English. Each time the two women began their daily mêlée, Àsùnlé’s two children would gather around their mother, naturally, and fling whatever insults their innocent tongues could fashion at Àtóké, who always managed to degrade the mother-and-
children with but one single, stinging insult from her well-rehearsed stock-pile of denigrating tongue-lashings. At each quarrel, Àtóké would verbally reduce them all to hapless, stuttering fools, taking them prisoners with the ease of a vanquisher.

Not one to concede defeat even in the face of such imminent routing, let alone openly admit the power of Àtóké’s mouthy advantage and verbal deftness, Àsùnle thought hard and long on ways to fashion deathblow insults that would pierce at the very heart of Àtóké’s verbal arsenal.

One morning, they quarreled as usual. Always the vanquisher, Àtóké once again pulverized senior wife Àsùnle with bone-chilling insults. Later, that afternoon, after Àsùnle’s first-grader, Olú, returned home from school, his mother summoned him after he had finished his lunch.

"Olú," Àsùnle called.

“Yes, Mother.”

“I want you to do me a favor;” his mother began quietly, but firmly.

“A favor did you say?”

“Yes, a favor; something bookish;” Àsùnle explained, calculatedly.

“Something bookish? Ah, let me guess, I bet you want me to write a letter.” Olú chanted eagerly, excited at the chance to show off his primary school book learning.

“No, no. Oh no, not bookish like that. Now tell me, have they started teaching you how to speak English in school?”

“English? Of course. Oh, yes, we’re not just learning English; we’ve been speaking it for a while now. And you know something? I can really speak it well already. I can show how well right now, if you like. Shall I fetch my book?” Olú enthused to his mother’s silent, mischievous delight.

“No, no, don’t bother about fetching your book right now. All I want you to do is to berate Àtóké grandly in English for me. Really insult her to tears for me with all the English you know; pound her like a ton of bricks with insults; numb that glib tongue of hers and put her in her place with biting insults; reduce her to nothingness; make her head spin with confusion so she knows I’m not her age mate. I want you to hurl one insult after another at her and knock her right off her high horse,” Àsùnle instructed her first-grader son.

“Ah, that’s no problem at all, mother; in fact, that’s easy,” Olú assured his mother.

While mother and son plotted their plan of attack indoors, Àtóké sat, relaxing outside in the yard. Àtóké had barely risen to step back into the room when Olú bounded from his seat and, with arms akimbo, jauntily walked up to Àtóké and stood in her way.

“So, what’s this I heard about you insulting my mother this morning while I was at school?” he began pertly.

“Oh, shut up. Who invited dog-breath mouth to partake of the food platter?” Àtóké sneered, preparing to dismiss Olú with the usual disdain she reserved for him but generously heaped on his mother every chance she got.
Àtóké had barely finished when Olú began belting out his limited list of the tuppence English he had memorized from his English Primer. Stunned momentarily, Àtóké was convinced that Olú’s tirade was indeed insults.

“What is this?” Olú began, all puffed up, his shoulders squared, his head held high.

“And who are you speaking to like that, you imbecile? Is it me you are cussing out in English?”

“It is a basket,” Olú showed off, unruffled.

“You’re courting trouble and poking your stinking nose into matters that don’t concern you,” Àtóké warned.

“What are you doing?” Olú recited, happily.

“And you, Àsùnle, his hopeless mother. Are you listening to your damn son abusing me like this?” Àtóké hissed angrily at Àsùnle.

“I am going to the door,” Olú continued his rote recitation.

“Asùnle, are you listening to this impertinent son of yours insulting me in English?” Àtóké hissed, brisling.

“Sit on the chair,” Olú intoned, teacher-like.

“Keep up the impertinence, and I will make you eat dirt for this insolence,” Àtóké fumed.

“What are you doing? I am sitting on the chair,” Olú retorted, unfazed by Àtóké’s threats.

Bruised and stumped by this sudden reversal of fortune and convinced that Olú had indeed been insulting her all this time, Àtóké hoped to derail Olú by resorting to the last weapon of injury in her arsenal. She began reeling off curses at Olú.

“May your stupid gibberish strike you dead,” Àtóké offered weakly, realizing that Olú’s unintelligible assault had her verbal arsenal in a strangle hold.

“Where is the book?” Olú fired back, fueled by Àtóké’s railing.

“May all your ill will, your malevolence, fall back on your head,” Àtóké managed, rather weakly.

“It is on the desk,” Olú continued in his teacher-student rote recitation exercise, swelling his mother’s pride and empowering her rejoinder with the much-desired venom she had hoped the so-called English insults would effect.

When it appeared that Àtóké was now turning the bantering into imprecation, Àsùnle smugly entered the fray, in defense of Olú, naturally. The two women squared off, going after each other with abandon. Pandemonium reigned. But, unperturbed by the two women’s railing, Olú fueled their quarreling with his unrelenting, now quickened chant as he paced back and forth, his left hand now in the pocket of his shorts and his right index finger rising and falling, mimicking his school teacher.

“Show me a book. This is a book. Put the basket on the table...” he went on and on, oblivious of his role in the din that had now drawn the neighbors around the two noisy,
quarreling women. Olú kept his pace, reciting with abandon his memorized school lesson. The neighbors, some stifling their chuckles enough, tried to quiet down the women, much as they were used to doing by letting each woman vent and tell her side of the story. Àtòké complained that nothing hurt worse than Àsùnle’s good-for-nothing son raining insults on her head in English! Visibly pained and shocked by such sound routing at the hands of her rival’s ten-year old son, she used the neighbors’ intervention to take final pot shots at both mother and son.

“It’s that good-for-nothing mother of yours who put you up to insulting me in English,” Àtòké hissed one more weak shot at Olú.

Finally, an elderly neighbor in the crowd inquired about Olú’s proficiency in English. Oblivious to the raucous, and, as if responding to the man’s query himself, Olú happily took off yet once again on his recitation trail, picking up where he had left off.

“What is this? It is a window.”

The mere mention of the word “window” fanned the fires ablaze. You see, Àtòké had recently lost a front tooth that had left a gaping hole in her head. No sooner had Olú uttered the word “window” than Àtòké screamed at the top of her lungs.

“Do you hear the imbecile now, do you hear the good-for-nothing son of the devil calling me names. Did you not all hear this imp call me ‘Window’ Tell me, you all, is it respectful for this hopeless, ill-bred child to mock my misfortune, my gap tooth?”

Àtòké fumed furiously, all worked up at this perceived insult, this final straw that seemed to seal her verbal defeat.

The amused neighbors again tried to appease her. But, for his part, Olú was not about to be silenced. Over the din he savored his verbal victory, taking yet another shot as he recited merrily until an elderly man in the crowd raised his voice to silence him. “Will you shut the hell up! From where did you learn all this gibberish you’ve been spouting anyway?” the man yelled, sending the bemused crowd now into peals of laughter.

One of the elders scolded Àsùnle, chiding her for irresponsibly encouraging her son to square off with her co-wife, Àtòké—a very bad practice, indeed, he warned. Such encouragement of a minor would surely lead to nothing but impertinence and disrespect for authority, he scolded. To satisfy her curiosity, one of Baale’s wives asked Àtòké, just for the record, how she had figured out that Olú had indeed been insulting her.

“Ah, I thank you for asking,” Àtòké began, grateful for yet another opportunity to rescue her bruised reputation as ace procurer of insults.

“Indeed, I may not understand English, but I can tell when I am being insulted. The very minute this imp arrived home from school, he walked up to me and said he had heard that I had insulted his mother this morning. I told him to shut up his stinking mouth. That’s when this ill-bred thing started mouthing off his gibberish to me. Now, you all heard with your own ears how he was mocking my gap tooth only a minute ago, didn’t you?” Àtòké explained, visibly pained.
Having listened to all this, one of the elderly men in the crowd beckoned me over and asked me to translate the insults Àtóké alleged Olú had heaped on her head. “I only heard very little of Olú’s tirade,” I confessed. “That said, I can assure you that Olú doesn’t know enough of the basics of the language to speak it let alone know how to use it to insult people. Alas, he was merely reciting the school lessons he’s committed to memory and is just mimicking his teacher. He simply was saying: ‘What is this? It is a basket. What are you doing? I am going to the door. Show me a door. Place your book on the table!’ He was merely repeating the rote lessons he’d learned at school—obviously showing off,” I explained.

The crowd’s muffled laughter erupted into peals, as the crowd realized the pitfalls of Àtóké’s ignorance and the resulting misunderstanding caused by her baseless assumptions. In the midst of the peacemaking that ensued, Olú’s father, Ládépò, arrived on the scene. When he found out from the gathered crowd what had transpired, especially Olú’s part in it, he wanted to give Olú a beating, but the neighbors intervened. A whipping, they wisely counseled, would undoubtedly be the cause of yet another quarrel between the feuding co-wives.

This is how Olú came by the monikers, “Jiver,” and “Tuppence English,” aliases that have stuck to him like glue to this day. They never cease to make him pout whenever we called him these names.

III

As a special guest at the 27th annual conference of the African Literature Association in Richmond, Virginia in March, 2001, Ìsòlá read “Wòn Pè Mí Jérìí” in its original Yorùbá to a large audience of Yorùbá and non-Yorùbá scholars. “Wòn Pè Mí Jérìí” was greeted with peals of laughter and much hilarity by the clamoring, anticipatory (mostly) Yorùbá audience, whose spirited response reflected the shared experience and connectedness—albeit simulated—of the story teller/narrator-audience reminiscent of their folktale/oral storytelling tradition. Although without the benefit of the language knowledge and the linguistic details of the story, the non-Yorùbá speakers in the audience were not to be left out of the mirth in the room. Perhaps by means of the infectious and enigmatic nature of laughter alone, they appeared to have caught on to the general drift of the story through its oral presentation—the rhythm, the crispness of the language, Ìsòlá’s voice modulation and facial nuances—and their own familiarity with the theme of collocations that result from cultural illiteracy.

First and foremost, “Wòn Pè Mí Jérìí” is a children’s story—a short, simple but dense, four-page-long Yorùbá story about family and community life in the context of the drama of what is commonly termed “polygamy.” It is as much a verbal joke about a child’s naiveté and an adult’s cultural illiteracy as it is a social commentary on the foolhardiness, indeed the heartache, of indulging in the polygynous lifestyle. At once a quick swipe on the irksome, in some cases, irre-
sponsible practice of taking multiple wives; specifically, it is a parody of Ládépò’s folly—the folly of an irresponsible man who, after more than a decade of marriage to Ìsòlá, mother to his two children, is incapable of keeping the peace in the chaotic household which he is partly responsible for creating. Under the guise of the frivolous advice of his “buddies”, Ládépò foolishly takes a second wife as a solution to his domestic problems, worsening them tenfold. “Wón Pè Mí Jéérí” uses humor and pathos to entertain and “soften” the serious and contentious subject of polygyny and its attendant domestic upheaval. And, it appears, the import of Ìsòlá’s intent is foremost to entertain, and secondarily to inject a moral: beware the hazards of claims to half-baked knowledge.

The heart of the humor or the humorous in this story is embedded in the bilingual and bicultural interpolations that continue to occur as a result of the contact between the colonizing European languages and the colonized African languages and cultures, in this instance, English and Yorùbá, respectively. The claim of “linguistic universals” notwithstanding, these strange bedfellows, whose contact and relationship have been circumscribed by the history of colonialism, are as disparate as imaginable like the Greeks and English of Woolf’s essay. Despite the serious, erosive effects of English on Nigerian languages and cultures, literary critics and socio-linguists agree that bilingualism and biculturalism have contributed a good share of the humorous to literary and verbal art in Nigeria. On the lighter, creative side, many of the collocations which have resulted from the collision of these two most incongruous languages and cultures have been hilarious, especially in Yorubaland, where they have been great fodder in the hands of writers, wordsmiths, quipsters, and comedians alike, many of whom have “bent” or “indigenized” the colonizing language and exploited the lexical ambiguities between the two to yield a rich store of puns, word play, and a variety of verbal jokes, etc.

For instance, “Wón Pè Mí Jéérí” is a subtle example of the humorous collocation, which occurred when English met Yorùbá in the midst of a domestic dispute. Incongruity and the ludicrous, two key ingredients for laughter, make up the comic episodes that invoke laughter. The humor begins early with wordplay, from the main characters’ names to the incongruity of their relationship in this David and Goliath motif encounter between Olú, a ten-year old first grader, and Àtóké, his loathsome, illiterate stepmother. Irony abounds, beginning with a play on the characters’ names to highlight their idiosyncrasies and peculiarities. The warring co-wives’ names are oriki, Yorùbá praise names, which, like all Yorùbá names, “are anthroponymic, deriving their meaning and import from the historical, social, cultural and linguistic circumstances of family and community” (Osundáre, 1995, p. 348). Àsùnlé, the first and senior wife, whose name literally implies one who rests or sleeps, or one to be shown off even in sleep, ironically, is hardly the character her name suggests. Instead, she is a quar-
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relsome woman, a termagant, who attempts to throw her weight about, perhaps as a cover-up for the insecurity she develops upon the arrival of a rival co-wife. Àtóké, the junior wife, whose oriki means literally, ‘one born or raised to be guided, fawned upon, petted and pampered’, is ironically, a sharp-tongued, bellicerent co-wife—a far cry from the characteristics of her name. Ládépò, whose name is a derivative of Oládépò, meaning ‘honor (in the person of this household head) has reached the position of eminence’, is in sharp contrast to the irresponsible, laughing stock character he turns out to be.

Laced with irony, humor, and pathos, the monikers summarize the essence and personality of the co-wives. An ironic twist lies in what appears to be a switched personality between the senior and junior co-wives—note the important designation of “position” in the uxorial, sometimes disruptive hierarchy that not only characterizes polygynous family set-ups but which also is responsible for fanning the fires of jealousy and hatred among these co-wives and Ládépò, their hapless husband and head of household. Olú, whose name is the root for all Yorùbá names referring to Olórun (owner of the sky) is the only one spared the ambiguity of name and character.

Apart from this name-character ambiguity – humorous in Yorùbá, wan in its transference into English—what, one may ask, can possibly be so humorous about two women, rival co-wives, airing their personal and domestic problems daily in public for their neighbors’ pleasure? What can be so admirable or comical in a mother cultivating the insolence of her ten-year old grade schooler in such a gerontocratic culture? Why the wanness of transference? The answers lie in the incongruity of locution, the use or appearance of (pseudo) cognates, and the humorous transference of some culture-specific peculiarities. Although more a case of misrecognition than of actual translation from Yoruba into English, because neither Olú nor Àtóké engages in actual translation, the humor that elicited laughter from the community in this drama is framed by the cultural illiteracy which arises simply from the process of Àtóké’s inherent assumptions and consistent misrecognition.

In Yorùbá gerontocracy, it is inconceivable that a ten-year old would entertain, let alone make good on, the notion of insulting, publicly, his mother’s co-wife or anyone older than him—certainly, not anyone of his parents’ age group. However, “crossing lines” had to be an integral part of the story’s scheme in order to achieve the element of incongruity needed for the humor of the situation to play out. Even though mother Ásùnlé advertently violated the code of behavior by setting up her ten-year old son against her sharp-tongued rival, her action was one of desperation to survive the breach of the co-wife code, which Àtóké herself had perpetually violated with impunity. The incongruous lies both in the dialogue itself, with its parallel, unrelated English and Yorùbá call-responses, and also in the fact that it is highly unusual that a ten-year old
would have developed an arsenal of abuses in a foreign tongue potent enough to
“best” an adult, particularly if the adult is reputed to be a notorious, unrivalled
insult monger, like his stepmother. Àsùnlé culls ingenuity, albeit deviously, in
searching for the “stone” with which to fell her archrival, and surely finds her
strategy and weapon of defense in Olú’s puerile book learning. Olú’s naiveté and
Àtóké’s illiteracy, two ill-matched forces, are set to show up the ridiculous in the
norm of daily living and social interaction.

Although based on a seeming privileging of English over his Yorùbá
mother tongue, Olú’s book learning and naive competency claims empower
him for the banter. However, since naiveté, a contributing source to the story’s
humor, is Olú’s chief weapon, it is easy to understand and appreciate Ìsòlá’s
clever contrast between Yorùbá and English and the seeming privileging of the
latter over the former in terms of the humorous results each language yields in
the course of the family feud.

It is a fact that the first things learned, informally, in a foreign tongue tend
to be the language’s vulgarities.\(^{16}\) Privileged by his rudimentary, rote-memory,
primer English, a mere preliminary sound orientation to any kind of structured,
serious, first grade English lesson he could possibly get as a first grader, Olú
pulverizes the glib-tongued but illiterate Àtóké, whose only shred of evidence
of Olú’s alleged “insults” is her final (mis)recognition of the word, “window,”
a pseudo cognate, if you will, for her gap-tooth disfigurement. Prior to this
climactic outburst, she merely hazards a guess that Olú’s “èèbó/òyìnbó (English
words) are indeed èébú (insults)—note the near similarity in spelling and sound
of the Yorùbá original. Indeed the climax of her misrecognition of English,
hers indignation at this point is culturally appropriate since, in Yorùbá, a gap
tooth is fodder for jokes, endless teasing, and even personal insults. “Katafu”
(gap toothed), especially in an adult— a choleric adult at that—is outside the
norm. Contrary to the desirable, cosmetically approved “èéjí, the slight center
space separating the top incisors, “Katafu” or “Katafurú” is considered a vulgar,
if temporary, disfigurement (as in too much of a gap that reminds one of the
world looking through and beyond a miniature “window” into the caverns of
the mouth). “Katafu” evokes laughter each time its unlucky victim opens his or
her mouth. It is important to note that Àtóké had to exhibit this vulgarity for
the gathered crowd to see throughout the exchange with Olú. Thus, the story’s
hilarity heightens in the dramatization of the incongruous match-up between
Àtóké, the gap-toothed, vulgar, venom-spitting goliath figure, and the diminu-
tive, resourceful, quick, bookish, ten-year old underdog-turned-vanquisher,
who humiliates her publicly. Alas, how easily the mighty are felled with but
one simple, round stone in a sling of gibberish—a hard, publicly-dealt lesson for
illiterate Àtóké on whom the joke is lost because she still did not “get it” even
long after the gathered crowd did.
To an anticipatory Yorùbá storytelling audience, the story’s typical humor lies in the village community’s handling of the drama as expressed by their daily, collective “Wòntún dẹ́ o” (“here they go again, as usual”) response to the interminable, early-morning husband-wife/co-wives fights that characterize Ládépò’s compound. Incidentally, it is interesting to note that Ládépò, the one mostly responsible for the family conflict, had been absent during the entire banter. But for the timely intervention of the “wit ness”/narrator, whose higher level of cultural literacy saves the day, one could argue that the story’s humor is truly unleashed at the point at which the villagers “got it” and recognize the pathos of their own domestic lives, played out in the Ládépò-Àsunlé-Àtóké saga. This recognition, arguably, offers them perspective and liberates them from the burden of similar lives, because once they recognized the folly of it all, they let their “muffled laughter” erupt into peals of laughter, being careful, however, to balance their amusement with common-sense advice and reminders about morals, ethics and simple protocol. In their important role as community “counselors,” they attempt to “play fair” in apportioning blame and voicing potential solutions. They do laugh at the pathetic Ládépò and his domestic situation, which, perhaps, not unlike their own, is just as pitiful yet laughable.

**Translation Issues**

Concern for preservation of the humor of the text appeared to drive the translation at times, almost outweighing concern for the aesthetic. The struggle was with how to maintain meaning and style in light of Ìsòlá’s commitment to “beautiful language.” If the contrast between the brevity of the original Yorùbá text and the almost two-to-one volume equivalence of the English translation were a factor in testing the limits of translatability and the merit of the translated work, then the foremost issue of synonymy becomes moot. But alas, the compactness of expression in four pages of the poetic prose of the ST expanded to seven pages of flattened TT, resulting in a mixture of free writing in some instances and “cushioning,” a method which Òsúndáre defines as “…a means of boosting intelligibility by adding to the target text information that is extra to the source” (p. 351).

Confessedly, because the author’s public reading of the original text influenced this translation, cushioning became both blessing and bane, raising questions about what transpires in the reproduction of a text when an author replicates it orally. In other words, is the translation of such a text marked by the transience of the oral rendition? Even though cushioning facilitated the attempt to preserve the humor, still the elaborate TT pales compared to the dense ST. For instance, consider the following TT and ST examples in which the sting of Olú’s mimicked trick of quick, stunning, bullet-like retorts flung at his goliath-like stepmother, lack the fleeting character of the ST because, as evident in TT1,
they are slowed down by intervening information without which the TT is wan as in the TT2 example below.

(ST1)

Olú: What is this?
Àtóké: Èè, taa ló ŋ bá wí? Èmi lo fèè máa f’òyìn bó bú?
Olú: It is a basket
Àtóké: O ó té só ohun tí o fèè máa se yìí!
Olú: What are you doing?
Àtóké: Ìwò Ìyá è, sè ò ŋ gbó?
Olú: I am going to the door.
Àtóké: sè ò ŋ gbó omo ósì tó ó bí?
Olú: Sit on the chair
Àtóké: Tó o bá so pé èmi ló o máa fèè bó bú, yóò yà o lénu o. O ó sì jìyà síí.
Olú: What are you doing?
I am sitting on the chair
Àtóké: Èèbó ìyá tó ó ñ fò un náà ni yóò pa ó.
Olú: Where is your book?
Àtóké: Gbogbo oun tó ó bá wí sì mi l’Olórun yóò dá padà fún o.
Olú: It is on the desk.

(TT1)

“What is this?” Olú began, all puffed up, his shoulders squared, his head held high.

“And who are you speaking to like that, you imbecile? Is it me you are cussing out in English?”

“It is a basket,” Olú showed off, unruffled.

“You’re courting trouble and poking your stinking nose into matters that don’t concern you,” Àtóké warned.

“What are you doing?” Olú recited, happily.

“And you, Àsùnlé, his hopeless mother. Are you listening to your damn son abusing me like this?” Àtóké hissed angrily at Àsùnlé.

“I am going to the door,” Olú continued his rote recitation.

“Àsùnlé, are you listening to this impertinent son of yours insulting me in English?” Àtóké hissed, brisling.

“Sit on the chair,” Olú intoned, teacher-like.

“Keep up the impertinence, and I will make you eat dirt for this insolence,” Àtóké fumed.

“What are you doing? I am sitting on the chair,” Olú retorted, unfazed by Àtóké’s threats.
Bruised and stumped by this sudden reversal of fortune and convinced that Olú had indeed been insulting her all this time, Àtóké hoped to derail Olú by resorting to the last weapon of injury in her arsenal. She began reeling curses at Olú.

"May your stupid gibberish strike you dead," Àtóké offered weakly, realizing that Olú’s unintelligible assault had her verbal arsenal in a strangle hold.

"Where is the book?" Olú fired back, fueled by Àtóké’s railing.

"May all your ill-will, your malevolence, fall back on your head," Àtóké managed, rather weakly.

"It is on the desk, “Olú continued in his teacher-student rote recitation exercise, swelling his mother’s pride and empowering her rejoinder with the much-desired venom she had hoped the so-called English insults would effect.

( TT2 )

"What is this?"

"And who are you talking to like that, you imbecile? Is it me you are cussing out in English?"

"It is a basket."

"You’re courting trouble and poking your stinking nose into matters that don’t concern you."

"What are you doing?"

"And you, Àsínlé, his hopeless mother. Are you listening to your damn son abusing me like this?"

"I am going to the door."

"Àsínlé, are you listening to this impertinent son of yours insulting me in English?"

"Sit on the chair."

"Keep up the impertinence, and I will make you eat dirt for this insolence."

"What are you doing? I am sitting on the chair."

"May your stupid gibberish strike you dead."

"Where is the book?"

"May all your ill-will, your malevolence, fall back on your head."

"It is on the desk, “

Although devoid of the humor the intrusions add to the TT1 for an English-speaking audience, the bare-bones dialogue of TT2 is intelligible and true to the Yorùbá original, which has no directive tags for the exchange between Olú and Àtóké. However, as an animated language that is spoken with much gesticulations—a wave of the hand here, a slap on the thigh there for emphasis, a hissing sound, a shake of the head, a snapping of the fingers, a grunt, a host of different...
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facial expressions, etc.—Yorùbá needs (or uses sparingly) the added descriptor tags that English requires for clarification and emphasis in reporting dialogue. In fact, such simplistic tags—usually, *mo/ó ni, ó/Wón so pé* (I/she/he said, she/he/they said)—are redundant, for the most part, in Yorùbá. Thus, for example, instead of the verb “*so lo ràì*” (continued speaking), Ìsòlá chose the more dramatic, humor-evoking verb “*fò lo ràì*” (belted out, undeterred) to convey the comical unusualness of Olú’s almost convincing book learning and the degree to which he claimed facility with the language, when in fact, unbeknown to the admiring, even envious audience, this English, as already questioned by some astute audience members, and when finally exposed for what it really is by the narrator/witness, was nothing more than “*òyìnbó élébà*” (a bogus English, akin to an illiterate food seller’s vulgar English). An additional element that makes the entire exchange between Olú and Àtòké hilarious is not only Olú’s cocksure delivery of the relentless badgering his mother wanted him to deliver, but also the crowd’s recognition of the pitfalls of Àtòké’s (and perhaps their own) illiteracy. In this case, innocence exposes ignorance by chance, showing that there is nothing “blissful” about Àtòké’s kind of touted ignorance.

Two further examples will suffice to illustrate the problems of rendering idiomatic expressions and mediating culture-specific tropes. In the first example, the subtle, humor-laden, culture-specific passage: “Àtòké a bú gbogbo won bí ení láyin” (literally, Àtòké would insult them all like one licking honey), sacrifices its bite and the visual impact of the simile, in favor of the more polished, but cushioned “With glib tongue Àtòké would reduce them all to hapless, stuttering fools, taking them prisoner with the ease of a vanquisher.”

Here is yet another example of loss in translation in the opening line of the Olú-Àtòké engagement: “Gbénu e sohùn-ún. Taa ló tenu ajá bèko?” Simply, literally, “Carry/put your mouth away. Whoever put the dog’s mouth into the bowl of èko?” However, such literal translation lacks Àtòké’s intent to ignore the little, irksome imp standing in the doorway before her, with arms akimbo, blocking her way. Absent from this clear but literal translation, are the tone of contempt, the disgust, the loathing, the relegation of the human Olú to dog status inherent in the Yorùbá original. How does one render the culture-specific èko, a Yorùbá staple? In the interest of meaning, clarity, and rhythm, the following over-cushioned rendition, though unsatisfactory (mainly in its length), had to suffice: “Oh, shut up! Who invited dog-breath mouth to partake of the food platter?” Àtòké sneered, preparing to dismiss Olú with the usual disdain she reserved for him but generously heaped on his mother every chance she got. While the underscored tag could, perhaps be omitted, such an omission would tame the intended effect of Àtòké’s vituperation too early in the exchange.

From the foregoing, it is clear that in any given text, the translator necessarily must play several roles: interpreter, critic, restorer of sorts, etc.—now
more one than the others, or all roles severally, depending on the text—as he negotiates his way through the maze of meaning, style, sound, authorial intent and concern for faithfulness to the ST. In translating “Wón Pè Mí Jérìí,” I functioned in and exercised the responsibilities of these multiple roles to meet the challenges of cultural idiosyncrasies—the connotations, the denotations, and the tones—and the inevitable loss of cultural subtleties. In a tonal, syllable-isochronic language like Yorùbá, in which sound is fused with meaning, the temptation in this translation was to focus mainly on locution through equivalence for the preservation of the humorous, even at the risk of over cushioning the TT with “stage directions or tags”, as illustrated above. However, in choosing between meaning and authorial intent, I leaned heavily toward the latter in favor of Ìsòlá’s intent to entertain and educate.

How does one achieve the comic effect, the cultural specificity of the Yorùbá original in its English translation? Loss in translation is inevitable. To bemoan this fact is to butt one’s head fruitlessly against the linguistic reality that tells us that because languages lack a one-to-one equivalence, exact translation is impossible. Thus, like the renovator of an ancient building, who strives to retain the edifice’s original structural framework, the translator wends his way through the process of understanding and appreciating the meaning and authorial intent of the ST, using equivalent techniques to preserve as much as possible the structure of the original in the “shipping” process.

In this regard, the refreshing boldness of Woolf’s essay was important in lighting the way in this essay, specifically in affirming the nervous but stubborn conviction with which I approached Ìsòlá’s Yorùbá text, in spite of my native speaker privilege. Woolf struck at the heart of the problem when she declared:

We can never hope to get the whole fling of a sentence in Greek as we do in English. We cannot hear it, now dissonant, now harmonious, tossing sound from line to line across a page. We cannot pick up infallibly one by one all those minute signals by which a phrase is made to hint, to turn, to live (p. 55)—my emphasis.

This could not state better one of the core problems of translating to and from languages as disparate as English and Greek, English and Hebrew, and in this case, as we see in the example of “Wón Pè Mí Jérìí”, English and Yoruba, whose distinctive linguistic features are stress-isochronic and tonal, syllable-isochronic respectively. However, it is to the knowledge and acceptance of this inevitable and important barrier that the informed translator must tune his “linguistic and stylistic sensibility.” At best, inevitably, the translator may produce “a vague equivalent,” or “perhaps… only an image of the reality, not the reality itself,” as Woolf averred. Nonetheless, notwithstanding the strain and stresses of translation, translating certain culture-specific features like humor and laughter in a
literary text, are challenging but feasible. While “Witness” did not produce a transference as humorous as its “Wón Pè Mì Jérìí” Yorùbá original, this English translation strove to come as close as possible to being humorous as the Yorùbá original, partly through the method of cushioning with contextual cues.

References


Notes


2. Prologue to the Book of Ecclesiasticus, quoted in *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, Elizabeth Knowles, editor, 91:15. The book is so called from a Greek word, meaning Preacher. First written in Hebrew, it was afterwards translated into
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Greek. For further detail, see www.tldm.org/bible/Old%20Testament/eccltus.htm.


4. A town in the northern part of Nigeria. Situated on the Kaduna River, the city of Kaduna—“Ka” (city) “duna” (crocodile), hence the city of crocodiles, got its name from the river’s profusion of crocodiles, is the capital of present-day Kaduna State in Northern Nigeria. The choice of Kaduna in this Yorùbá adage serves merely to indicate distance in miles and difference in clime and tongue.


6. See footnote 2.

7. Mario Wandruszka, quoted in Kurt Baldinger’s Semantic Theory, p.245.

8. According to Kurt Baldinger, “By all the accepted theories of linguistics it should be impossible to translate from one language to another. Fortunately, the ordinary translator does not know this, and he goes ahead and translates anyhow” (p. 242).


10. Among these, the purists of the Yorùbá language, doyens such as D. O. Fágúnwà, I. Délǎnò, Chief Fabunmi, and the proliferation of verbal artists and comedians on the contemporary scene—Moses Oláiyà, aka Baba Sala and his Alabama group; Òjò Ládípọ, aka Baba Mere and his Wàdà Keri group, etc.


14. Such was the case in my experience of translating Ìsòlá’s two historical plays, Efùn-setán Aníwúrà Ìyálóde Ibàdàn and Olú Omo (Tinúubú), (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2005).


16. Numerous childhood incidents come to mind in which the participant who is able to throw the biggest-sounding foreign words at the other in a banter, even without the added advantage of knowing the meaning, won the banter. The Olú-Àtòké encounter is reminiscent of a stadium incident in which a 6 or 7-year-old boy walked up to my 8-year-old brother and hurled the words, “you concobility” at him. Instinctively, echoing a phrase I must have overheard my mother use, I spat back, “hopelessness personified” at the perceived insult, unaware of its meaning.
but delighted at the impactful result, my busted lip from the boy’s head-butt notwithstanding. I had abused his mother in English, the work-up boy complained tearfully to the peace-making crowd that had gathered around us. And how did he know that it was indeed an insult I had hurled at his mother? The boy reported that I had called him *hopelessness personified*. Without waiting to be asked to give my side of the story, I reported the boy’s “**concobility**” insult. Puzzled, the crowd asked the boy, then me, what the perceived “insults” meant. Neither of us knew. However, unlike the Olú-Àtóké crowd, no “witness” emerged from our peace-maker crowd to save the day and enlighten the crowd. But they burst out laughing anyway. Later, at a safe enough distance, my brother and I agreed that I had vanquished the insulter and won the banter. It did not matter that we still did not know the meaning of “*hopelessness personified*.” The important thing was that my perceived “insult” had made my “insulter” cry!


18. In other words, a marketplace type English, consisting of, perhaps, no more than a handful of words, which the “trader”/market woman (literally, the woman who sells era) uses to “invite” or entice the buyer to buy her wares (in this case, the food era) rather than those of her competitor’s. This “customer calling,” a repertoire of some four or five English words she has heard (and at times mixed with broken English words), is almost always reserved for foreign shoppers. The admixture can be quite hilarious as the illiterate market women string together single phrases, shouting her entire stock pile of foreign words, “Madam...Oga...hey, my fren...fine, fine customer...come...come buy heya...I gif gudu price.”

19. In the several years since “Wón Pè Mí Jérìí” was read at the Richmond ALA conference, it has gone through at least three levels of translations: the original Yoruba text, its oral presentation in Yoruba, my English translation, and Ìsòlá’s two translation attempts in English. Ìsòlá’s experience at translating his own short story into English after this ALA experience turned out to be a rewriting of the story, “another version,” more embellished than the original, which he has since published in *Words Without Borders: The Online Magazine for International Literature (WWB)*, Alane Salienro Mason, founding editor, 2003. In yet another short story, “The Grammar of Easter (You Don’t Say That in English),” translated from his Yorùbá original, and also published in *WWB*, he again takes up (humorously) the issue of English and its many uses.
Chapter 16

*Orísun FM Radio Station and the Reclamation of Yorùbá Language*

Adéolá Adijat Fáléye

**Introduction**

Nigeria has a long history of radio broadcasting which dates to colonial times. The British colonial authority introduced radio broadcasting to the nation in 1932 when the Radio Distribution Service (RDS) began to re-transmit programs of the external service of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). At the same time, the British broadcasts served as the colonial government’s instrument of disseminating information. Radio broadcasting advanced in 1952 when the Nigerian Broadcasting Service (NBS) was established, but it still remained under the control of the federal government. However, in June 1959, with the right won by regional governments to own broadcasting stations, the government of the Western Region established the Western Nigeria Government Broadcasting Corporation (WNGBC), a broadcasting service which was a joint venture with a foreign interest, the Overseas Rediffusion Service Limited. Subsequently, in October 1959, the Western Region established the first television station in Africa, the Western Nigerian Television (WNTV), at Ibadan, the capital of the Western Region. A commercial radio service followed, the first in the nation, when the Western Nigeria Broadcasting Service opened for broadcast in May 1960 at Ibadan.¹
Modern day radio stations in Nigeria are generally owned by the federal and state governments, although since April 2009, tertiary institutions in the country are allowed to own stations. With a plethora of stations all over the country, radio has now emerged as an important medium of mass communication. Radio programs inform, educate, and entertain listeners, and some radio stations such as Orísun FM promote the use of the indigenous language, Yorùbá.

The radio station Orísun FM operates from the ancient city of Ilé-Ifè, in Osun State, Nigeria. It aims to reach the people of the state and broadcasts exclusively in Yorùbá language. The purpose of this chapter is to examine this radio station as an instrument in the efforts to develop the use of Yorùbá language in Nigeria and the promotion of Yorùbá culture in general. This is done against the backdrop of the contention, as suggested in the literature, that the Yorùbá language is endangered or nearing extinction.

Orísun FM Radio: The Historical Background

Orísun FM Radio station is located at Òkè-Ìtasè, in the very heart of Ilé-Ifè—a walkable distance from the royal palace of the Oòní (traditional ruler), Oba Sijúwadé Olúbùse II. The station’s location at Ilé-Ifè is significant; the ancient town, according to mythology, is the cradle of the Yorùbá.

Following the creation of Òsun State out of the old Òyó State in 1991, Orísun FM station was established by the Òsun state government. Initially, the station transmitted from Ilé-Àwíyé, in Òsogbo, the state capital. It quickly established itself as one of the main radio stations in Òsun State. However, following requests by its board members and demands from the community, the station was relocated to Ilé-Ifè in 2005. Equipped with the capacity to reach a wide audience, particularly the Yorùbá-speaking states of Òyó, Òsun, Ògùn, Èkìtì, and Ondo, its mandate was to promote indigenous values, especially Yorùbá language.

After its inauguration at Ilé-Ifè, Orísun FM station began to air its programs in Yorùbá language. With a staff strength of fifteen permanent officers and about twenty other associates, the station broadcasts daily programs from six in the morning to midnight. Like other radio stations, Orísun FM station fields a wide range of commercial, educational, entertainment, and informative programs. These programs explore political, religious, and cultural issues, geared towards promoting the Yorùbá language. Table 16.1 provides some sample programs of the station.
Table 16:1 Sample Programs of *Orisun* FM Station

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<tr>
<th>Religious/Cultural</th>
<th>Educational/Cultural</th>
<th>Informative/Political</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Eso Òmí,</td>
<td>1. Òwúrò-ajo,</td>
<td>1. Ìròyìn tó n lo</td>
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<td>2. Òrò Èségun</td>
<td>2. Pírí lologo-n-jí,</td>
<td>2. Mo fara mó on, mi-ò-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Opót-ifà</td>
<td>3. Àjâjirebi</td>
<td>fara mó on</td>
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<td>4. Òdè-tó-ode</td>
<td>4. Ìdilé aláyò</td>
<td>3. Pòn-ún là á Sefôn</td>
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<td>5. Omoloso</td>
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<td>6. Oorun ayò</td>
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<td>7. Tiwa-làsà</td>
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<td>8. Lagbo Òdó</td>
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<td>9. Olólufé ni</td>
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<td>10. Òyí yàtò</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Some programs also target specific audiences such as women, young adults, urban and rural populations.

**Yorùbá Language: The Question of “Endangerment”**

Yorùbá is the general name of the language spoken by the Yorùbá people of Southwestern Nigeria. The Yorùbá consist of a number of subgroups such as the Ìgbómìnà, Òyó, Ìjèsà, Èkìtì, Ègbá, Ìjèbú, and Òwò, each with a varying dialect of the Yorùbá language.

As stated earlier, a number of scholars have argued that Yorùbá language is “deprived,” “endangered,” or even facing extinction. Ayo Bamgbose, in his Nigerian languages analysis, argues that English, as the official language in Nigeria, has overshadowed the indigenous languages. He classifies Nigeria’s languages in terms of currency of use thus:4

1. The dominant: English language
2. The deprived: Hausa, Igbo and Yorùbá
3. The endangered: Edo, Efik/Ibiobio, Itsekiri, and Tiv
4. The dying: Bassa, Emai, etc.

English has continued to be a dominant language in an increasingly globalized world. As E.T. Babalola contends:

English is generally regarded as the world’s most important language. The pre-eminent status of English is not in doubt given the varied roles it is performing in the world. Whenever it is being spoken alone (as in most monolinguial nations like England and America, or used together with another language (as is the case in bilingual nations...
like Canada and Swaziland), or used in a multilingual setting (as in Nigeria and Ghana), its supremacy is well established.\textsuperscript{5}

In the case of Nigeria, Bamgbose has further underscored the fact that English has gained more recognition and usage over indigenous Nigerian languages. The use of English as opposed to Yorùbá is popular not only among the elite, but also among the semi-literate. It is common even among native speakers to see Yorùbá language as vernacular. As “deprived” in Bamgbose’s classification, the language is seen as less-spoken, which makes it less likely to achieve its communicative prowess. Progressive decline in its use makes the language “endangered,” in which case it is prone to “dying.” When classified as “dying,” a language is considered as incapable of surviving and destined to becoming extinct sometime in the future. By running exclusively Yorùbá programs, Orísun FM station is designed to arrest the downward trend in Yorùbá language.

**Yorùbá as the Language of Radio Broadcast**

The success of Orísun FM station as a vehicle for promoting Yorùbá culture, and particularly Yorùbá language, is evident. The station’s programs are very popular with listening audiences found beyond the Yorùbá-speaking states of the southwest. The station boasts of listeners as far as Aba in the east, Kaduna in the north, and Maiduguri in the northeast. Indeed, its broadcast is heard even outside Nigeria.

The celebration of the second anniversary of Orísun FM Radio with fanfare in February 2008 suggests its fulfillment of the mandate to promote Yorùbá culture and language. The approach employed by the station can be described as “bottom-to-top and top-to-bottom.” This implies elite and grassroots participation in its programs. For example, phone-in programs such as Pòn-un làá-séfòn (“Boldness is Required”) and Òrò tó nlo (“Current Affairs”) bring top government officials to the air to discuss current political and economic issues with listeners. These programs, conducted in Yorùbá, have allowed the underprivileged in the society to have access to important information that otherwise would have been available only to the elite if, as on other radio stations, English were the language of broadcast. Other phone-in programs such as Lábé Òrun (“Under the World”), Ojú-àwo-làwo fi-n gbòbè (“Eye for an Eye”), and lágbo òsèlú (“At Political Setting”), allow ordinary citizens to air their views on political, economic, religious, and cultural subjects and other crucial and general issues of relevance to the society. Especially popular is Kókó imú iwé ìròyìn (“Press Review/Reports”), a program that brings current information in the dailies to listeners in Yorùbá language.
CHALLENGES

Although Orísun FM Radio station is popular among speakers of Yorùbá language, its exclusive use of the language has its demerits. Its narrow focus on Yorùbá as medium of broadcast defeats the first objective of any media establishment—to reach all audiences. In other words, the station caters only to the interest of Yorùbá language speakers.

Also as a result of its exclusive use of Yorùbá, the station struggled to make commercial gains, especially at its initial stage of operations in 2005. Its use of Yorùbá necessarily limited the type of advertisements it received; thus patronage was relatively very low.

Initially, Orísun FM Radio station had to rebroadcast programs due to the lack of enough new programs to air. To some listeners, repeated programs were monotonous. Also, at the initial stage, robust discussions were often lacking since many participants were not fluent in Yorùbá. Thus, in order to ensure high quality programs in Yorùbá, the station resorted to selective participation where guests and callers to live programs were first screened to ensure their proficiency in the language.

CONCLUSION

Language is of paramount importance for cultural preservation in any society. If, indeed, the Yorùbá language is endangered, Orísun FM Radio station, as conceived, has certainly enhanced its development and promoted its preservation. As a Yorùbá language station, it has prompted emulation by other states. Now there are a number of radio stations in the country broadcasting in Nigerian indigenous languages. Another example of a Yoruba-oriented radio station is Tiwa-n-tiwa FM, in Lagos.

European languages, official in many African states, tend to emasculate African indigenous languages. A case should be made here that the indigenous languages must not be permitted to go into disuse. Radio broadcasting, as clearly demonstrated by Orísun FM Radio station, has an invaluable part to play.

References


Notes

1. Information for this section is obtained in “About BCOS: History and Social Responsibilities,” website of the Broadcasting Corporation of Oyo State; retrieved at http://www.bcosonline.com/about/history.htm


Every society has its own unique pedagogical approach to transmit its culture and history. In many African societies, history is transmitted orally because of the lack of a writing culture. The Yoruba people in particular have clearly demonstrated the power of the brain (oral traditions) over that of the pen (written documents). Oral traditions which embody the Yoruba culture and history have been well developed, well preserved, and often well narrated. Much of the pre-colonial Yoruba civilization was largely oral, and there was a tremendous respect and admiration for people who could express themselves or recite poetry. The palace historians, who often recited the genealogical list of the rulers, commanded high respect. The professional drummers, who chanted a large number of songs and praised the names of certain individuals, also received high respect. Along with palace historians and drummers, storytellers were also considered repositories of Yoruba culture and history. Storytelling performs the function of revealing the past, the worldview, and the social practices of the people.

The Yoruba are homogenous in culture and language, and pride themselves in a complex and sophisticated civilization. A large part of their rich culture and tradition are expressed in folklore. Àáló (folklore) represents the Yoruba philosophical way of thinking and it serves as a vehicle of self-expression. Folklore is deep in ideas, rich in expression, and enthralling to hear. It is informative and entertaining because of the cultural content and the inclusion of songs and wise sayings. Àáló falls within two categories: àáló àpagbè and àáló àpamò. In this chapter, examples of both categories will be provided and analyzed to draw on
their cultural and historical lessons, and their relevance in contemporary cultural and historical education. Many scholars have written on folktales and their values including Oyekan Owomoyela, an erudite and versatile scholar to whom this book is dedicated. He published widely on Yoruba folktales and proverbs, some of which will be examined in this chapter.¹

**VALUES OF ÀÀló**

Traditionally, the Yoruba were agricultural people and urban dwellers. They established close-knit relationships and lived in compounds, which were comprised usually of members descendent from the paternal line. During the day, the men worked the fields and the women engaged in various trading activities. The evening time was for entertainment and relaxation. This goes with the Yoruba saying, *isimi dún lèhin isé*, (“rest is sweet after labor”). Activities for relaxation often included storytelling and the playing of *ayò* (a board game). Since the Yoruba lived in compounds, it was easy to gather the children together to enjoy storytelling, especially during the bright moonlight time. Although children enjoyed *eré alé* (“night play”) such as hide and seek, storytelling seemed to be their favorite evening activity, presumably because of its educational and social component.

ÀÀló were verbally and freely expressed, essentially to impart values in the young, to affirm the society’s values, to discourage unsociable behavior, and to promote the power of expression. To the Yoruba, ÀÀló is a form of cultural identity. There is a shared belief in the potency of folklore as an agent of character development, cultural transmission, and historical education. J. A. Majasan made the point that one of the most appropriate instruments of educating and acculturating the youth is folklore.² The Yoruba considered education as paramount for success in life, and to them, education transcended the mere acquisition of book knowledge. Education included the assimilation of strong morals and values and an equally strong Yoruba identity through observation of and close contact with family members and others in their society. For example, children were provided with systematic training in skills and habits, following after their parents or elderly members of the community. Corroborating Majasan, T. A. Awoniyi asserted:

> Stories, songs, myths, and dancing were combined to stimulate the children’s emotions, quicken their perceptions, and guide them as they explored, exploited, and interpreted their environment. The objective of education was to make an individual an *omoluabi*, to develop his personality and character and weave him [or her] harmoniously into the social fabric.³
The Yoruba believe an *omoluabi* is a well-rounded, well-educated, well-behaved and well-respected person. That person, according to Babatunde, is “cautious, respectful of elders and committed to and persistent in hard work.”

*Ààló àpagbè* is narrative in form. They are long stories with intermittent songs, proverbs, drumming, tapping of fingers, or dramatizations. Stories purport to teach certain lessons, especially moral values. They help the youth not only to develop oratory skill, but also to socialize and acculturate. *Ààló àpagbè* were usually narrated at night during moonlight hours. The storyteller began with a loud *à à l ó o*, the audience responded in chorus *à à l ó ó*, and the storyteller then began to narrate the story. The second is *ààló àpamò*, which are in the form of riddles and jokes, but which are contextually historical, educational, and entertaining. Both categories are used to test the intelligence of the children. They enable the children to learn how to listen attentively and to have critical thinking because at the end, they may be asked questions on the content, message, and lessons of the story. While the storyteller narrates the tale, children not only listen, but also develop their vocabulary. It takes an intelligent person who is well grounded in the Yoruba culture and language to understand the riddles and provide appropriate answers, especially for the *ààló àpamò*.

**Content of Ààló**

Folktales cover a wide range of areas. They can reflect cultural, historical, geographical, mathematical, and political content. Yoruba folktales are, however, heavily influenced by the people’s worldview and traditions. As an avenue for education, folktales are used to draw and maintain children’s attention and to broaden their minds in a variety of ways. In terms of spirituality, stories that identify Olodumare or Olorun (the Supreme Being) as the Creator and King are narrated, and children are taught the concept of good and evil, heaven and hell. Children are taught that Olodumare resides in the sky; hence he is a sky god and he is remote to the people.

Yoruba folktales, mythology, and history are sometimes intertwined as demonstrated in the myth of Oduduwa who supposedly descended from heaven through a mystical chain. Tradition claims that Oduduwa, the eponymous ancestor and cultural hero of the Yoruba, descended from heaven with “sixteen companions [with whom he shared] his task of colonizing the earth.” Historically, Ile-Ife, the place where Oduduwa landed on earth, has been regarded as the cradle of the Yoruba people, and serves as their cultural and religious center. Although a mythical explanation, the Yoruba continue to incorporate this information in their political history and to promote the *ebi* (kinship) concept, which has been used to guide and to strengthen political relations among the Yoruba kingdoms and their rulers. The kinship relationship was used as a strat-
egy for preventing warfare among the Yoruba kingdoms. Even though a myth, there are historical contents within, especially in explaining how Oduduwa and his group established political dominance over the people they met and how the Yoruba people developed and practiced the concept of kinship relations. One of the lessons of the kinship relations is peaceful co-existence, which is emphasized to children by demonstrating how warfare should be avoided and harmonious living encouraged. Beyond ordinary story or tradition, the Oduduwa episode served as a part of cultural identity for the Yoruba.

The content of folktales may also focus on heroes and heroines such as Sango and Moremi. These two individuals were historical figures, and they feature in moonlight stories which demonstrate their acts of heroism. Sango was a powerful Alaafin of Oyo who according to Samuel Johnson, “was of a very wild disposition, fiery temper, and skilful in sleight of hand tricks. He had a habit of emitting fire and smoke out of his mouth, by which he greatly increased the dread his subjects had of him.” Sango reigned for seven years and became deified as the god of thunder and lightning after his death. He was able to challenge the enemies of the Yoruba and to defeat them in wars. His bravery in wars often earned him a position among the heroes of the Yoruba.

Moremi was a beautiful, brave, and virtuous woman of Ile-Ife whose only son was called Ela. Although narrated as a tale, it is historically correct that Ile-Ife was being constantly raided by a group of people known as the Igbos. The Ife people were often thrown into disarray and fear any time the Igbos attacked. As a solution, and in love for her people, Moremi surrendered herself to be captured by the Igbos. Her purpose was to find out the secrets of the raiders. Before she left, Moremi made a vow that if she succeeded in saving her people, she would offer the highest form of sacrifice to the god of the stream. Moremi was captured when the Igbos attacked, and taken as a prisoner of war. The king of the Igbos was attracted by Moremi’s beauty and he married her. Gradually, Moremi began to study the secrets of the Igbos and after mastering them she escaped and leaked the secrets to her people at Ile-Ife. Using the military tactics and secrets that Moremi provided them and applying charms to counter the Igbos’ magical power, the Ife people finally defeated the Igbos. Thus Moremi was able to save her people from destruction at the hands of the formidable Igbo warriors. To fulfill her vow, the god of the stream demanded the sacrifice of her only son. Painful as it was, Moremi obeyed.

Stories about heroes and heroines carry the intent of teaching the youth lessons in the act of bravery (on the part of Sango) and selflessness (on the part of Moremi). Such stories teach historical realities involving political insecurity, constant warfare, the use of charms, and the danger of being captured as a prisoner of war. Captives in wars often became slaves to their captors, but Moremi’s case was special: instead of being a slave, she became a queen in the palace of the
Igbo king. Moremi provided an example for children to become good citizens who would be willing to surrender their lives for their community.

**Ààló and Natural Phenomena**

The Yoruba are close to nature in their worldview. They revere animal, bird, reptile, and tree totems. Not surprisingly, their folktales not only feature human beings, but also animals, birds, and other natural phenomena. Ààló helps the youth to connect with nature and with the real world in a cultural context. As Afolabi Ojo put it, Yoruba fables and folklore tales “were almost all woven around animals.” He states further: “In the Yoruba environment animals and birds were by far the most concrete and impressive objects conjured up as pictures for abstract thought: they were common to the thinker (elder) and the ordinary man (the farmer), and therefore served as the common factor of their thinking.”

The most popularly mentioned animal is the trickster (tortoise), a small, crafty, and scheming animal, but “strikingly human in habits, predisposition, and weakness.” In what Owomoyela described as “The Trickster Phenomenon,” he indicated that the trickster is prominent in many cultural folktales in Africa and other parts of the world.

In Yoruba belief, the tortoise (variously called Àjàpá, Ìjàpá, or Alábahun) is presented as a handsome, wise, but greedy individual who uses flattery or trickery to achieve his desires. Amos Tutuola described the tortoise as “cunning, cruel, selfish, audacious and treacherous,” and “the greatest liar, villain, thief and traitor...” The tortoise makes every effort to outwit or outplay his opponents in any competition. To make him special, the tortoise chooses to do what others cannot or would not do. Stories about the tortoise portray how the Yoruba society appreciates and encourages adroitness and shrewdness, but frowns at avarice and the deliberate attempt to cheat other people. Owomoyela compiled twenty-three different stories on the tortoise in one of his books and he affirmed, “No Yoruba child brought up in a traditional setting escapes exposure to Àjàpá [tortoise] tales, and many children grow up learning a number of them.” One of the stories commonly told and which was Owomoyela’s favorite, Àjàpá and Àjànàkú the Would-Be Oba, is narrated and analyzed below.

**The Tortoise and the Elephant Story**

“A long time ago,” begins the story, a town was in trouble. Rains failed to drop, the land failed to yield crops, famine and desperation to survive gripped the whole town. The town, formerly known for its blissful and peaceful outlook, became a desolate and gloomy place. Everyone in the town wore angry and ugly faces. After all, they say, “a hungry person is an angry person.” The face of the king and his chiefs were covered with shame because they had lost the confi-
dence of their people. Were these the signs indicating that the ancestors and the
gods were angry? Why did the rain fail to fall? Why did the crops fail to yield?
For how long would the people suffer? The people needed answers and the king
needed to take immediate and effective action. Since religion and politics were
intermixed, the king eventually summoned Olú Awo, the chief of the babalawo,
to consult the Ifa oracle. The king believed that there must be a spiritual remedy
to the socio-political calamity that had befallen his town.

In the presence of the king and his council of chiefs, the Olú Awo divined
and proclaimed that to ward off the catastrophe a live elephant would be offered
as sacrifice to the gods at the market place. The main problem was how to catch
a live elephant from the forest and bring it to the market place. The hunters of
the town were charged with the task. Since the hunters were unwilling to risk
their lives, they informed the king that he had assigned them an impossible task:
they would not be able produce an elephant. At this point, a tortoise (hereafter
Tortoise) volunteered to perform the seemingly impossible task of bringing an
elephant to town for sacrifice. The townspeople were surprised that Tortoise
chose to do what the brave hunters who had charms and weapons were inca-
cpable of doing.

Tortoise went into the forest with the elephant’s favorite delicacy, honey-
soaked àkàrà (“bean cake”). As the elephant was eating, Tortoise was praising
him in song and told him the great news that the humans had failed politically,
the gods were angry with them, and accordingly they faced disaster. Drought
and famine had eaten deep into their society. Hence, on the advice of the Ifa
oracle, the humans had decided to make him (the elephant) their king in seven
days. Tortoise added that, according to the Ifa oracle, the tragedy of the humans
would not end until the elephant became their king. Wanting to boost his ego
and position as the king of the humans, the elephant accepted the offer, not
realizing that Tortoise was merely deceiving him.

Tortoise went back to the town and informed the king about his plans
for the elephant. Before the day of the Elephant’s coronation, Tortoise ordered
an elephant-size pit to be dug in the market place where the sacrifice would
be performed. The pit was covered with a beautifully decorated throne for the
would-be king. On the day of the enthronement, the market place was full of
people who had come to witness what would become of the elephant and how
Tortoise would fulfill his promise. There was merriment and songs of praise
were rendered to the elephant. The elephant (playing into the tortoise’s trick),
 enjoyed his “triumphant entry” into the town. To the elephant, the dream of
becoming a king was turning into reality and he was elated. To Tortoise, things
were working out well according to plan. People were singing:
"A o merin joba
Eweku ewele,
Erin to d’âde owo
Eweku ewele,
Erin to t’opa ileke
Eweku ewele
A o merin joba
Eweku ewele.

We shall make elephant a king
It’s celebration galore
Elephant that wears the crown made of money
It’s celebration galore
Elephant that holds the beaded walking stick
It’s celebration galore
We shall make elephant a king
It’s celebration galore.

With dignity, the elephant attempted to sit on his “royal throne,” and suddenly, everything collapsed under him: he fell into the big pit. It was at this point that the elephant realized that Tortoise had tricked him. Immediately, the Olú Awo used the elephant to perform the sacrifice, the people shouted for joy, and Tortoise was excited that he fulfilled his promise. The would-be-king of humans became a victim of sacrifice for humans. When other animals heard the news, they became happy that the oppressive elephant had been humiliated and killed.

The story has neither a cultural or historical interpretation because ordinarily, humans would not make an animal their king, but it conveys a moral lesson against greed and inordinate ambition. It warns against using one’s position to oppress others as the elephant did. The end result of such actions could be humiliating and disastrous. One should beware that those who plan for the destruction of another may start by flattering and giving false praise to their intended victim. The story also shows the people’s spiritual belief that sacrifices to the gods would solve their problems. The Yoruba usually consult the oracle before embarking on any venture. After the sacrifice, the drought ended, and as Owomoyela added, “Peace, ease, and happiness returned to the community.” The king gave Tortoise a handsome reward for his heroic feat. The story does not intend to encourage treachery, but its focus is on the process of restoring peace and prosperity to the society. It is about sacrificing one’s life for the good of the people.
Tortoise, the Cunning Creature

Once upon a time, there was an animal called Tortoise who was conscious of his cleverness and often boasted about it. Being a cunning creature, Tortoise was always trying to do what other animals could not do or beat other animals in competitions. Tortoise announced that he would do what no one had ever done, that is, he would ask the king to perform a service for him. The king, among the Yoruba, is considered to be a semi-god and father of all his subjects, and he is accorded the highest respect and honor. Therefore, it is culturally impossible for anyone to ask the king to perform a service for them. But that was what Tortoise chose to do. Everybody warned Tortoise of the consequences of his plan because the punishment was death. Tortoise still insisted that he would do it. A date was set to carry out the plan. On that day, everybody gathered at the king’s palace, looking forward to seeing Tortoise put to shame.

The king began by sending some animals such as the goat, dog, sheep, and others on different errands. Then the king sent Tortoise on an errand, but before leaving, Tortoise left his hat with the king to watch. Tortoise claimed that the hat would not allow him to run fast and the king agreed to watch the hat until Tortoise returned. Not long after, Tortoise returned and the people expected the king to order his execution. Tortoise, however, claimed that although the king sent him on an errand, he made the king look after his hat. This was a cunning way of making the king perform a service: looking after his hat. Instead of killing Tortoise, the king surprisingly honored him for his cleverness. This story had a happy ending for Tortoise but the conclusions of the Tortoise stories are not always happy ones. As Karin Barber indicates, “sometimes the victim of Tortoise’s stratagem retaliates; sometimes the town as a whole combines to catch him and have him punished; and sometimes his bad action leads directly to retribution, without intervention of any other agency...”16 Tortoise places himself into potentially dangerous situations to win out over others or simply as a result of his own inherent greed.

Think before Doing Evil

In a town named Ìkà kò Sunwòn (“Evil does not Pay”) was a man who had been married for several years, but did not have a child. He and his wife were desperate to conceive a child, but they were unsuccessful. In the Yoruba culture, marriage without bearing a child does not make for a complete family. Since this man was unwilling to bear the stigma, he was forced into marrying a second wife, who gave birth to many children. Because the man was poor, he thought of different ways to raise funds to care for the children. The man informed his first wife that a powerful babalawo (diviner) would procure medicine for her to have children. To make her dreams come true, the woman agreed to cooper-
ate with her husband. She followed him to the medicine man. Little did the woman know that her husband lied to her; instead of a medicine to enable her to become pregnant, the man had earlier approached the babalawo for a medicine that would make him wealthy along with a plan to kill his first wife in order to procure the medicine. The babalawo requested the woman to stay with him for three days for the medicine to produce the desired results. According to the plan, the man left his wife with the medicine man believing that the woman would die after three days.

The woman was not immediately killed, but being a hardworking, sociable, and likeable person, began to assist the medicine man and his wife in doing some household chores. The babalawo and his wife were favorably disposed to the woman because of her good nature and diligence. On the third day, the medicine man asked if the woman knew the reason for her being with him. She answered that she was bereft of a child. The babalawo had pity on her because she was a good woman. He confessed her husband’s true motive, but assured her that she would not die. The babalawo then secretly gave her instructions to save her life. The husband later arrived to receive the medicine. The babalawo put the medicine in a covered calabash and asked the man to carry it following his wife into the forest, where he would put the calabash on the woman’s head. Things were going according to plan until the man instructed his wife to carry the calabash because he wanted to ease himself. Following the instructions of the medicine man, the woman immediately placed the calabash on her husband’s head and he mysteriously disappeared. On arriving home, the woman found her husband dead in their bedroom though in the possession of a calabash full of money. While the husband lost his life out of greed and deceit, the wife became suddenly wealthy.17

The perspective of this story is to reveal the dangers of wrongdoing. Although the Yoruba frown upon evil, it persists in the society. A Yoruba proverb that eni da eérú ni eérú tò (“Evil follows after the evildoer”) supports the outcome of this story. Procuring medicine for money by using human beings is not peculiar to the Yoruba and is not a good lesson that children should learn. The story teaches children not to do evil and to think of the consequences of their actions before acting. The story promotes hard work instead of finding wrong strategies to wealth. It warns against avarice and the desperation to be rich. Children are taught to be content because if one is overly ambitious, it could lead to an untimely death. The story teaches the concept of good and evil, which is important for children to know as they grow into the realities of life.

The Donkey Story

Other animals such as horses and donkeys are often mentioned in folktales. In pre-colonial times, camels, horses, and donkeys were beasts of burden, which
were used for transportation. In the trans-Saharan trade between North African Arab and Berber merchants and West African Wangara merchants, donkeys were the primary animals of transportation. A.G. Hopkins described them as “the chief pack animal,” which were “cheap to buy, inexpensive to operate and well suited to the terrain.”¹⁸ According to Deji Ogunremi, donkeys were important for their hardiness and they were “used in assembling the scattered farm crops at a centre from where they transported the crops to villages or local market-places.”¹⁹ In the Yoruba culture in particular, horses and donkeys were symbols of wealth and status and thus were prominent in folktales.

Ebenezer Obey, the Yoruba juju musician, popularized the story of how it is impossible to please everyone through his song track on Kétékété (“Donkey”). The story narrates about a man who owned a donkey. He and his son planned to travel with it. When they began their journey, the father was riding the donkey while the son was following after them on foot. They met someone who rebuked the father for riding alone on the donkey. The father then put his son on the donkey while he walked after them. Another person met them and reprimanded the father that he was supposed to be riding the donkey as the older person. The father, then, decided that he and his son would now ride the donkey together. Again, they met someone who accused them of abusing the donkey; that they had put too much wait on him. Both of them came down and decided to lead the donkey along. Before long, they met another person who claimed that they were foolish for not riding on the donkey.

This story simply shows that although the father tried to please all the people he met, it was practically impossible. Whether good or bad behavior, people would criticize. The story teaches both children and adults that they should be themselves and not try to please every one because in an attempt to please everybody, you will end up not pleasing anyone. According to a Yoruba wise saying, a kii we ka k’aye ja (literally, “It is impossible for one to swim throughout the rivers of the world”). This means that no matter how good one is, it is impossible to satisfy everybody. This also indicates that it is a lesson of life that no one is perfect.

Lesson in Patience

Patience was born in the village named Hope. Patience’s parents loved him so dearly because he was their only child. When he grew up, he decided to go to the city for a job. After many years without hearing from him, his parents thought he had died. Patience, however, returned home, but was unable to locate his parents’ house partly because he arrived at nighttime and partly because he had lost the location of the house. He therefore went to the palace of Endurance, the king of the village. After identifying himself and describing his parents, the king ordered his messengers to take Patience to his parents’ house.
Patience’s parents did not recognize him and he did not immediately declare to them who he was.

Before going to bed, Patience asked for food, but his parents told him that there was no food at home. On opening his wallet, Patience brought out a large sum of money to buy food. Being poor, Patience’s parents were surprised at the amount of money the “stranger” had on him, and they conspired to kill him and take his money. Tired after a long journey, Patience ate the food, went to bed, and was sound asleep when his father struck, not knowing that he had killed his own son. He and his wife stole Patience’s money. In the morning, the king inquired about their “visitor,” but was told that he had left. Summoning Patience’s parents, the king wondered why they allowed their son to leave so soon. Upon hearing about the true identity of their visitor the mother collapsed and died. The father fainted. When he gained consciousness, he confessed that they killed the “stranger” for his money, not realizing that he was their long-awaited son. The king replied with a proverb: Ìgbèhin ní ńyé olókùú àdá (“It is only at the end that the person with a blunt machete realizes his error.”). As Owomoyela put it, “sometimes wisdom comes too late to salvage lost opportunities,” and “patience is the best in delicate or difficult matters.”

There is danger, consequence and regret in being rapacious and being in a hurry to get rich, as demonstrated in the killing of Patience, the death of his mother, and the regret of the father. This story is often narrated to teach children to be patient and to endure the difficult circumstances of life. Contentment is a lesson of life and it pays off to be patient (súúrù lérè). The impatience of Patience’s parents became too expensive for them to bear. While situations may be difficult and times may be hard, there is no problem that is insurmountable. Although this is a mere story that teaches moral lessons, its relevance to real life situations cannot be ignored.

ÀÀló ÀPamò (Riddles and Jokes)

Unlike the long stories, ààló àpamò are short riddles and jokes that are stated in question form, and answers are to be guessed. They are used to entertain and convey specific messages. Children often take delight in using ààló àpamò to test their knowledge of the understanding of the Yoruba culture and language. In a brilliant but technical literary analysis of ààló àpamò, William Bascom states that the riddles “are often stated in such a way that an American or European may not understand what he is expected to guess, and may even be unaware that an enigma has been propounded.” This is because a deep understanding of the Yoruba culture and language is required to be able to provide the answer. ÀÀló àpamò relate to all kinds of topics including parts of the body, human relations, illness, occupation, crops, and natural phenomena. While
many of the riddles focus on things that happened several centuries ago, on a
timeless date, others relate to colonial or contemporary events. An example is
àkùko baba mi láééláé, àkùko baba mi láééláé owó ló ń je, kì í je ìgbádò (literally
translated: Long ago, my father’s hen used to eat money, but now it eats corn”).
Simply, this shows the changes that occurred in the justice system with the
introduction of the court system during the colonial period. In the traditional
Yoruba justice system, a culprit would be asked to pay the fine in crops, but
during the colonial period, that changed and court fines were paid in cash. The
British enforced the cultivation of cash crops such as cocoa, groundnuts, and
d palm produce, for their economic exigencies: to procure raw materials for their
industries. In the process they introduced wage labor and payment of taxation
by cash to maintain the colonial administration.

Adeleye Adesua identified five categories of ààló àpamò.22 First, riddles
beginning with “once upon a time.” This is understandable because the Yoruba
did not develop the concept of recording time with events; hence stories
occurred in a timeless period. An example is: “Once upon a time, my father
had a hen that produced hundreds of chickens.” Second, are those that start
with a “what” question: for example, Kínni ń lo l’ojude oba ti kò ki oba? (“What
is it that moves through the palace without paying obeisance to the king?”). In
Yorubaland, it is un-cultural and disrespectful for someone to pass through the
palace without greeting the king. The political and sacerdotal position that the
king occupies in the society makes it imperative for his subjects to respect him
by paying obeisance to him. Even for a visitor, it is considered culturally discour-
teous not to pay a visit to the king at the palace before doing anything in the
town. Another riddle is Kínni odò pókótó abé ilostín, gbogbo ayé lo n mun ún yó
(“What is the small hidden river, which every one drinks from?”). This riddle
deals with the Yoruba culture not directly or publicly mentioning certain parts
of the body, especially in the presence of children, to respect human dignity.
This is borne out of respect for the body and it is also to avoid exposing the
children to sexual discourse. The river represents the female breast from which
everybody has been fed. Among the Yoruba, breast feeding takes approximately
two years, which suggests that for everyone who has been breast fed, the river
had a continuous flow for two years.

The third category begins with words that do not have definite meaning,
but are simply to trick people about the riddle. Òrúkú tindí tindí, Òrúkú tindí-
tindí, Òrúkú bí igha omo, gbogbo won ló yo kúmò lé lówó (“Oruku had two
hundred children and gave a short heavy club to each of them”). In this riddle,
Oruku is not a particular person, but something that possesses many children,
and the answer is baobab tree fruit, which has several seeds and are regarded as
children in this riddle. To pluck the fruit, the Yoruba used to throw stones or a
heavy club. This means that the tree suffers any time people throw the stone or
a heavy club. The fourth category are the ones which mention years and months as reflected in Òkú àtòdúnìmòdún, Òkú àtósùììnìì̇sìì; a ba a lòkè òdò, ó ń fe ehìn keke (“The death of many years and many months, we met it at the river bank smiling”). The answer to the riddle is dry cotton, which if left untouched, retains its white color. The smile is represented by the whiteness of the cotton. The fifth group of riddles provides some explanation about the riddle.24 For example, Àlejò baba mi àtàyébáyé, tèrìntèrìn l’a ñ gbaàá (“My father’s visitor for ages is often welcomed with smiles”) shows the hospitality of the Yoruba people.

Other riddles include Ki l’on b’oba jeun ti ko k’ewe? (“What dines with the king without disposing of the leaves?”). Some Yoruba food such as cold corn meal, are wrapped with leaves, which must be collected and disposed off after eating. This riddle states that something ate with the king, but was discourteous by refusing to collect and dispose of the leaves. The answer to the riddle is a fly. Flies are uninvited and unwanted guests at table time, and flies do not discriminate between rich and poor, powerful or weak. Flies do not obey human instructions and do not follow human actions. Hence, dining with the king and refusing to dispose of the leaves simply teaches politeness.

Another riddle is: O nlo s’Oyo, o k’oju s’Oyo, o nbo l’at’Oyo, o k’oju s’Oyo (“It’s going to Oyo and faces Oyo, it’s coming from Oyo and faces Oyo”). It is humanly impossible to face two directions at a time – facing where one is going and where one is returning from. Oyo is the name of a large historical city in Yorubaland. The capital of the Old Oyo Empire was called Oyo Ile, but the capital shifted to the present site in the wake of the Fulani victory in the Ilorin War of 1837. This riddle does not differentiate between old or new Oyo, for the answer remains the same. The answer to this riddle is talking drum, which has two sides, facing two directions at the same time. This riddle does not have any historical or specific cultural implication.

A duro, o duro; a joko, o joko; a le e, ko lo (“We stand, it stands, we sit, it sits; we send it away, it refuses to go away”). This riddle relates to something that is very close to a person—one’s shadow. The shadow is always present with an individual. Hence the Yoruba people believe that the shadow knows all the secrets of an individual.

Poetry

Poems constitute a different category in Yoruba oral literature, but they were sometimes injected into storytelling. Like storytelling, poems also have different genres, and like storytelling, poems have historical and cultural content. Yoruba poetry, like storytelling, enhances literary creativity and oratory. Poetry shows the deep thoughts of the Yoruba on their environment as well as their
philosophy of life. There are poems for all kinds of occasions and many of them have solid historical and cultural background.

In Yoruba work philosophy, hard work is considered one of the ingredients to success in life. Hence, one of the most popular and loved Yoruba poems that children were taught is on hard work and it reads:

*Iṣe loogun iṣe*
*Múra sí iṣe, ọrẹmí,*
*Iṣe ní a sì n di eni giga,*
*Bí a kò bá rí eni féyin ti,*
*Bí ọlẹ ní a á rí;*
*Bí a kò bá rí eni gbéké lè,*
*A tèrè mó iṣe eni.*

*Ìyàà rẹ́ lè lówó lọ́ wọ́,*
*Kí baba sì ní ẹsin ní èèkàn,*
*Bí o bá gbójú lè won,*
*O tè tán ní mo wítí fún è!*
*Ohun tí a kò bá jìyà fún*
*Kí i pé lówó rárá;*
*Ohun tí a bá fi ara se isè fún*
*Ní pé lówó ení.*

*Apá lará, igbúnápá ní iyékan!*

*Bí ayé n fé o lónii,*
*Bí o bá lówó lówó*
*Ní wón máa fé o lóla*
*Tábí ki o wà ní ọpó átátà,*
*Ayé à yé o sí tèrín-tèrín*
*Jẹ́ kí o di eni tí n rágó,*
*Ayé à máa sá fún è!*

*Èkó si túnn n sọ níi dí ìgá,*
*Múra kí o kò o dáradára.*
*Bí o sí ọpó ènìyàn,*
*Ti wón n fí èkòpó sèrín-in rèn,*
*Sórà kí o má fara wé won!*
*Ìyá n bù fún omo ti kò gbón,*
*Èkún n bè fún omo ti ó n sá kiri!*
*Má fí ówúró seré, òrèè mi,*
*Múra sí isé, ọjọ n lò.*

Work is the panacea for poverty
Get on with work, my friend
Work makes one a prominent person
If you don’t have anyone to lean on,
Ààlọ: Historical and Cultural Analysis of Yorùbá Folklore

You become a lazy person
If there is no one to cast hope on
You intensify your effort on your work
Your mother may be rich,
Your father may keep horses on a tether
If you count on them,
You will be completely disappointed
Whatever one does not suffered for
Does not last at all
Whatever one expends energy on
Keeps long in one's possession
One's strong arm is one's relative;
the elbow is one's maternal relation.

If people cherish you today
If you have money
They will love you tomorrow
If you occupy a very important position
People will honor you with smiles
If you become a beggar
People will run away from you
Education transforms one into a boss
Work hard to master it very well
If you see a multitude of people
Who make a mockery of education
Beware, do not imitate them!
Suffering is coming to an unwise child
Lamentation exists for a truant child
Do not waste valuable time my friend
Get on work, time is hurrying off!

Much of the message of this poem is deeply rooted in the cultural approach of the Yoruba people to life in general, but in particular to diligence and hard work. Wasting away one’s precious life, especially as a youth, is frowned at. The poem calls for self-determination, self-inspiration, and the will to be a successful person in life. Dependence on a parent’s wealth or accomplishments may lead to a disappointing end, but hard work is rewarding. There is also the strong warning that people often praise and surround the rich to share in their wealth, but they would disown that person if he became poor.

The emphasis on the importance and value of education shows that the poem was written after the introduction of Western education. Although the Yoruba had their own system of education, which was pragmatic, its focus was not on seeking government jobs. In the Yoruba context, an omoluabi is a well educated person, an individual who is well behaved and well cultured in the
society. Western education, as referred to in this poem, elevates one to a higher position of authority and power. The poem is instructive as it is prophetic: instructive by communicating the idea that hard work is the key for success and prophetic in that an indolent person would lament and suffer when serving others.

Another poem emphasizes being good to others, and not harming people. There are stories that show how a deceitful person has paid heavily for his action. The story of the man who wanted to get rich by using his wife to make medicine, narrated above, is an example. Here is a short poem that calls for doing good instead of evil, working hard instead of being lazy.

Eni d’erú l’ééru tò
Elété lété yé
Ohun tí a bááse ni ye ni
Akii gba àkàtà lówó akítì

A kíi gba ílèe baba eni lówó eni
Má fí ówúrò séré, òtòé mi,
Múra sì isé, ojó n lọ!

It is often difficult for Westerners to understand the complicated form of Yoruba poetry because of the problem of translation. However, poetry is one of the powerful ways of understanding Yoruba culture and of acquiring vocabulary. Poets command respect among the Yoruba. To Yoruba speakers, the poems above convey significant meaning and powerful messages.

ÂÅLÓ IN CONTEMPORARY YORUBA CULTURE

In spite of their huge contributions to the culture, history, and philosophical thoughts of the Yoruba people, both categories of âåló are rapidly disappearing as tools of education. They are no longer narrated or taught in schools thus creating a gap between the youth and their traditions, culture, and history. The teaching of the Yoruba language is suffering a loss because it is becoming more fashionable for children to speak English. In spite of the end of colonial rule several decades ago, the law of “Speak English Language Always” surprisingly
remains in force in some Nigerian schools. During and immediately following colonial rule, it was the vogue in schools to prohibit the speaking of the mother tongue in schools. It was a deliberate attempt on the part of the colonial officers to promote the colonial language, which was the *lingua franca* in Nigeria. While the use of the English language remains important, its promotion is doing significant damage to the Yoruba language.

The youth no longer enjoy the stories of J.F. Odunjo, D.O. Fagunwa, Amos Tutuola and others, that enlighten on the rich culture, history, and traditions of the Yoruba people, and there is a profound loss of vocabulary on the part of the children. It has become very hard for the youth to converse fluently in the Yoruba language. The pervasive influence of Western and Oriental cultures, languages, and practices constitute a challenge to the Yoruba language and culture. Nonetheless, Owomoyela’s works on proverbs and folklore will remain important as major contributions to Yoruba culture, history, and literature. There are more stories than have been recorded, and the stories may vary from one dialect to another of the Yoruba language, but the central themes and messages are common.

**Conclusion**

Using examples of the two categories of *ààló*, this chapter has indicated that Yoruba folktales have cultural and historical values. The primary focus of *ààló* is to educate the youth, and in addition, to train them in verbal self-expression, acquisition of vocabularies, and creative thinking. Storytelling enables the youth to develop the ability to remember details as well as to identify and emphasize key points and lessons of the story. The development of oratory skill through folktales is a form of communication empowerment to the youth; they become fluent, engaging, and entertaining speakers. Hence, children should be encouraged to learn more about their heritage and connect more with their culture and language. Folktales should not be considered things of the past, but should continue as agents of cultural education. After all, there is “an unending dialogue between the present and the past.”

Many aspects of the Yoruba culture have crossed to the Caribbean as a result of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and they are thriving. The Yoruba language is spoken, folktales are narrated, and the youth are learning from the past. Although folktales have a global dimension, they are particularly invaluable to the Yoruba educational development of the youth. The culture that is practiced and taught does not die. Hence, the Yoruba must not allow *ààló* to go extinct. The education, history and cultural values derived from *ààló* are so imperative that they should continue to be told and taught in schools and in the society.
Notes


10. Ibid., ix.


14. Ibid.

15. Ibid., 132.


17. S.A. Adekunle narrated this story at Ogbomoso on December 15, 2007.


Chapter 18

THE ROLE OF PROVERBS AND IDIOMS IN YORUBA DICTIONARY-MAKING

Yiwọlá Awóyalé

Ọwe leṣin ọrọ, ọrọ leṣin ọwe, bí ọrọ bá sọù, ọwe ni à àfi i wá a ’a.

Proverb is the horse of discourse just as a discourse is a horse for a proverb, when a discourse gets muddled; it is a proverb that we use to search it out.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will show how in a language where its oral literature far exceeds its written form, proverbs and idioms, in addition to serving as a proverbial horse for discourse, can actually become a rich gold mine for the form, usage and meaning of a word, whether simplex, complex or compound, in compiling

1. The present electronic database has been constructed using Shoebox version 5.0 for Windows (Oct. 2000), produced by the Summer Institute of Linguistics. The database will be the first electronic type on global Yoruba in a multilingual format encompassing Yoruba-English (about 130,000 Yoruba headwords), English-Yoruba (00s of 000s based on an electronic reversal of the Yoruba-English format), AnagoLucumi-Spanish-English-Yoruba (about 10,000 entries, based on Cabrera (1970)), Gullah-English-Yoruba (about 3000 entries, based on Turner (1949\1969)) and TrinidadYoruba-English-Yoruba (about 1000 entries, based on Warner-Lewis (1996)). It is hoped that in future, the work will include Anago-Portuguese-English-Yoruba from Brazil and Krio-English-Yoruba from Sierra Leone.
a dictionary of such a language. We will cite examples of proverbs and idioms that have contributed very richly to our compilation of a large lexical database for a contemporary dictionary of the Yoruba language. Apart from contributing the form of a typical word, whether in its simplex, complex or compound form, a proverb can also serve as an example of usage and meaning of such a form. Proverbs and idioms in this type of enterprise are intriguing for two reasons. First, they provide ready-made utterances that are largely anonymous. Secondly, because they are anonymous, they belong to everybody who speaks the language. Consequently, examples of usage and meaning based on proverbs and idioms already enjoy automatic acceptance without much further explanation on appropriateness and interpretation. A lexicographer dealing with data from a language that cannot boast of extensive written form dated into the distant past, whether standard or non-standard, is definitely on a much surer ground using proverbs and idioms as examples than he would be if he were creating his own examples.

Traditionally, proverbs and rich idioms used to be viewed in Yoruba culture as the exclusive reserve of the elderly. This to the extent that in a discourse, if a younger person chose to ‘pluck’ or use a proverb in the presence of the elderly, he would be expected to explicitly state his apology for daring to do so. The main reason for the restriction is that proverbs and idioms were meant to demonstrate some type of superior reasoning and mental alertness that are the attributes of old age, maturity and understanding. It would therefore be presumptuous or immodest of a younger person in the culture to engage in using a proverb in the presence of the elderly.

**Proverbs and Idioms**

What is a proverb? What is an idiom? How are they different? The answer to the question of what a proverb is can take two interpretations—what a proverb consists of in its form, and what a proverb is used for in a discourse. In terms of its content, a proverb can be seen as a short popular saying that expresses some commonplace truth that draws on some moral. It usually would be based on some kind of premise, which if accepted or assumed would make some conclusion drawn from or based on it to be held to be correct or valid. It is the didactic significance that differentiates a proverb from just any statement of truth. A proverb usually enjoys a universality of appeal and acceptance especially in the culture in which it holds true.

For example:

ọ̀rọ̀ ìghà, bí kò ṣe láláró, yóò ṣe lójú-alé

mark the word of an elder, if it does not come true in the morning, it will come true in the evening.
That is, if the observation of an elder does not hold true in the morning, it will hold true in the evening; therefore, one must pay a particular attention to it. The proverb has a premise—‘if the word of an elder does not come true in the morning’ and the conclusion—‘it will come true in the evening.’ This proverb can be reduced to just an idiom—ọrọ ọgbà to mean ‘experienced remark.’

Furthermore, from the point of view of the function of a proverb in a discourse, the example of a Yoruba proverb at the opening of this presentation clearly states that a proverb is not just a horse that drives a discourse forward, but is also a compass that plots the bearing of a discourse. A proverb therefore is a way to spice up conversation.

**Idioms**

An idiom on the other hand is an expression with an opaque meaning that is not transparent from its structural component. It can create a semantic island for itself as the word in which it resides flows along in the complicated river of usage and meaning. As the literal meaning of a word flows along, the idiomatic meaning tarries much longer against all odds, sealing off its domain with a cloak of opacity and inscrutability. An idiom may also be a metaphor! While a proverb is usually a sentence or a fragment of it, an idiom usually is a word or a phrase; for example ‘the black sheep of the family’ in English usually refers not to a black sheep that a family owns, although this meaning is conceivable, but to an incorrigible member of the family. In Yoruba, the idiom ‘ilé-ọko’ can have both a literal as well as an idiomatic meaning: (1) husband’s house/home (= literal); and (2) ‘a woman’s marital home’ (= idiomatic). When the Yoruba people talk about ọkú-èkó ‘dead body of Lagos’, they are not talking about a dead human body literally, but a frozen fish imported from Europe or Japan, that usually would come in a container through the port of Lagos. Finally, a proverb may be reduced in form to just an idiom, as in the example of ọrọ ọgbà; however, where this happens, such a proverbial idiom can be fully stretched out to get its proverbial form. On the other hand, an idiom, per se, does not have this possibility of structural expandability. There is nothing proverbial about ‘ilé ọko’ or ‘ọkú-èkó.’

**The Nature of a Word in Yoruba**

A word in Yoruba can take three forms—simplex, complex and compound. A word is considered simplex if it is a morpheme and cannot be broken down compositionally. At another level, a word is either considered complex if it is made up of two or more morphemes from different word classes, or compound if it is made up of two or more morphemes from the same word class. For example, while ro ‘be mean’ is a morpheme and a word, rojú (<ro-øjú) ‘put on
a reluctant face’ is a complex word derived by dropping an ‘o’ at the morpheme boundary and contracting the resultant form. Similarly while *bínú* (*<bí-inú>* ‘get mad’ is complex, *òkú-èkó* ‘frozen fish’ is compound. Both a complex word and a compound word can share related patterns of derivation in Yoruba. The usual pattern of derivation for a complex word is through a process of segment deletion across a morpheme boundary to be followed by a process of contraction as we see in both *rojú* and *bínú*. However with the greeting verb *kú* ‘be greeted or saluted’, its complex form is usually formed by vowel assimilation as in *kúulé* (*<kú-ilé>* ‘be greeted at home’. For a compound, the usual pattern of derivation is by vowel assimilation to be followed by contraction or some kind of fusion, as in *òkéèkó* (*<òkú-èkó>* ‘frozen fish’. The derivation of either a complex or a compound word usually involves some modification of the underlying morpheme boundary, either by erasure or neutralization. Either way, both complex and compound words would have two types of pronunciation—the full form at the underlying level and the short form representing the resultant form.

**Proverbs and Idioms in Database Construction**

**Argument Format**

In order to demonstrate the very robust contribution that proverbs and idioms generally make to our understanding of the meaning and usage of Yoruba words (simplex, complex and compound), I will, very deliberately, adopt the following argument format of presentation for each data: [That X can mean or be used as Y is illustrated in the proverb or idiom Z]. At the risk of repetitiveness, I believe that this argument format will enable me to move very fast across as many examples as space will permit. Whatever properties of grammar and meaning come up will be dealt with at the specific point in time. Using the format mentioned, we will first deal with simplex words, then complex words and finally compound words, irrespective of their word classes. In another interesting respect, this argument format follows the complex propositional or logical structure of most proverbs in presenting an argument structure.

**Simplex Word in Proverbs**

We have said that a simplex word is one that keeps its basic orthographical form where it can stand alone. Usually one does not necessarily need to look to proverbs for the form of every word in the Yoruba language. However where a word stands by itself in a sentence in the context of its collocation, that would be a good example. For example the meaning of the verb ‘ṣè’ ‘come to pass,’ is easily expressed and illustrated in the proverb:
The Role of Proverbs and Idioms in Yorùbá Dictionary-Making

örọ àgbà, bí kò ọ̀rọ láááró, yóò ọ̀rọ lójú alé.
mark the word of an elder, if it does not come true in the morning, it will come true in the evening.

This example not only shows ‘ọ̀rọ’ as a basic morpheme or word, it shows its typical collocational structure. What normally comes to pass cannot be a person, a place, or a physical entity; it has to be an event or a proposition. The example shows ‘ọ̀rọ’ in collocation with ‘órò’ (statement, remark, comment, utterance, prophecy, curse, prediction, etc) as its direct object. This example will be appropriate under the head entry for ‘ọ̀rọ’ in a dictionary.

That ènìyàn can have the meaning of ‘adversary’ is illustrated in the proverb:
ènìyàn ni ó sọ fún ìgbín kí ó lọ sá pamó sábé ịgí ọgèdè; ènìyàn náà ni ó so fún aráyé pé kí wọn lọ wá ìgbín lábé ịgí ọgèdè.

it was a human being who advised a snail to go and hide underneath a banana plant; it was also a human being who advised that they should go and search for a snail under a banana plant’ (proverb on betrayal).

The base of a banana plant is usually very cool because it is a water plant, which makes it a very suitable hiding place for a snail. The intended meaning of ènìyàn in this proverb is not that of a normal person, but of a betrayer or adversary.

Complex Word in Proverbs

That the complex word torí (<ti-orí ‘of head’) can mean ‘for the sake of, because of’ as well as share this meaning with titorí (<ti-i-ti-orí), with which it is interchangeable, is exemplified by the proverb:
a kò níí toríi gbígbó pajá; a kò níí toríi kíkàn págbò; èbè ni mo bè yín, è má torí orí biníú mí.

we do not because of barking kill a dog; we do not because of headbutting kill a ram; a plea is what I am making to you, do not because of my destiny, get mad at me.

On the other hand, nítorí (<ní-ti-orí), another related form to torí with which torí shares the meaning of ‘because of’ cannot interchange with torí in the preceding proverb, possibly because of conflict with ‘níi’. Another proverb clarifies this difference:
a hunter that killed a game and made a propitiatory sacrifice, it was not because of today, it was because of another day; and the one that killed a game and did not make a propitiatory sacrifice, it was not because of today, it was because of another day (proverb on gratitude).

In this latter example, all the three of them—torí, titorí and nítorí—can freely interchange with one another. These two proverbs, (03) and (04), can also exemplify both the meanings and usage of complex verbs such as pajá (pa-ajá) ‘kill a dog’; pàgbò (pa-àgbò) ‘kill a ram’; bínú (bí-inú) ‘get mad’; pẹran (pa-ẹran) ‘kill an animal/game’, sètùtù (se-ètùtù) ‘make a propitiatory sacrifice’.

The two proverbs can serve as example sentences under the appropriate head entries for these complex verbs. In addition, the complex verbs are shown in their typical contracted forms, which clearly show how they can be entered as head entries in a dictionary.

That ojúgbà (ojú-ọ `gbà) can have the meaning of ‘one’s contemporary, agemate’, and that ojúgbà rather than elegbè more appropriately and more idiomatically captures that meaning is exemplified in the proverb:

ikú tí ó ń pa ojúgbà eni, òwe ni ó ń pa móni.

the death that kills off or takes away one’s contemporary, it is a proverb that it is hauling at such a person.

A similar situation on the meaning of ojúgbà is found in the next proverb:

ojú kí i pón edun ki ó di eni-ilè; isé kí i sé igún kó di ojúgbà adìè.

a monkey will not become so desperate as to become a creature that walks on the ground; a vulture will not become so destitute as to become a peer for a chicken (proverb against impudence).

That bọ́mo (bí-ọmo) can have a meaning of ‘be born as a free person’, different from bímo ‘give birth to a baby’, is exemplified in the proverb:

ibí kan kò jú ibi; bi a se bérú náà ni a se bọ́mo.

one birth does not exceed another one; it is as we gave birth to a slave or bondservant that we gave birth to a free child’ (proverb on equality).
Both *bímọ* and *bọ́mọ* come from the same source of (*<bí-ọmọ>*) but they do not mean quite the same thing. While *bímọ* refers to the normal process of baby delivery, *bọ́mọ* refers to being ‘born into a free home’. *Bọ́mọ* is not very common in usage, and seems to occur only in this proverb. This example shows why both *bímọ* and *bọ́mọ* should be listed as separate complex head words in a dictionary, despite the fact that they come from the same source, and can be illustrated with the sample proverb.

That *fin níràn* has the meaning of ‘provoke or taunt a victim’ is illustrated in the proverb:

\[ bí ẹyẹ kò bá níi fin ẹyẹ níràn, ojú-ọ̀rún tó gbogbo ẹyeè fò láìfápákan araawọn. \]

If one bird would not provoke another bird, the sky is wide enough for all birds to fly in without their wings touching each other (proverb on the sufficiency of divine providence).

This proverb points to the difference between *finràn* and *fin níràn*. While *finràn* is agent-oriented, *fin níràn* is victim-oriented. Their word entries should bring out the difference.

**Compound Word in Proverbs**

That the compound *ẹni-ilẹ́* can have the meaning of ‘ground walker, commoner’ is exemplified in the proverb:

\[ ojú ki i pón edun ki ó di ẹni-ilẹ́; isẹ́ ki i sè ịgùn kó di ojúgbá adié. \]

A monkey will not become so desperate as to become a creature that walks on the ground; a vulture will not become so destitute as to become a peer for a chicken (proverb against impudence).

That the compound *ojú-ọ̀rún* has the meaning of ‘face of heaven, sky’ is illustrated in the proverb:

\[ bí ẹyẹ kò bá níi fin ẹyẹ níràn, ojú-ọ̀rún tó gbogbo ẹyeè fò láìfápá kan araawọn. \]

If a bird would not provoke another bird, the sky is wide enough for all birds to fly in without their wings touching each other (proverb on the sufficiency of divine providence).
In this section, we will provide three sets of data on idioms to demonstrate their richness. The first set will be an assorted collection of simplex idioms which are mostly simplex metaphors in the language. Under complex idioms, we will list complex idioms that illustrate how death is announced in a polite discourse to point to the possibility of similar idioms in many other distinctive discourse domains. For the compound idioms we will list some samples of compound idioms built around oyú ‘eye; face; surface’ in Yoruba. By doing this we hope to show that idioms have greatly enriched Yoruba lexicon.

**Simplex Idioms**

The literal meaning is put in brackets while the idiomatic meaning is in quotes:

- ajá (dog) ‘morally loose female’;
- akàn (crab) ‘favorable outcome’;
- amí (breather) ‘spy’;
- ìjúlú (vulture) ‘law enforcement official (immigration)’;
- ayé (world) ‘evil people’;
- ejó (snake) ‘dangerous person’;
- ewé (leaf, herb) ‘supernatural medicine’;
- ewéle (sprite, elf) ‘mischievous person’;
- ẹja (fish) ‘unfavorable outcome’;
- ọkété (large bush rat) ‘untrustworthy person’;
- ẹkùn (leopard/tiger) ‘male sex addict’;
- ẹyẹ (bird) ‘witch’;
- igún (vulture) ‘law enforcement official (immigration, police)’;
- iwin (sprite, elf) ‘mischievous person’;
- ìkùn (leopard/tiger) ‘male sex addict’;
- ọdẹ (hunter) ‘male sex addict’;
- ọ̀gà (chameleon) ‘unreliable person’;

In addition to their literal meanings, all their idiomatic meanings will also be a part of their listed meanings in a dictionary.

**Complex Idioms**

As in many cultures of the world, the Yoruba people approach death with trepidation; death is not supposed to be announced in a matter-of-fact fashion. It is supposed to be announced with dignity, (except in cases of dishonorable deaths), as if by being polite to the state of affairs, that attitude would not only cushion the shock effect, but also hope falsely to change the situation and make it go away. Each culture must have crouched death in countless euphemisms as if to make death go away; but the stark reality of life is there that death is not going anywhere. The following complex idioms are from the perspective of someone who has died, not as the death affects the living. As with the simplex idioms, we will put the literal meaning in brackets and the idiomatic meanings in quotes:

- ààròó dilẹ́ (oven has become idle) ‘death has occurred’;
- àkùkọ́ ìkò (cock has crowed) ‘death has occurred’;
- bàrà-ìlẹ́ (spend life with the citizens of the ground/soil) ‘death has occurred’;
- dagbére sáyé (‘bid goodbye to the world) ‘death has occurred’;
- dalẹ́ bora (wrap the soil round one’s body) ‘death has occurred’;
- dara-ìlè (become citizen of the ground) ‘death has occurred’;
- ìdèbóra (become a divinity) ‘death has occurred’;
- dolóògbé (become a sleeper)
‘death has occurred’; fáyé sílẹ́ (exit the world) ‘death has occurred’; filè bora (use the ground to wrap one’s body) ‘death has occurred’; ọ̀rọ̀ rọ́rí kú (recline the head on the hand to die) ‘death has occurred’; gbàwé (receiver a letter) ‘death has occurred’; jade láyé (come out of the world) ‘death has occurred’; jé Ọ̀lọ̀run nípè (answer the summon of God) ‘death has occurred’; káyé pé ó dìgbòóse (bid farewell to the world) ‘death has occurred’; lọ (exit) ‘death has occurred’; oyín si lọ ní kókó igi (bees have evacuated from the knot of wood) ‘death has occurred’; papò dà (change one’s state) ‘death has occurred’; para dà (change or transform one’s body) ‘death has occurred’; pokùn so (hang by the rope) ‘death has occurred’; sùn (sleep) ‘death has occurred’; sùn lé omo lọwọ́ (sleep on the lap of child) ‘death has occurred’; ọ́bá wàjá (act like a hero) ‘death has occurred’; sìgbá-ìwà (open the calabash of destiny) ‘death of a king has occurred’; ta tèru nípàá (kick off the white shroud) ‘death has occurred’; ọ̀rọ̀gbà sọ (surrender the head to the shroud) ‘death has occurred’; wájá enter the attic) ‘death of a king has occurred’; wọ́lẹ́ lọ (disappear into the ground) ‘death has occurred’; wọ́lẹ́ láwọ́ (withdraw one’s hand from the plate) ‘death has occurred’; etc. etc. The following is a typical lexical entry for a complex idiom in our database:

\w wàjá
\p v
\d (1) go inside the attic
\d (2) die as a king or a prominent citizen (euphemism)
\v wọ́ ájá
\cf iwájá; wiwájá; awájá; òwájá
\o wọ-àjá
\eg òbá wájá
\gl the king has passed on

Each of these complex idioms has been preserved in the language in their contracted forms to show how they can be listed as complex head entries in a dictionary.

**Compound Idioms**

Here we pick the domain of ojú ‘eye; face; surface’ to further demonstrate the richness of compound idioms in the language in general: ojú-arà (eye of the body) ‘euphemism for the orifices and/or pores’; ojú-ọgbò (face of the hand) ‘the palm; operational style’; ojú-ẹ̀ṣẹ́ (surface of foot) ‘footprint’; ojúu-bàtà (surface of shoes) ‘footprint’; ojú-egbọ́ (face of sore) ‘open sore’; ojú ọgbẹ̀ (face of wound) ‘open wound’; ojú-ìlè (face of house) ‘house frontage’; ojúlè (face of house) ‘doorway’; ojú agbo (face of circle) ‘center circle’; ojú-àtìná (face of way) ‘path’; ojúu ferè́sé (face of window) ‘window opening’; ojú ọgbọ́ (face of bush) ‘bush front’; ojú-ilè (face of ground) ‘land surface; social environment’;

Similar compound idioms can be generated from body parts such as etí (ear) ‘edge or tip of’; ẹnu (mouth) ‘opening or entrance of’; ẹsè (foot) ‘base of’; idi (buttocks) ‘base or bottom of’; ara (body/torso) ‘body or surface of’; ori (head) ‘top of’; ẹhin (back) ‘back of’; owó (hand) ‘side of’; apá (arm) ‘side or part of’; ọgbé (side) ‘side of’, etc. Other compound idioms can freely be generated from ọmọ (child) ‘small size of’; ilé (house) ‘container of’; inú (inside) ‘inside of’; etc. etc. The following is a typical lexical entry for a compound idiom in our database:

\w ojú-ẹni
\p n
\d (1) one’s own face, method, care or approach
\cf ojú-olójú
\o ojú-ẹni
\d (2) one’s presence
The Role of Proverbs and Idioms in Yorùbá Dictionary-Making


\gl we have witnessed cases when the weather rumbled and rumbled without raining, and we have also witnessed cases when the weather rained and rained without rumbling (proverb on life’s paradox)

\d (3) one’s personal experience

\eg ojú méwàá kò jọ ojú-ẹni.
\gl ten eyes can never be like one’s own eyes (proverb on personal responsibility).

\eg ojú-olójú kò lè dàbí ojú-ẹni (= ojú-olójú kò jọ ojú-ẹni)
\gl another person’s method or care cannot be like one’s own method or care (proverb on personal attention or approach).

The more one digs into the idioms the more one realizes how richly creative they are, and how deeply rich they can make a database to be.

**Conclusion**

While I have no worked-out percentage to offer at this point in time of the contribution of proverbs and idioms in Yoruba to the overall meanings and usage of the language, I can state quite clearly because of my direct experience on going through thousands of proverbs and idioms during the compilation of the database, that they contribute a lot. Their ever-presence has saved me a lot of hours of looking for or making up examples either of my own or of other users. Yoruba language definitely would have been a much poorer language without them. It is therefore a very rich heritage that compilers of Yoruba proverbs and idioms such as Chief Ajibola, Chief Delano, Chief Fabunmi, Adeleye Adesua, and Dr. Owomoyela have bequeathed to us, and we must be eager to celebrate their legacies. Proverbs and idioms have enriched our understanding of the meanings and usage of words. They have served as a stabilizing agent or force in the fast-changing world of meanings and usage of words. In a large Yoruba database of the type that is being undertaken at the Linguistic Data Consortium of the University of Pennsylvania, every effort is made to do justice not only to the meaning and usage of every word, but to locate as many examples from as many proverbs, riddles and idioms as possible.
References


YORUBAN CULTURAL GRAMMAR IN IBADAN’S URBAN SPACES: REFLECTIONS ON TOYIN FALOLA’S A MOUTH SWEETER THAN SALT

Aaron Reynolds

From the beginning of his career as a scholar, Toyin Falola has made significant contributions to the historiography of Nigeria and the wider field of African History. Those who know Dr. Falola, as a colleague or as a teacher may agree that his enormous personality accompanied by his reputation as an esteemed historian make him a formidable figure in any discursive environment. In graduate seminars, he is known for asking difficult, often seemingly abstract questions regarding an individual’s personal experience. Within the historical profession, he has pointedly criticized political and military power structures, using his word processor as a political instrument. Central to Falola’s scholarship is an interest in the dynamics of his own personal heritage; his intellectual work has consistently brought new perspectives to histories of his national homeland, Nigeria, his home state of Ibadan, and Yoruban culture. Falola’s writings, and often his teaching style, engage new approaches to viewing historical movements while emphasizing the interconnection of individual experience, socio-economic interest, and larger political and military phenomena.

Falola’s early scholarly work, namely, The Political Economy of a Pre-Colonial African State: Ibadan, 1830-1900, challenged pre-existing approaches to viewing the pre-colonial period in Nigeria which were based on economic
theory, or what some called “new economic history” by suggesting that separating economics and politics from social relationships was unrealistic. He also asserted that any accurate depiction of pre-colonial Nigeria must include local knowledge and oral histories. As Funso Afolayan has so perceptively pointed out, Falola insisted that larger historical phenomena owed much of their causation to smaller inter-regional and intra-polity social and demographic dynamics. One could not look at the many wars fought by Yorubans in the nineteenth century without acknowledging how conflict affected people in Ibadan. Farmers, who were robbed or dislocated, women and children left without fathers to protect them, and refugees flooding crowded city centers in search of security are all crucial to reconstructing the changes experienced during the period of conflict.¹ Falola is also credited with pointing out, and working to fill in, the gaps that existed in Yoruban history. He worked tirelessly to shed new light on the overlooked role of individuals and groups who had been left out of traditional Nigerian histories.

In both The Political Economy of a Pre-Colonial African State, and later works such as Politics and Economics in Ibadan 1893-1945 Falola utilized the state of Ibadan as a case study, claiming that by looking at smaller geo-political locales we can more specifically understand the social dynamics which impacted the larger political and economic phenomena. Falola’s personal experience growing up in Ibadan allowed him the keen perspective of how important Yoruban cultural expressions, especially in the developing urban spaces of places like Ode Aje, speak to the history of his people. Falola’s work implies that not only the people who built the cities, but the patterns of settlement, the structures and spaces themselves revealed crucial historical information. In his Memoir, A Mouth Sweeter than Salt, Falola reconstructed his own personal narrative as a device for communicating a history of Ibadan as well as distinctly Yoruban cultural values. By examining his memoir, we can see how Falola emphasizes the importance of what I call Yoruban Cultural Grammar in his own personal history as well as in the history of his native land and people as they experienced the social, political, and economic transitions of the 1960s.

At once an entertaining and conceptually driven personal history, A Mouth Sweeter than Salt deals with the very nature of what constitutes a historical narrative both within and beyond the academy. A preeminent figure in the field of African History, Falola is author of many important traditional political and intellectual histories such as Nationalism and African Intellectuals. In what he calls ‘An African Memoir’, Falola uses a poetic prose, achieving an important personal project, while pushing the boundaries of historical scholarship and offering crucial insight into the social and cultural phenomena of Nigeria in the nineteen fifties and sixties. Falola engages important conceptual frameworks of historical narrative, including notions of time, space, and power. He approaches
time through discussion of the meaning of birthdays in Yoruban culture, showing how social and political changes increased the importance of dates and documents to verify ‘facts’ under an expanding Nigerian State. Expressing the ways mobility and environmental stimuli mesmerized and inspired him as a child, Falola interpolates mechanisms of gender, economics, and politics around the emergence of an independent Nigeria. Falola’s memoir also raises important questions about the place of creative license in scholarly literature, about the construction of truth, and the perception of reality. *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt* is useful for historians interested in how the lines between history and literature might be blurred for the betterment of both fields.

**HISTORICAL METHODOLOGY, SCHOLARSHIP, AND LITERARY PROSE**

Though Dr. Falola would be the first to admit that very few young burgeoning scholars could publish such a work, the poetic, literary prose of his memoir offers an important insight into how we may rethink historical narratives’ place in the classroom and the larger academic world. Because Falola has spent his career as an African historian writing monumental political and social history such as *Economic and Political Reforms in Nigeria*, and editing his seven volume series, *Africa*, he is well established enough to make room for the ethereal, not only in the classroom, but also in the official historiography of Africa, and any other geo-politically imagined culture. Falola begins his memoir asserting that: “...no one’s reckoning is superior or more utilitarian than anyone else’s; only the passage of time invests different meanings to each one.”2 With this statement, he asks the reader to step out of the traditional institutional framework of historical narrative. His methodological approach defies our desire for accuracy, verifiability of sources, and shared contextual meaning.

Relying on his position as a renowned scholar, and more importantly, as a native son of Nigeria, Falola utilizes his authorial voice to stake claim to his own truth. This step outside of conventional academic methodology allows Falola room to organize his memoir without seeking to please the well-trained reader of political and social histories. The appropriate place for literary personal histories in academic institutions may well depend upon the perceived usefulness of each monograph. The structure of *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt*, being basically chronological, with a few flashes forward or back, abides by many coming of age tropes, namely early childhood development, parentage, and emergence into the hardship of adulthood. However, Falola relies heavily on poetry as narrative, and he punctuates each development in his life with proverbs. The elastic, prose-oriented text can appear disjointed, especially to a western eye. Yet Falola’s magic lies in his emotional intelligence. Throughout chapters orga-
nized around his family background, polygamous household structures, childhood experimentation with the outside world, and his emergence into external systems of spiritual and political power, Falola weaves insightful moral stories with brevity and gumption.

**Cultural Grammar, Perception, and Meaning in Academic History**

Falola does not dwell on justifying his methodology. Rather, he jumps directly into supporting his claim of divergently equal truths by explaining what might happen were one to inquire into the birth dates of his family elders. Without defending his approach, he immediately expresses how meaning and values shift, and perceptions change over time and across generations. Beginning with his familial history, Falola makes the point that for his parents’ generation, modern western notions of time, age, and careers had not yet invaded the daily lives of most Yorubans. Employing colorful, prophetic language, Falola states “The frog does not know that there are two worlds until it jumps into hot water.” Yet Falola doesn’t seem to argue that changes brought to Nigerians during his parents’ and his lifetime were naturally regressive. As a young boy he marveled at the bustling urban landscapes of Ibadan, and learned the ropes of manhood as the younger sibling of entrepreneurial and perhaps socially deviant older brothers. The young Toyin learned about the outside world, as well as the expectations of his native culture, by abiding by and breaking the cultural grammar of his community.

Beginning with the first two chapters, respectively titled *Time and Season*, and *Blood and Mouth*, Falola leads his audience in a lesson of what might be understood as ‘Cultural Grammar.’ The initial two chapters set a precedent for Falola’s use of language, proverb, and narrative poetry as they provide historical information, the implication being that one cannot understand Falola’s early childhood without understanding the culture and language into which he was born. Here Falola expects his readers to set their own cultural grammar aside. In Falola’s memoir, one must accept the relative nature of history, especially the ambiguity experienced by an individual whose personal history coincides with a major shift in both cultural values and socio-political imperatives. Birth certificates were of little use to his parents’ generation. Rather, the divergent narratives of their elders about when they were born, and the meaning various elders derived from the event held greater power than any official document could. In the emerging secular state under colonialism, the uses of facts, dates of events, and documents to confirm them held increasing power for young Toyin. As western influence increased in Nigeria, applications for pensions, school enrollment, and employment all required a birth certificate. Falola presents
state institutions as square holes attempting to contain individuals who exist in amorphous forms. His use of proverb and language is crucial to explaining the elusive aspects of life; Yoruban cultural grammar allows him a device with which to approach that project.

In an attempt to return to his early childhood, Falola reminds the reader that his title as scholar and professor are less important than the meaning ascribed to his birth by his elders and peers. His diploma says what he knows, not who he is. Rather, language, and the power to manipulate language are the tools with which people ascribe and obtain power. Verbal Yoruban greetings such as *E Pelle O*, meant for strangers, and *Pelle*, more appropriately directed toward one’s peers, must be understood in order to navigate in Falola’s community without offending someone. Furthermore, Falola points out that *Eku*, a neighboring polity’s name, and the name of its people, come from their prominent greeting, *eku*. For European missionaries, who ascribed great power to words and thus history, the term *Esu*, the Ekus’ God of Heaven, was associated with Satan. *Esu* was thence negatively associated with wicked, savage natives. Rather than explain the political history of the world he was born into, lessons in language values suffice to explain the identity of young Falola. Though he points out that the meaning of his birth name will depend upon who you ask, the word ‘Oloruntuyin’ means “God is enough to praise.” The shortened root ‘toyin’ attaches his identity to gratitude and a bond to the ethereal, a key aspect to the narrative Falola incites.

In *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt*, Falola consistently engages the methodological and conceptual historical foundations of *language* and *meaning*, both of which are used to construct reality. Historians have long been subjected to the pitfalls and profits that come with engaging linguistic and interpretive constructs. However, memoir serves as a canvas for Falola to engage philosophical aspects that many historians may appreciate, though not actively detail in their own work. Flashing between his forbearers’ cultural landscape and his own, Falola describes the local history of Ibadan, the city of his family clan, and the cataclysmic shifts of British colonialism, Nigerian Independence of 1960, and the Civil War of 1967. “Knives and Guns defined Ibadan’s modernity during [the] nineteenth century.”4 Through the telling of a violent rock-throwing incident between two childhood friends that left his peer Yusuf blind in one eye is an example of the way his stories operate within the context of Ibadan’s cultural value systems. Violence and vengeance, once instilled in young males as culturally sanctioned behavior, became less necessary in colonial Nigeria. Unlike previous generations, the ‘war boys’ of Falola’s generation had to find other occupations. Colonial Western influence emasculated young men, though Falola clearly states: “No one waits to be told to discard a pot that can no longer boil water.”5
Falola implies that flexibility, the ability to survive, and self-determination were tightly woven tropes of 1960’s Ibadan’s cultural landscape.

Falola’s personal narrative of early experience with his own culture comfortably utilizes proverb and poetry. Expressing meaning within ambiguous language, Falola teaches his readers the word ‘Mesiogo,’ meaning “to reply quickly to a fool,” but which is also often associated with the language of elderly or rural provincial people, and can be used to feign populist, non-elitist sentiment. The example of a creditor approached by an acquaintance for a loan dictates the cultural wisdom that positive assurance and patience can deter negative relations, even when one is unable or unwilling to give another what they want. The cultural grammar of Falola’s Ibadan comes through repeatedly in patterns of personal narratives, colloquial proverbs and customs. Falola seems capable of writing to detail both his own experience and distinct instructions for making a happy, successful life. Nearly a philosophy of life, ‘Mesiogo’ stands with other terms such as his own name, ‘Falola’ meaning ‘deviner’ or one who makes use of “esoteric knowledge.” Falola reveals that his personal, familial identity is bound to a utilization of both the ethereal and the tangible. His future as a scholar, a writer, and a professor are foreshadowed in his childhood curiosity: his desire to discover and determine phenomena in his environment.

**Family Life, Local History, and Urban Landscapes**

The fantastic description of a young Toyin’s mischievous journey on a train in the third chapter, titled *Snake and Bible*, works to place Falola’s childhood experience within important physical environments, as well as his own creative imagination. Falola claims that at the age of nine, he entered “the bowels of the longest snake.” Trains embody not only western infrastructure, but technological transformation of human experience. Mobility across time and space are crucial elements to Falola’s memoir. Leaving home to ride the train from Ibadan to Kano was no simple rebellious act. The process by which a young boy had to inquire, cajole, and plot, utilizing the knowledge and experience of older boys, took time and creative activism. Early experiences of mischief fit into the cultural trope of Yoruba defiance laid out in previous chapters. Spending his food money to pay older boys to show him the way to the train station, Falola foreshadows the mechanisms of social, political, and economic power relationships. At nine years old, he was an entrepreneur, who supported his own adventurism. “To sneak away from the house and school for about two hours without being discovered was a victory.” Linked to earlier explanations that ‘war boy’ culture had to shift and recalibrate itself, Falola extends these threads into his own personal narrative. To be defiant was to experiment with being Yoruban, or perhaps even human.
The third, fourth, and fifth chapters are organized around descriptions of Falola’s urban environment. The cultural landscape of his childhood home is comprised by immediate domestic experience blended with references to local history and material culture. Falola tells of an early nineteenth century Oyo Empire and its Afonja’s Wars with Alafin, which gave rise to the city of Ibadan. The Ibadan army prevented the Hausa Muslim caliphate from invading in 1840. Historical moments of conflict and urbanization, widely utilized and maintained in the collective cultural memory of Falola’s clan are blended with his own education in how to defy authority and negotiate phenomena in an urban environment. As formal education became more crucial to economic success, Falola claims that he could see how schools, teachers, and clergy ‘constructed’ narratives and meaning to fit particular versions of ‘reality’ in order to maintain their authority. Young Toyin’s escape from home and journey into the belly of the ‘snake’ served as an opportunity for him to excite the fears and superstitions of his parents. Again orienting his readers to linguistic signposts, he tells of *abiku*, which means the premature death of a child, viewed as a curse. The potential to bring great suffering on his family, had his journey been fatal, is clear. He further enlivens the narrative by explaining the ‘good omen’ of a returned child, which confers social power upon the child and the family. Like the trains connecting the cities of Nigeria, Falola eloquently uses his personal story of adventure to explain the cultural values of his family clan and region.

Falola interweaves his personal history with flashes of Nigeria’s national history, particularly the rapid industrialization and urbanization that came with British colonial rule. The building of transportation not only changed the land and the experience of the Nigerian people, it brought Indian and Syrian immigrants, known as ‘koraa.’ Young Toyin emerges, in his own time, as an ‘emere,’ meaning child of great promise, in a drastically changing society. Falola’s old-fashioned father rented rooms to foreign tenants in Toyin’s childhood home. The tale of the journey on the great snake serves to present Falola as well fitted to embrace an increasingly dynamic environment. As testament to his flexibility and intelligence, Falola explains that in his culturally diverse urban environment, he learned many languages, including Yoruban, English, and Pidgin. Flashing forward to his present thoughts, he expresses sadness at the loss of that childhood. Falola’s childhood may seem fractured by the polygamous household in which he lived, as well as by the chaotic turn of events in Nigeria, but this perhaps tells us important information about how Falola became the young man who would follow a scholar’s path, studying the history of his country and people.

In the fourth chapter, titled *Mommas and Money*, Falola explains the family structure of his childhood household. There is little mention of his father, or any men for that matter, with the exception of a nod to his father’s will, which
along with the number of wives, implies his wealth. However, the reader finds a rich description of a polygamous household, something foreign to a contemporary Western audience. The experience of having multiple ‘mothers’ seems oddly supportive in Falola’s account, despite his assertion that he did not know his biological mother’s identity until he was ten years old. The key insight, in keeping with the curious, crafty Toyin we learn to love in the previous chapter, is that the household, as a dynamic urban landscape, contributed to and even required Falola’s developing ingenuity and creative opportunism. Having many ‘mommas’ allowed young Toyin a certain level of independence, as he was no single woman’s primary responsibility. He knew these women only by the designation of their first child. Yet watching them interact gave him his earliest lessons in female power and conflict and thus they became part of his identity.

Repeatedly throughout the volume, the reader receives a lesson in the power of language. Mama Ade became labeled an ‘ogogoro’ woman, for her gin drinking and marijuana smoking. Mama Ade caught negative attention from the elder wives for her behavior, and from the younger wives who wanted to discredit her in order to compete for positive attention within the family political structure. Falola’s rich description of the household and the women’s interaction establishes his memoir as not only a history of his personal experience, but of urban space and his conceptualization of that space into landscapes—rooms, streets, and corners envisioned and traversed. The story of Mama Ade’s dispute and ensuing fight with a street magician, from which young Toyin ran to inform the men, who left their radio repair shop, implements in hand, ready to square off in defense of their family pride, depicts a rowdy scene of tension and tumult. In this dynamic familial structure, young Toyin learns to engage social systems, earning money working as an errand boy and doing odd jobs.9 As Toyin describes his experiences learning about responsibility and some of the freedom that comes with it, he is actually writing about human development within a social, cultural, and historical context. Family history, in the description of Agbo, Falola’s original family ancestor and official symbol of the household, made them all “children of alligators” and “children of rams”. For Falola, the household system and the physical urban spaces are ‘history’: “It is about the power of tradition to use symbolism for identity.”10

The patriarchal structure of households and society serves as Falola’s pallet, from which he paints his own identity. Falola’s lack of awareness of a biological mother, whom he later learns is Mama Pupa, works to isolate his character in this personal narrative. Likewise the death of his father in 1953 further distinguishes young Toyin as a mannish boy, wise beyond his years, and somewhat alone to design his own destiny. The implications of how he navigates his familial, social, and historical context parallel the author’s storytelling power. The reader gets the sense that in telling his story, Falola finds meaning in his past, with which he
is able to reconstruct his own identity. This appears to be a perpetually illuminating experience as Falola mentions throughout these chapters that at certain transitional periods in his life, he could identify the meaning in his emotional responses to the physical spaces he grew up in. He places clear emphasis on the visceral experience of growing up in a dynamic urban environment.

Combined together, chapters four and five place young Toyin’s identity as an individual squarely within a social system that requires loyalty to clan, family, and country. He establishes this system as history itself, and himself as a swiftly maturing young child navigating the system. Toyin’s new home with Baba Olopa and his household, decided by the settling of his father’s will, leaves Toyin as a ward of his male patron. He thus goes into more detail about the behavior of men and their power within the patriarchal social-cultural system of Ode Aje. An explanation of polygamy, ending with an expression of Toyin’s condition as ‘motherless child’ in a ‘real jungle’ utilizes metaphor and poetry to explain his personal social status. Again, magic serves to explain the elusive experience of transplantation and migration. Young Toyin learns from older boys that one can use ‘egbe,’ Yoruban magic, to disappear from Nigeria and appear in foreign cities like London and New York; this illustrates the dynamic social changes of his country in the late colonial period.11 Toyin’s experimentation with learning ‘tricks’ and diversions in order to liberate himself from the rules of his adult guardians lends itself to the fluidity of his urban culture and the flexibility that Nigerians would need in order to survive and succeed in a dynamic society.

Perhaps Falola’s greatest accomplishment in A Mouth Sweeter than Salt is his description of the cultural landscapes of his childhood environments. “Ode Aje, like all older neighborhoods, was densely populated, merging with the other equally crowded areas to create a cobweb of compounds, thousands of houses that one could only reach on foot.”12 Radios, linked piece meal to city electricity poles, serve to explain both how technology allowed Nigerians to be physically and conceptually interconnected, sharing a growing national mass culture which also bound them to the singular government media source. Increasingly, Falola’s memoir becomes a place story; emphasizing space and time, he explains that Ode Aje was born out of Ibadan’s urban sprawl, which was a byproduct of increased desire for economic growth and prosperity. Falola’s description of the bustling of the streets, where fistfights and romantic rendezvous took place amidst the social friction of family loyalty, inter-clan conflict and financial opportunism cause them to materialize in the reader’s mind. “Ode Aje had no nightclubs, but there were small shops where one could drink palm wine and beer. There were no bands playing popular music…but one could hear the popular albums in private homes with gramophones or on the radio.”13 The new households and clans of warriors that grew in Ode Aje served as social and intellectual institutions through which individuals contested for power. Invok-
ing history again as a key signifier of his identity and culture, Falola describes how conflict between new compounds and long established clans pervaded even the classroom: “History was about power.” Linking oneself to a powerful ancestor or social role, such as a hunter or warrior, could add to present day status for the entire family.

Illustrations of how the men of Ode Aje carried out elaborate rituals to maintain wives and mistresses, and to obtain new wives, work to chronicle his childhood as well as to distinguish Falola’s childhood environment from those of his western audiences. A somewhat disjointed passage on men’s seed explains the assigned value on male sons’ fluids, rather than females’ vaginas. This section rests awkwardly against the assertion that Yorubans praised mothers, not fathers. “It was at Ode Aje that I learned about polygamy and its practices.”

That every man in Ode Aje had at least two wives allows Falola the opportunity to detail how the men maintained a patriarchal system that favored their personal interests. Falola tells a painful story of how a group of men staged a party in order to allow a head of household to introduce his wife to his mistress while simultaneously protecting himself legally by proposing to marry the mistress, making her his second wife. “A strong male conspiracy has ensured that divorce and inheritance laws favor men and reinforce Patriarchy.” Falola’s admonition of patriarchy does not preclude its place in his identity. His assertion that he was truly alone in the jungle is prescient. The author knows that, primarily because he is a man, he would eventually be able break out of Ode Aje, starting his own life, if not completely shirking both its positive and negative cultural values.

Falola’s vivid description transports the reader to those streets where he grew up, impressing upon her the visceral stimuli of crowded communities where opportunities for education and adventure are everywhere. His personal experiences, told through narrative, expose demographic realities that communicate how Yoruban society was changing in the rapidly expanding urban centers. The thread of Falola’s individual emergence into Yoruban culture through his learning and adapting to secular society, ethereal spiritual belief systems, and political machinations runs throughout the last half of the memoir. Continuing to rely on concepts of cultural grammar and detailing both material culture and urban landscapes, Falola turns to his intellectual development, as it will serve as a driving force for the direction of his life and his identity as an individual.

**Political Machinations, Magic, and Manhood**

_Becoming Yoruban_ serves not only as the title to Falola’s sixth chapter but, really, as the direction of the entire volume. By the age of twelve, at the culmination of his formative years, he claims to have “…come to understand my environment-the home, the school, other wards, and even villages…I had become both
Yoruban Cultural Grammar in Ibadan’s Urban Spaces

Yoruban and Ibadan in the process.” Falola’s storytelling skills gave him social status among his peers, easing the other rituals of proving one’s masculinity such as wrestling and verbal sparring. The children’s acknowledgement of the power of words reemphasizes Falola’s assertion from early in the book that facility with language and creative imagination are crucial to success: “Wrestling and wars of words defined power for young boys.” Formation of social cliques, singing, joking, and marching together became practice for leadership and loyalty habits important to character development.

We will grow faster than you think
If we cannot add to our age too quickly
We can add to our songs, to our wallets.

The importance of songs reiterates the prevalence of poetry in Yoruban culture, as well as the opportunity for community and individual expression, a theme that resurfaces in later chapters.

In his memoir, Falola emphasizes a pronounced awareness of how access to material sustenance affected daily life. Food was viewed as a key to controlling children in school. The children acknowledged the power of food provided and withheld. Teachers punished students by withholding food. Falola’s claim that the children mocked the teachers while sympathizing with the hungry student serves as an early childhood expression of political solidarity. Schools held power in that academic success brought economic opportunity. Western influence made knowledge of English an imperative. Status, and thus power, were linked to education for young Yoruban children. Falola articulates a clear perception of how education linked social status and material wealth. “I was actually more privileged than those who had only one set of clothes...I loved school and did well not because anybody told me to but because I enjoyed school and the outdoors more than life at home.” However, Falola’s home life allowed him to learn how to manipulate cultural mechanisms. He claims his first lessons in politics came by watching the negotiations of power between members of the household.

The story of ‘Leku’ is of particular value for Falola. The narrative of his emergence into Yoruban culture could not be complete without his own understanding and his audience’s awareness of the spiritual realm. Leku was the local witch doctor, who supposedly received her power from a black tornado which carried her away, keeping her in the upper world for seven years where she learned her magic. Falola’s childhood curiosity about girls drew him to seek Leku out for potions of love. Due to his curiosity, Leku selects him to undergo a ritual that would protect him from death at the hands of a woman. She made incisions in his scalp, rubbing magic powder into the cuts, and he was made to drink dirty
water, with which Leku had washed her privates. The ancient ritual and language of Leku tie Falola to both real and prejudiced historical mythology. The vision Westerners held of non-Christian spiritual practices in African cultures as backwards, and the real power of myth and spiritual belief in Yorubas’ lives specifically, operate in this chapter to build young Toyin’s identity both in his own mind and in the mind of his readers. He is becoming Yoruban, while at the same time becoming an increasingly greater curiosity to his audience. Falola truly has the gift of narrative and it is articulated best in this gruesome and tantalizing story of Leku, the witch.

If Leku’s ritual serves to bring young Toyin into the fold of spiritual power, his experiences in the rural agricultural holdings of his father initiate his exposure to class consciousness and politics. Again, Falola’s wonderful description of space and culture articulate an awareness of geopolitics in Nigeria. Rural people, or ara oko, were more and more viewed as backward and boys wanted to leave villages and seek opportunity and modernity in urban centers. Falola experienced traveling through these rural spaces to play with friends, gaining ‘new knowledge’ of these spaces and environments where foreigners were held in suspicion and violence was done to ‘thieves’ in order to defend property.21 His personal experiences there tell of a pervasive social system, demographic division, and the distinct daily realities of rural Nigerians in the mid-20th century. Young Toyin was charged with performing the manual labor of farm work while on vacation from school, growing cassava and corn. He also experienced the ritual ‘cult of Ogun’ or god of iron, associated with hunters and the wild animals they hoped to secure through religious offerings. Magic, presented as a sign of rural, and to some backward, culture, was also one mechanism for securing prosperity.

Falola’s grandfather Pasitor, or Pastor, becomes the signal figure of the last few chapters of the memoir. His sermons on evil and suffering carry clear tones of social consciousness, linking the poor rural characters in Falola’s narrative to the familiar historical movement of liberation theology. “Only God bestows wealth; one may work like a termite and still be poor; one’s work could be as big as an elephant, but one’s reward could be as small as a mouse.”22 Condemning the ‘wicked chief’ and corrupt local politicians, Pasitor aroused the resentment of the peasants. Peasants viewed merchants, or osomalo, as stingy and exploitative. Between the chief’s collection of taxes and osomalo collecting rents, the elepo peasants remained impoverished. Falola ties his personal story of Pasitor with the traditional narrative of agrarian social revolutionary ideology. He intentionally connects his memory to historical facts. This early dissent of peasants in 1965 led to the first major peasant uprisings in Nigeria in 1968. Young Toyin’s relationship with his grandfather had an important impact on his own social consciousness, a key developmental factor in his individual identity, which again is tied to the cultural and historical reality of his homeland.
The ninth chapter, titled *Seasonal Pleasures* comes between two chapters dealing specifically with Pastor and politics. Falola’s decision to place his description of the Carnival and childhood games at this point in the novel seems awkward. Perhaps Falola felt the need to return to the world of his childhood imagination and creative expression, or to layer the impending reality of the violent fissures of political conflict with iconic representations of cultural celebration and joy. Nonetheless, he describes the vulgar songs children were allowed to sing, due to the specific nature of carnival—songs of sexuality and social tension that mocked teachers, police, and government officials.

I heard keereewu [a cracking sound]
It is your vagina that is being hit by a long penis
I heard keereewu
The dog is eating your vagina bone.

“Songs of rape became the meta-narrative of power.” This ritualized expression of dissent was only allowed during the period when everyone prayed for the survival of the city. Similarly, Falola tells of religious syncretism in the seasonal festival, where Muslims, Christians, and Yorubans celebrated together regardless of distinct faiths. Priests dressed as women, street fights, bands who played competing for small cash, and public songs of praise adorned the ‘egungun’ festival at Ibadan. “My city created religious harmony and balance, providing pleasures at creatively spaced moments.” In celebration of city and culture, people came together, creating balance. In an attempt to prevent empty bellies, bankruptcy, and political oppression, the balance would become strained.

In the final chapter, *The Pastor’s Ordeal*, Falola begins with an effective rhetorical device, his Grandfather’s order, “I want you to follow me to chief Akinloye’s house to tell him what you saw.” The combination of a Grandfather’s order and Falola’s young self, Toyin, having seen an event worthy of being related to the chief provide a captivating springboard into perhaps Toyin’s most crucial lesson in the memoir. Upon approaching the chief with information Pastor winds up being dismissed. Demanding to be heard, he bravely challenges political authority. Dismissed, he went to another chief. In describing the scene, Falola expresses what may be a meta-proverb for the entire volume. After being offered food and drink by chief Ajibola, Falola explains: “Only a fool remains thirsty in the midst of water.” Toyin drinks up his culture in all forms and manifestations. Pastor remarks that one “should never eat anybody’s food or accept anybody’s drink unless [they] know the sources of the money used to purchase them.” Falola follows this with an explanation of ‘atenjue’, a Yoruban term meaning many things, all associated with greed and corruption. Awareness is a requisite for thirsty living. Pastor is educating young Toyin in order to facilitate his consumption of life.
This particular lesson in politics, selected by Falola to punctuate his narrative, carries a specific weight that previous stories do not. Falola’s assertion that his grandfather’s purpose for taking him to see the chief was to “introduce me to the hierarchies of power in a modern society” culminates in a near rite of passage for the young man. Falola presents power in its abusive manifestation. The landlords and government officials held the power. Placing young Toyin’s realization of this political reality at the conclusion of the memoir leaves one expecting a second volume. The spirit of revolution is captured in the peasants’ dissent. Falola writes himself into the period by establishing that he witnessed first hand the practices of exploitative power. His recognition that “There was no assurance that the forces of goodness would always win” allows Falola to operate as a near prophet or philosopher. Nigerian independence did not bring all the good that its leaders claimed it would. Rather, Falola writes that the political factionalism of the period was both poisonous and violent.

Leku’s return at the end of the book re-emphasizes Falola’s attraction to and appreciation for maternal, as well as paternal guidance. Falola’s affection for his grandfather was bound up in his benevolent treatment, “He had a sense of loyalty and identification with me,” Falola says: “I reciprocated because he was gentle with me and because of the way he talked.” Leku, holding spiritual power, was a likely surrogate for the justice Pasitor sought with the non-responsive chiefs. That she was willing to help Pasitor, and that Falola claims that Leku was his “first heroine” makes her the maternal figure of the memoir. Her recognition that Pasitor had placed Toyin in danger signifies that Pasitor’s political resistance will be something with which Toyin will have to contend. Falola’s claim that Leku used ‘supernatural’ powers to protect him, causing evil spirits to see him as something non-threatening is prescient. Falola’s role as a scholar—a member of the establishment—may camouflage his personal political persuasion. In addition, that Falola believes he was given ‘Ogun isoye’ to allow the brain to “attain excellence” and to fortify his memory serves to encapsulate the identity of the young Toyin who would become Dr. Falola, a world renowned scholar of history. In the meantime, Leku’s vision of a big fight, and Falola’s assertion that he would join Pasitor in a peasant revolt that would create a “political earthquake” places the young Falola squarely within the history of Nigeria and its people.

**MYTHMAKING AND HISTORICAL MONOGRAPHS**

Through the use of poetry and visual imagery, Falola articulates exactly how imaginative and creative young people initially interpolate their surroundings, associating reality with the stories adults tell, the power adults wield over the child’s daily life, and the charisma these influential figures impress upon them. As a scholar and a historian, Falola uses poetic and fantastic prose to illumi-
nate not only the magical quality often associated with childhood, but to signal the importance of continuity narratives utilized by humans to make sense of a disparate and dynamic world. Not only is this an entertaining and creative methodological approach, it is an implementation of an historical phenomenon, whereby history is mythmaking, and the tangible holds only so much information about human lives. In the realm of experience, Eros is often more capable of interpreting truth than the intellect. In Falola’s world, people can travel by means of their own powerful imagination and far away places hold the promise of truly fantastic and surreal opportunities difficult to place any real value on until one has actually experienced them firsthand. Maps and radios provide Toyin with a rich material culture which facilitated the informal education he received in the streets of Ibadan. In an incredibly effective manner, these continuity narratives express much about what western social scientists may be more comfortable with. For in Falola’s memoir we can see in them real and tangible mechanisms for the transference of notions of masculinity, financial success, and cultural pride.

* A *M*outh* *Sweeter than Salt* holds much more than poetic musings of childhood. Falola offers extremely valuable descriptions of the cultural landscapes in urban Ibadan. In this memoir readers get a real sense of what the streets and kitchens of these neighborhoods meant to the young author. Even before he knew he would become a scholarly historian, the significance of family and community were impressed upon him. These descriptions place Falola’s memoir squarely within the historiography of West Africa, which he has been so central in cultivating throughout his career. Falola merges his creative prose with ever more insightful explanations of social and intellectual institutions, confirming that his purpose for the work is to prove how historical reality can be captured in the personal memory as well as the archival record. Explaining the uses of history in Nigerian social institutions, Falola explains that: “…clans used history to establish social and political hierarchies in the neighborhood. Who came first? Whose ancestor was a hunter and a blacksmith?”30 Falola leaves us with the real sense that his academic degree is less valuable here than his cultural literacy. His status as a scholar may now allow him to publish such a unique and seemingly abstract literary work; but most important is his point about the uses of narrative to cultivate power. Academic history is only one manifestation of discursive power. Perhaps Falola’s project is to encourage a new understanding of narrative as a supplement, though certainly not a replacement, for institutional archival history.

As a student Falola recounts his participation in a cultural rite of passage for the middle classes; attending English language boarding schools opened the opportunity for careers in politics, business, and perhaps even living in England or the United States. In these schools, the students do as much teach-
ing as the faculty; Falola’s experience with his older brothers and his personal charm allowed him to curry favor with the other students, foreshadowing his success as a young politico and scholar. Maintaining his literary style and utilizing poetry to communicate cultural truths, Falola proves that establishing yourself as an important figure in a social community, using your knowledge of historical and social systems to make sense of your identity and to cultivate a life of opportunity requires experimentation, appropriation, and aggregation. A Mouth Sweeter than Salt is a spiritual and intellectual journey into the mind and memory of a brilliant scholar who just so happens to have maintained his inner child. Falola reminds us all that humor and wit have a place in the historical pantheon. If we have the longevity and the creativity to assure that we can add these personal narratives to our resume, we too may have, what, for Falola, must have been an enjoyable and rewarding experience—to write such a prescient and rewarding account of his childhood in the land of his ancestors.

Notes


3. Ibid., 11.

4. Ibid., 36.

5. Ibid., 41.

6. Ibid., 42-43.

7. Ibid., 59.

8. Ibid., 60.

9. Ibid., 93.

10. Ibid., 102.

11. Ibid., 113.

12. Ibid., 117.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid., 120.

15. Ibid., 123.

16. Ibid., 136

17. Ibid., 137.

18. Ibid., 142.

19. Ibid., 244.

20. Ibid., 152-153.
21. Ibid., 201.
22. Ibid., 210.
23. Ibid., 233.
24. Ibid., 245.
25. Ibid., 247.
26. Ibid., 250.
27. Ibid., 252.
28. Ibid., 261.
29. Ibid., 264.
30. Ibid., 120.
Part III

PERSPECTIVES ON CULTURE
Chapter 20

YORÙBÁ CULTURE IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICA

Adebayo Oyebade

INTRODUCTION

*Omi kii san san ko gbogbe orisun re.*
The stream does not forget its source no matter how far it flows.
—Yorùbá proverb

The Yorùbá Diaspora in the Americas encompasses parts of South and Central America, the Caribbean, and the United States. During the trans-Atlantic slave trade, Yorùbá captives were exported to New World destinations such as Cuba, Brazil, Haiti, Trinidad, Puerto Rico, and the southern part of the United States. Relatively more Yorùbá found their way to Cuba and Brazil than other parts of the Americas. The Yorùbá populations in Cuba and Brazil, which became known as Lucumí and Nagô respectively, was significant in the nineteenth century so that, as suggested by Matt Childs and Toyin Falola, Havana and Bahia were virtually Yorùbá cities in the Diaspora.1 Today, Yorùbá cultural heritage is a significant element of Afro-Cuban and Afro-Brazilian cultures.

The Yorùbá were late arrivals to the international slave market across the Atlantic. Except in Brazil and Cuba, they never constituted a majority of the enslaved African population in the New World. Although the United States received a lesser number of Yorùbá slaves during the Atlantic trade, nevertheless their culture has in many ways impacted contemporary American society. This
is particularly true of the black community where elements of Yorùbá culture—religious practices, indigenous names, attires, literature, art, music, and dance forms—have been adopted and have contributed significantly to the construction of African-American identity. The aim of this chapter is to examine forms of Yorùbá identity and culture in contemporary America. The chapter takes the trans-Atlantic slave trade as the causal point in the diffusion of Yorùbá culture into the Americas.2

**The Historical Framework: The Atlantic Slave Trade**

The beginnings of the transplantation of Yorùbá culture to the United States could be dated to the Atlantic slave trade which flourished from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. In the early phase of the trade, up to the end of the seventeenth century, the Yorùbá hardly constituted a significant portion of captives taken from the west coast of Africa. From the mid eighteenth century, however, the trade had begun to consume more and more Yorùbá from the Bight of Benin, a coastal stretch extending from present-day Togo to southwestern Nigeria. Civil wars in Yorùbáland in the late nineteenth century further fuelled the exportation of the Yorùbá to the New World.

Although Yorùbá slaves in the United States did not constitute the largest ethno-linguistic group from Africa, yet there was a high rate of cultural preservation among them. As has been shown by the pioneering work of Melville Herskovits and other scholars, African cultural influences survived during slavery.3 Although in the antebellum South there was an all-out effort by the slave-holding class to stamp out African cultural practices in the slave community, enslaved Yorùbá still managed to retain elements of their traditions.

The survival of Yorùbá cultural heritage could be explained in the character of the people and the strength of their political, social, cultural, and economic institutions. The Yorùbá are an enterprising people with a strong and resilient culture. They are custodians of an ancient history and an enduring civilization dating to at least the eleventh century A.D. Considered as one of the most prominent ethno-linguistic groups in Africa, the Yorùbá built powerful kingdoms, the most enterprising being Oyo, noted for its history of imperialism in the late eighteenth century. The Yorùbá are also known for their urban culture, centralized political system, divine kingship, strong family ties, religious traditions based on polytheism, complex trading culture, artistic sophistication, and literary prowess. At the time of the advent of the slave trade, the Yorùbá had already established themselves as a powerful entity in West Africa, sometimes able to project their suzerainty over neighboring groups such as the Aja of Dahomey.4 In the New World, the resilience of their culture ensured that some of their traditional practices survived enslavement. It has even been suggested
that slave houses in South Carolina bore similarities in terms of dimensions and floor plans to houses in Yorùbáland, an indication of cultural retention in America.⁵

Some interest in Yorùbáland was generated in the African American community in the 1850s, in the heat of the antislavery campaign in America. This interest was principally the handwork of Martin Robinson Delany, a black physician, author, anti-slavery crusader, and a proponent of the colonization of free blacks in Africa. A one-time associate of Frederick Douglass, the most prominent black antislavery campaigner of the late nineteenth century, Delany agitated in the 1850s for African American emigration to Africa as a permanent solution to the black predicament in America. Delaney’s choice of an African home for the African American community was none other than Yorùbáland.

Though never fully embraced in the African American community, the idea of black emigration and colonization in Africa gained some importance in the mid-nineteenth century. Liberia, on the West coast of Africa, had already been established in 1847 by the American Colonization Society (ACS), as a colony of American ex-slaves. But Yorùbáland was increasingly considered as a place to resettle free blacks. Already, by 1858, a Yorùbá movement was in existence among African Americans in New York, seeking emigration to Lagos and other parts of Yorùbáland.⁶

Perhaps more than anyone else in black America, Delany helped to popularize the idea of African American immigration to Yorùbáland. His interest in Yorùbáland was inspired by earlier writings, notably those of the Reverend Thomas Jefferson Bowen, about the region and its people. Bowen was an American Baptist missionary who had pioneered the Baptist mission in Yorùbáland in 1850. In the 1850s, he had done a series of writings in the Washington-based journal of the ACS, *African Repository*, showing his admiration for Yorùbáland. An article in the *New York Times* in 1858 based on his writings described Yorùbáland as “a healthy and fertile region…well adapted to the cotton and sugar culture.” Indeed, Bowen had promoted the idea of the United States possibly obtaining these coveted products from Africa. This was an idea which some in the abolitionist movement saw as something that could contribute to ending slavery in America. As *The New York Times* article concluded,

> It is hoped that ere [sic] long a civilized community of enterprising colored Americans will be engaged in the cultivation of cotton, sugar, rice, coffee, &c., and the production of palm-oil, in that healthful and fertile country.⁷

Apart from his writings on the Yorùbá, Bowen had also done linguistic work on the Yorùbá language, publishing in 1858 a Yorùbá grammar book, *Grammar*
and Dictionary of the Yoruba Language. Delany seemed to have been taken in by Bowen’s works extolling Yorubaland and its people whom he himself once admiringly described as “intelligent” and “advanced.”

In 1859, under the auspices of his Niger Valley Exploration Party which he had established a year earlier with Robert Campbell, a fellow emigrationist, Delany embarked on a trip to Yorubaland. He arrived in Lagos in December, and was reportedly impressed by the coastal Yoruba city which had already received some emigrants from the Americas. He proceeded inland to his final destination, the Yoruba town of Abeokuta, peopled by the Egba. At Abeokuta, he joined his compatriot, Campbell, who had already arrived there via Europe on the same mission. Both held discussions with the traditional ruler in Abeokuta, the Alake, and a number of his chiefs on the subject of planting an African American colony in the town. According to Delany and Campbell, a treaty emanated from their discussions with the Egba chiefs which granted them the permission to purchase a land for the settlement of African American emigrants. Before departing Abeokuta on January 16, 1860, Delany and Campbell visited other Yoruba towns including Ogbomosho, Ijaye, Oyo, Iseyin, and Ilorin. Delany subsequently published his expedition to Yorubaland in 1861, in which he commented on various aspects of life in the country—particularly its economic enterprises.

Yorubaland was so popular in the African American worldview of the mid-nineteenth century that leading emigration societies including the ACS and the New York State Colonization Society took interest in the region. But the idea of Yoruba colonization was never actualized. Delany-Campbell’s project floundered, in part, by the start of civil war in the United States in the spring of 1861. Nevertheless, interest in the Yoruba country among African Americans did not entirely vanish even while the war consumed their attention. With the end of the war and the constitutional abolition of slavery in 1865, Yorubaland continued to feature in American thoughts about emigration. The May 1866 issue of African Repository carried a detailed article on “Abbeokuta.”

**YORUBA IN THE BLACK CULTURAL REVIVAL OF THE 1960S**

The civil rights movement of the late 1950s and the 1960s was primarily a headlong confrontation with the evil of racial discrimination and segregation in America. It was a demand by African Americans, who had largely been disenfranchised in the South and historically denied many other rights across the country, for racial equality, social justice, and integration. In the mid-1960s, the emergence of radical militant black activism, the Black power movement, pushed further the frontiers of the civil rights movement. Although by that time major strides had been made in the struggle for civil rights, the mainstream civil rights coalition had failed to improve African American economic well-
being. In a land of affluence, the vast majority of African Americans still lived in abject poverty, segregated into urban slums and relegated to a second-class status. Black Power consequently went beyond the demand for civil rights legislation and called for African American economic self-sufficiency and political empowerment. It believed that African American integration into the dominant white society was not a *sine qua non* for black redemption. The movement thus demanded black cultural renaissance as a tool by which black people would control their own destiny. Black pride became the rallying cry for the Black Power movement.

In search of racial pride, African Americans looked towards the ancestral homeland for inspiration. From the late 1960s, there was a resurgence of interest in African culture in the African American community. Many blacks turned to Yorùbá culture and adopted many of its elements, sometimes modifying them to suit their own purpose. The noted United States Virgin Islands-born Harlem visual artist, Ademola Olugebefola, expressed the very high regard accorded to Yorùbá culture by many African Americans when he described the culture as “a model... the epitome of the highest standards and the highest achievements of African culture.”

**Recreating Yorùbá Communities: The Ilés**

Perhaps the most visible expression of the reclamation of Yorùbá culture in America is the establishment of *ilés*, or Yorùbá communities. These communities are to be distinguished from those of the immigrant Nigerian Yorùbá. Rather, they are those of African Americans who have adopted and are practicing Yorùbá culture, particularly traditional Yorùbá religions.

The first of these *ilé* seemed to have been established in New York City, by Pancho Mora, a *babalawo* (ifa priest), shortly after his arrival in the city from Cuba in 1946. These communities of African American devotees of Yorùbá culture have to varying degrees successfully recreated authentic Yorùbá lifestyle in America. They organize their communities along the social and political patterns of traditional Yorùbá cities in Nigeria. They often dress in Yorùbá attire, especially during religious ceremonies. A few even emphasize their adoption of Yorùbá identity by acquiring Yorùbá facial marks (*ila*), a practice which, incidentally, has practically disappeared among the Nigerian Yorùbá.

Community members also endeavour to employ the Yorùbá language, at least in religious ritual performances, if not even in daily communication. Linguist Augustine Agwuele, who has done ethnographic study of one of these *ilés*—the Orile Olokun Sanya Awopeju of Cedar Creek, Texas—found that the community has fashioned a speech pattern from the Yorùbá language adapted to the community’s own use in religious ceremonies. One of the most promi-
nent leaders of the community, Onifa Oloriya Aina Olomo, a scholar and an Òrìsà priestess, has christened this speech pattern “Yorùbá bonics.”

The best known of the African American Yorùbá communities in the United States is the Oyotunji village, located in Beaufort County, South Carolina. Founded in 1970 and named after the famous ancient Yorùbá town in Nigeria, Oyo, its founder was Walter Eugene King, an African American who took the name, Efuntola Oseijeman Adelabu Adefunmi I, as the first crown oba (king) of the community. Oyotunji has been studied extensively, and it suffices to state here that it is an epitome of Yorùbá traditional culture in the United States. Its social-cultural, political, and religious structures are modeled after Yorùbá values, practices, and traditions, just as manifest in Yorùbá communities of western Nigeria. The following assessment of Oyotunji as an authentic Yorùbá community in America by Egbe Isokan Yorùbá of Washington D.C., a Nigerian Yorùbá socio-cultural association, is quite revealing:

Oyotunji Village has all the trappings of Ile-Ife, the cradle of Yorùbá land. Every known Yorùbá deity has his or her own shrine, neatly adorned with all materials made famous by that particular god or goddess. For instance, Ogun—the god of iron was surrounded by specially crafted irons and homage was paid to him every now and then. Every shrine has a designated priest responsible for its daily upkeep and for performing necessary rituals. A boldly written, long inscription cataloging the achievements and historical background of each god/goddess is placed beside each shrine.

Religion seems to be at the core of these African American Yorùbá communities. As it is discussed later in this chapter, members of these iles accept and practice various forms of Yorùbá religion. The celebration of Yorùbá religious ceremonies, festivals, and rituals are thus important features of life in these communities as shown below in the 2008 calendar of festivals at Oyotunji:

### Table 20.1. 2008 Calendar of Oyotunji Festivals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Festival</th>
<th>Type of Celebration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mar. 22-23</td>
<td>Eshu, Ogun, Ososi, and Men’s Akinkoju</td>
<td>Celebration of the Trickster, War and Hunter Deities, and annual Akinkoju Men’s Rites of Passage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr. 26-27</td>
<td>Osun</td>
<td>Brilliant pageants and parties for the Deity of Love and Spring.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Yorùbá Culture in Contemporary America

| June 21-22 | Yemoja | Women's' Rites of Passage Pageants and fertility dances for the Great Mother Deity of the Yorùbá, Celebrate Women's Rites of Passage. |
| May 23-June 1 | Egungun | Celebration of the great Ancestors, featuring annual Royal customs of [the] Oba's sacrifice to the Ancestors. |
| July 4-6 | Ifa Festival and Yorùbá National Convention | Mythical festival of Dances and recitations to the Deity of Destiny; mass gathering of Yorùbá. |
| July 26-27 | Songo | Veneration of the brilliant 8th century Alaafin of ancient Oyo who became Deity of Thunder and Lighting. |
| Aug. 23-24 | Obatala | Stately dances and plays in celebration of the Patron Deity of the Yorùbá Village. |
| Dec. 21-31 | Obaluaiye Festival | Masquerades, archers, mischief and dances for the Winter Solstice and ruler of the Taskmaster Deity. |

Source: adapted from Oyotunji Village’s website at http://www.oyotunjiafricanvillage.org/calendar.htm

FASHION AND IDENTITY FORMATION

Yorùbá material culture in the African American community is very evident in fashion, including clothing style and hairdo. Many blacks have always seen the wearing of different types of Yorùbá attires as an expression of pride in their African heritage. The various forms of Yorùbá attire are often generally identified in America as *dashiki* (correctly spelled and pronounced as *danshiki*).

The Yorùbá fashion tradition is one of the richest in Africa, and thus has easily attracted the interest of African Americans. Yorùbá attire made its debut in the black fashion community in the mid-1960s in the wake of the Black Power Movement. New Breed, a black clothing enterprise in Harlem, New York, began to produce *danshiki* in 1967, popularizing it.16 Years before ascending the throne of Oyotunji, Adefunmi I was said to have produced and sold *danshiki* in Harlem.17 African dress became a statement of African American Africanity in the era of the “black-is-beautiful” movement.

Some notable African Americans in the 1960s such as civil rights activists Malcolm X, the fire-brand minister of the Nation of Islam, and Marrion Barry, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) organizer and future mayor of Washington, D.C., often appeared in Yorùbá attire.18 This was
an endorsement which aided acceptance of this form of dress. African fashion textiles labeled as *danshiki* soon began to appear in the advertisement section of newspapers such as the *Chicago Tribune*. Leading black-oriented magazines such as *Ebony*, and even mainstream fashion publications such as *Mademoiselle*, displayed Yorùbá and other West African apparels. *Danshiki* was accepted enough in the black community to be used in advertising African American products. In 1968, a Newport cigarette advertisement produced by Vince Cullers Advertising Agency of Chicago—the first black-owned advertising agency—featured an African American adorned in *danshiki*.

Since the late 1960s, African fashion has gained significant popularity among American blacks and an acceptance in mainstream America. Yorùbá attires in particular are found in boutiques and clothing stores specializing in African wears, and are often on display in the now numerous African American street festivals staged in many urban centers. It has become increasingly common for African Americans to use richly embroidered Yorùbá dresses as wedding attire. Popular Yorùbá textiles range from *adire* (tie-and-dye) often worn as casual attire, to the more elaborate fabric for formal occasions, the *aso oke* completed with the *fila* (hat) for men, and the *gele* (head tie) for women. The popularity of Yorùbá fashion has been greatly enhanced by the increasing immigration of Africans of Yorùbá origin, notably from Nigeria, into the United States since the 1980s. Nigerian Yorùbá are well known for their traditional attires which they regularly wear to church and to other formal occasions such as weddings. Nigerian-owned variety stores and boutiques also market a wide variety of Yorùbá attires.

In addition to attire, Nigerian-Yorùbá hairdos for women have been extensively borrowed in the African American community. Different types of Yorùbá hair braiding and plaiting have become standard in many black-operated hair salons. This fashion of hair braiding has also increasingly become popular among young black men in America.

**Yorùbá Names as Cultural Reclamation**

The luxury of bearing African names was lost to the enslaved Africans in the New World. As Africans arrived in chains in America they were quickly stripped of their African names and promptly assigned new names, often those of their masters, or debasing ones such as “cotton,” depicting the kind of work they were put to on the plantations. The denial of the right to bear African names was one of the most potent ways by which enslaved blacks were stripped of their cultural heritage. It was a powerful symbolic disconnection of Africans in America from their ancestral homeland.

In the late 19th century, many blacks began to shed inherited “slave names.” Commonly adopted last names were those of notable historical figures such
as “Washington” and “Jefferson”, two of the first American presidents. In due course, names identified with great black figures such as “Frederick Douglass,” the great black abolitionist, became commonplace.

From the 1960s, name change among African Americans became even more commonplace. This was a result of the increased interest in African culture in the black community brought about by the prevailing black Cultural Revolution movement of the era. While it was fashionable for African Americans, especially those who converted to Islam, to adopt Muslim names, many culturally conscious blacks increasingly turned to African names. The popularity of Yorùbá culture in the United States attracted the interest of many to Yorùbá names. The adoption of Yorùbá names was initially prevalent among those who adopted Yorùbá religion. In 1959, ifa devotee Walter Eugene King took the Yorùbá names, Efuntola Adelabu, after his initiation into the Afro-Cuban Yorùbá religion. He would later assume the Yorùbá royal title of Adefunmi I, as the oba of Oyotunji. African Americans who are priests and priestesses, or who practice Orisa religion, often adopt Yorùbá names which reflect devotion to one Yorùbá deity or another. Some examples of these names adopted by African Americans and the deity to which they are identifiable are provided in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General</th>
<th>Ogun</th>
<th>Ifa</th>
<th>Osun</th>
<th>Sango</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aborisade</td>
<td>Ogunjobi</td>
<td>Fagbamila</td>
<td>Osungbemi</td>
<td>Sangodele</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efuntola</td>
<td>Ogunde</td>
<td>Fagbenle</td>
<td>Osunleke</td>
<td>Sangomuyiwa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obalorun</td>
<td>Ongbemi</td>
<td>Ifanikee</td>
<td>Sunbunmi</td>
<td>Sangowande</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awodele</td>
<td>Ogunyemi</td>
<td>Ifakorode</td>
<td>Olaoshun</td>
<td>Songoda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oguntola</td>
<td>Ifajauba</td>
<td>Undiya</td>
<td>Songina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oguniyi</td>
<td>Fakayode</td>
<td>Osunde</td>
<td>Sangobukunmi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ogunsuyeye</td>
<td>Ifasehun</td>
<td>Osunyemi</td>
<td>Sangodare</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Non-religious Yorùbá names have also been adopted. The existence of numerous Internet sites and publications on African names has made ready access to a variety of Yorùbá personal names quite easy.

**Traditional Yorùbá Religious Practices**

Yorùbá religion with its attendant rituals and ceremonies represents the most popular expression of Yorùbá culture in the Americas. Yorùbá religious practices had always been an important part of African cultural identity in many
parts of Central and South America. In the 1950s in the United States, African Americans began to be initiated into Yorùbá-derived religious traditions such as Cuban Santería and Brazilian Candomblé.24 Oba Adesunmi I was one of the first American blacks to embrace Afro-Cuban religion.

In the mid-1950s a small group of Òrìsà adherents, mainly Afro-Cubans and Afro-Puerto Ricans, was already in existence in New York City.25 However, Oba Adesunmi seems to have played a crucial role in the spread of Òrìsà worship in the United States in the 1960s. A long term practitioner of Santería, he became an initiate after his visit to Matanzas, Cuba, in 1959. That year upon his return to the United States, he established the first African American Òrìsà temple called the Shango Temple on East 125th Street, New York City. In 1960 he incorporated the African Theological Archministry, and later moved the Shango Temple, subsequently known as Yorùbá Temple, to Harlem.26

The emergence of Òrìsà religion in America was heavily influenced by Cuban and Brazilian forms of Yorùbá religion. The first generation of African American converts was initiated into Santería and Candomblé. Although originally influenced by Afro-Caribbean religions, African Americans soon transitioned to traditional Nigerian Yorùbá religion. They rejected the infusions of Western religious traditions in the form of the Catholic saints into Afro-Caribbean religions. Increasingly they sought an authentic and unadulterated African religion and way of life in Nigerian Yorùbá Òrìsà. Many became adherents of Ifá, a Yorùbá religion and system of divination. Others took to the worship of Yorùbá Òrìsàs (deities) like Ogun (god of iron), Shango (god of Thunder), Oya (goddess of fertility), Osun (goddess of the river), and Yemoja (mother goddess), among others. The Òrìsà religion (or Òrìsà-Voodoo), as these forms of Yorùbá religious practices have come to be known in the United States, has many adherents today.

Practitioners of Òrìsà continue to be active in contemporary America. Oyotunji village appears to be the most recognizable community of Òrìsà adherents in the United States, but apart from Oyotunji, there are a number of other iles scattered all over the country. They are found in major cities such as Miami, Atlanta, Chicago, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., San Francisco, New York City, and other places. The list below of Òrìsà temples, shrines, and other worship centres, though not exhaustive, shows how widespread Òrìsà religion is in the United States.
Table 20.3. Òrìsà temples, shrines, and other worship centres

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>City/State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ile Iwosan Orunmila Mimo</td>
<td>Phoenix, Arizona</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HATTAF International</td>
<td>Sacramento, California</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ile Orunmila</td>
<td>San Bernardino, California</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ile Orunmila Temple, I.F.A., Inc.</td>
<td>Miami, Florida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ilesa Ire (Temple of Blessings)</td>
<td>Gainesville, Florida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Institute of Afrikan Studies &amp; Knowledge</td>
<td>Tamarac, Florida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye (CLBA)</td>
<td>Hialeah, Florida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egbe Òrìsà Nubian Temple</td>
<td>Atlanta, Georgia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ile Alafin</td>
<td>College Park, Georgia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egbe Imole Agbo Iwosan</td>
<td>Chicago, Illinois</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ile Ifa Jalumi</td>
<td>Maywood, Illinois</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ile Osikan</td>
<td>Chicago, Illinois</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ile Ifa, Inc.</td>
<td>Laurel, Maryland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oju Olokun</td>
<td>St. Louis, Missouri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ifa Temple of Light</td>
<td>E. Orange, New Jersey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asaforitifa Temple of Òrìsà</td>
<td>Brooklyn, New York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ile Okanran</td>
<td>Brooklyn, New York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institute of Yorùbá Cultural Studies</td>
<td>Brooklyn, New York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lukumi Church of Òrìsà</td>
<td>Bronx, New York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ifa-House of Wisdom</td>
<td>Charlotte, North Carolina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ile Sankofa / Obà Sekou Ministries</td>
<td>Philadelphia, Pennsylvania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oluwa Ni Sola Institute</td>
<td>Philadelphia, Pennsylvania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ile Òrîsà Nla</td>
<td>Columbia, South Carolina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kingdom of Oyotunji African Village</td>
<td>Sheldon, South Carolina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ile Olokun Sanya Awopeju</td>
<td>Austin, Texas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egbe Mimo Anago Ile Oshun</td>
<td>Nashville, Tennessee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ile Oyiigiyi Ogubo Òrisa</td>
<td>Richmond, Virginia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


African American Òrìsà worshippers have maintained a link with traditional Nigerian Yorùbá religion mainly through visits to Yorùbá cities for initiation. Popular destinations include Oyo, an ancient and one of the pre-eminent Yorùbá cities; Osogbo, famous for the worship of the deity, Osun; and the ancient and ancestral city of Ile-Ife, the mythical cradle of the Yorùbá. Oba Adefunmi visited Yorùbá land a number of times, once in 1972, where, in Abeokuta, he was initiated into the ifa priesthood. In 1981 he visited Ile-Ife to receive coronation rites as Oba of Oyotunji, in a ceremony performed by the traditional
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ruler of the ancient city, the Ooni, Oba Okunade Sijuwade, Olubuse II, often regarded the foremost Yorùbá traditional ruler in contemporary times.\textsuperscript{27}

Visits to Nigeria for initiation into Òrìṣà religion are no longer very necessary. This is largely because the required rituals can now readily be performed in the United States by qualified priests. Although some of these priests are Nigerian Yorùbá, a good number are African Americans who have acquired the spiritual know-how to perform the initiations. Òrìṣà worship centers in many parts of the United States now provide the necessary training for priesthood into Yorùbá religion. Nonetheless, initiation visits to Nigeria remain popular.\textsuperscript{28}

The interaction of the African American Yorùbá Òrìṣà community with its Nigerian Yorùbá counterpart has impacted the former group in some important ways. For instance, the emergence of Yorùbá bonics, earlier defined as a small demographic within the Yorùbá language family, is one of the most significant results of this interaction. Yorùbá bonics developed as the language of worship among African American Òrìṣà adherents, and as Agwuele has noted, this language form is now being incorporated into regular conversation among African American Yorùbá who seek a greater kinship with Nigerian Yorùbá.\textsuperscript{29}

Another influence of the Nigerian Yorùbá religious practices on the African Diaspora in America is the emergence of African American musical bands specializing in Yorùbá religious and cultural musical performances. One of the most popular of these groups is the Women’s Sekere Ensemble, widely known for its mastery of sekere, a traditional Yorùbá percussion instrument made from beaded gourd. This all-women group of percussionists was formed in 1988 by a Philadelphian musician and composer, Omomola Iyabunmi. The group is well known for its sonorous rendition of Yorùbá numbers, and for stage appearances in complete Yorùbá attire. Iyabunmi herself had been to Nigeria once in 2004, where she participated in the rituals associated with the sekere musical form.\textsuperscript{30}

Also out of Philadelphia has emerged the largest and the most popular community-based street festival in America, christened, “Odunde.” Street festivals have become an important feature of the celebration of black culture, and they are common in many cities with significant African American populations. Typically, a street festival is a marketplace of assorted merchandise such as soul food, African and African American music, jewelries, arts and crafts, fabrics, attire, and artifacts from different parts of America, Africa, and the rest of the African diaspora. Apart from the rich display of wares by vendors, a street festival also often includes cultural enrichment such as indigenous dances and performances. Odunde Festival, however, goes beyond the traditional street festival; it has a religious component. It is a festival of worship of the Yorùbá deity, Osun, the sea goddess and custodian of fertility and blessings. Odunde is obviously conceived as an imitation of the celebrated Osun Festival held annual
at Osogbo in western Nigeria. Indeed, the first edition of the festival held in the summer of 1975 was not called “Odunde,” but “Osun Festival.”

“Odunde” is a Yorùbá word which, in the African American community, means the celebration of the beginning of a new year. Since its inception in 1975 under its founder, Lois Fernandez, it has become a huge event held annually, in June, at Philadelphia’s South Street in the heart of the African American community. The religious part involves a ritual procession to the Schuykill River accompanied by drumming, chanting of incantations, and prayers, in honor of the Yorùbá goddess, Osun. At the river, offerings in form of fruits and flowers are made to the deity in return for her blessings. This aspect of the festival is a direct replica of the procession from the oba’s palace in Osogbo, down to the Osun sacred grove on the Osun River, where sacrifices are offered to Osun. Following the necessary rituals at the grove, worshippers expect to obtain the blessings of the goddess which they believe include provision of children to barren women and healing for the sick. Odunde, now in its 33rd year and under the directorship of Oshunbumi Fernandez, continues to be a showcase of Yorùbá culture in America.

**Promoting Cultural Identity: The Nigerian Yorùbá**

African immigrants in the United States have increased significantly in numerical strength since the last decade of the twentieth century. Immigrants from Nigeria constitute a great proportion of the African immigrant population. Large Yorùbá communities found mostly in urban areas all over the United States comprise a major part of the Nigerian immigrant community. The Nigerian Yorùbá group has made a major impact on the advancement of Yorùbá socio-cultural identity in America in a number of ways.

Like other immigrant groups in America, many in the Nigerian Yorùbá community desire to retain their cultural values even while adapting to American society. To achieve this, they wear their traditional attire at every opportunity, especially during formal occasions; they speak their language at home and at social gatherings; and they eat their traditional food.

In recent times, Nigerian entrepreneurs have opened their own businesses to serve primarily the African community and the rest of the American populace. Business-minded Nigerian Yorùbá own many of these businesses which have become a conduit for popularizing Yorùbá culture. General merchandise stores selling African goods carry a lot of items identifiable with the Yorùbá, ranging from men, women, and children’s apparel such as *agbada*, *aso-oke*, *danshiki*, *ankara*, *iro* and *buba*, to assorted food stuff including pounded yam (*iyan*), yam flour (*amala*), corn pudding (*ogi*), kolanut (*obi*), herbs (*egbogi*), shea butter (*ori*), hot pepper (*ata wewe*), indigenous soap (*ose dudu*), bitter nuts
(orogbo), and stock fish (panla). African-owned restaurants serve traditional Yorùbá dishes such as iyan, eba, and amala, with gbegiri, ila, or efo stew.

As sojourners abroad, one of the ways in which the Nigerian Yorùbá in America have sought to keep alive their culture is through the establishment of egbes. These are the socio-cultural associations, numerous in urban areas, with the primary objective of catering for members’ interests and fostering ties among them. But they have also served as instrument of promoting Yorùbá culture.31

There are two broad types of these associations. First, there are pan-Yorùbá associations with membership available to all Yorùbá, irrespective of sub-group, town of origin, or dialect. Many of these associations have constituted themselves as local chapters of an umbrella organization, the National Association of Yorùbá Descendants in North America, more popularly known as Egbe Omo Yorùbá. The affiliate member associations of Egbe Omo Yorùbá are distributed all over the United States as indicated in the table below:

Table 20.4. Affiliate member associations of Egbe Omo Yorùbá

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Location/Area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Concerned Yorùbá Committee</td>
<td>Houston, Texas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egbe Isoken Yorùbá</td>
<td>Washington, D.C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egbe Omo Yorùbá ti Baltimore</td>
<td>Baltimore, Maryland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egbe Omo Yorùbá of Baton Rouge</td>
<td>Baton Rouge, Louisiana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egbe Omo Yorùbá of Boston</td>
<td>Boston, Massachusetts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egbe Omo Yorùbá of Miami</td>
<td>Miami, Florida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egbe Omo Yorùbá, Staten Island</td>
<td>Staten Island, New York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egbe Omo Yorùbá, Greater New York</td>
<td>Elmont, New York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egbe Omo Oduduwa of Greater St. Louis</td>
<td>St. Louis, Missouri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egbe Omo Yorùbá of Tennessee</td>
<td>Nashville, Tennessee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egbe Omo Yorùbá, Greater Atlanta</td>
<td>Atlanta, Georgia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oduduwa Descendants of Tampa Bay</td>
<td>Tampa Bay, Florida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oduduwa Heritage Organization of Oakland</td>
<td>Oakland, California</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yorùbá Cultural &amp; Development Organization</td>
<td>Philadelphia, Pennsylvania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yorùbá Descendants Union of Jacksonville</td>
<td>Jacksonville, Florida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yorùbá Peoples’ Congress</td>
<td>Chicago, Illinois</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The second group of Nigerian Yorùbá associations is what one might call Hometown Associations (HTA). Also numerous and urban-based, these are associations whose members belong to the same Yorùbá sub-group, or people who originate from the same town. There are several of such associations in
Nigeria, and their explosion in the United States seems to be a carry-over of the home practice. Ekiti, a sub-Yorùbá group, for instance, has a number of associations exclusively identified with the interest of the members of this group rather than with the larger pan-Yorùbá interest. Ekiti Associations in North America (EKAINA) is a pan-Ekiti association, and has the following chapters:

Table 20.5. Ekiti Associations in North America

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Location/Area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ekiti Progressive Union</td>
<td>Dallas, TX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ekitikete Association of Chicago</td>
<td>Chicago, IL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ekitikete Club of Chicago</td>
<td>Chicago, IL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ekiti Progressive Union</td>
<td>Los Angeles, CA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ekitiparapo Association of New York</td>
<td>Brooklyn NY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ekiti Association in Houston</td>
<td>Houston, TX</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: http://www.ekaina.org/ekaina_national_executive_counci.htm

Irrespective of type, Yorùbá organizations in America have broadly the same mission. This is very well articulated in the mission statement of Egbe Isokan Yorùbá, quoted below:

To cherish, uphold, and project the honor and dignity of Yorùbá culture, language and tradition in Africa and the Diaspora; to promote the cultural, social, economic and political welfare of Yorùbá; and to work with other organizations inside and outside Nigeria to promote peace, stability, justice, and unity while working actively for the promotion of Yorùbá interests.

In a variety of ways the Yorùbá associations have played an important role in showcasing Yorùbá culture in America, aside from promoting the interest of their members. Some, for example, promote Yorùbá culture through conferences and conventions. Egbe Omo Yorùbá holds an annual national convention which brings together delegates from all parts of the United States and other places including Canada, the United Kingdom, and Nigeria. The conventions provide an avenue for deliberations on issues germane to the progress of Yorùbá people in America and at home. The 2007 convention held in Baltimore, Maryland, for instance, had as its theme: “Social and Economic Development for the Yorùbá in the 21st Century and Beyond.” The Egbe Omo Yorùbá has maintained a powerful presence in the African immigrant community in America.

There are other ways in which Yorùbá organizations have projected an awareness of Yorùbá culture. They organize social and cultural events like public lectures on aspects of Yorùbá culture; display Yorùbá traditional attires through
fashion shows; and participate in Black History Month programs of local communities. Most of the associations publish newsletters, newspapers, journals, and magazines, which not only disseminate local news, but also educate on Yorùbá history and culture. One of these publications is the quarterly news magazine of Egbe Isokan Yorùbá, *The Isokan News*. Also, the internet has provided these associations a more effective way of propagating themselves and of easily reaching interested parties.

**Yorùbá Culture as Intellectual Enterprise**

African Studies as a field of academic inquiry is firmly established in the American academy. In many universities and colleges across the country, the study of various aspects of Yorùbá life and culture is an integral component of the African Studies Program. As a sub-field of African Studies, Yorùbá Studies encompasses the history, archaeology, politics, religion, language, literature, and art of the Yorùbá people. Several notable American universities with African studies programs, especially those designated Title VI Africa National Resource Centers and funded by the United States Department of Education, have course offerings in these areas.

An important element of Yorùbá studies in American universities is the Study Abroad Program (SAP), a summer-time intensive study of selected aspects of Yorùbá culture in Nigeria, which allows students to earn transferable credits from classroom instruction and from other activities. The most popular component of this program is the study of Yorùbá language, which provides participating students the opportunity to reinforce their Yorùbá reading, writing, and speaking skills. The program also enables students to interact with native Yorùbá speakers, participate in cultural activities, visit historical sites, and, sometimes spend time in a Yorùbá household.

**Yorùbá Studies in Non-Academic Setting**

Studies of Yorùbá culture are not limited to academic institutions. Non-academic settings have also instituted programs designed to study aspects of the culture. A number of Nigerian Yorùbá associations have such a program. For instance, through its Institute of Yorùbá Language and Culture, Egbe Isokan Yorùbá provides instruction to the community on spoken Yorùbá. Egbe Òmo Yorùbá of Greater Atlanta also conducts summer courses on Yorùbá language for young children.

Classes and workshops on Yorùbá language are also being offered in the African American Òrìsà community. Groups within the community provide instructions for devotees of Yorùbá religion who believe that the ability to speak the language of their adopted religion enhances their spirituality. In its internet
advertisement of “another season of Yorùbá language classes geared to raising the knowledge of our orisa community,” Irumole Traditional Ifa and Orisa Worship explained that “the language course will consist of 8 classes of intensive language and culture training,” focusing on “greetings for priests/priestesses; language used in ritual contexts; nouns, verbs, grammar; sentence structure; colloquial and deep language (ijinle Yorùbá); dialect variations; praises for orisa; diasporal preservations; alphabet, tones, number system [and] conversation.”

**Conclusion**

This chapter has endeavored to provide an insight into ways by which Yorùbá culture has impacted contemporary America. Yorùbá culture is expressed through African American adoption of Yorùbá religious practices, indigenous names, attires, dance and music, and language. Yorùbá culture continues to be an important dynamic force in American social and cultural life. Indeed, it is one of the most recognizable African cultures in the United States today, and has further been promoted by the institution of Yorùbá studies in American academia, and by the increasing influx of immigrants of African Yorùbá extraction in the United States.

**Notes**

2. I would like to appreciate the invaluable comments offered by Dr. Mayo Ogedengbe on an earlier draft.


22. Among his assumed names is “Oseijeman,” which is non-Yorùbá.


27. The visits are reported in “The Ogboni Chiefs of Oyotunji Village.”

28. The Internet is an important medium of popularizing such visits. See, for instance, “2008 Tentative Itinerary for Initiation in Nigeria,” http://www.osunpriestess.com/Itinerary.html


34. Title VI Africa National Resource Centers include the African Studies Programs in the following institutions: Indiana University, Michigan State University, Ohio University, University of California-Los Angeles, University of Florida, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, University of Pennsylvania, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Yale University, Boston University, Stanford University, and University of California-Berkeley.

Introduction

The possible interaction between art and religion has often engaged the attention of scholars in both disciplines. The bone of contention has always been the desirability or otherwise of this interaction. And where this is the case, what level of interaction is permissible between the two phenomena that may not be appreciated from the same realm or perception? Although there are arguments to show that there are some tinge of spirituality attached to artistic creations, this becomes more plausible when in some pantheistic religions, like African traditional religion and Catholicism, symbols (creative works) are used to represent the gods. This may perhaps explain why Andrej Tisma explains art as a form of phenomenon that represents the attitude of man towards the absolute (spiritual realities) and interprets the meaning of existence. Religion can also be given a similar interpretation, since its substantive interpretation gives meaning to existence in the attempt to reconcile men with the absolute.

Our attempt in this chapter is primarily to examine the value of art in religion and vice versa. We shall seek the possibility of interaction between the two phenomena using Yoruba traditional religion as our matrix. In this regard some artistic works in the religion shall be described and their values examined.
We shall also attempt to debunk the claim that the art works prevalent in the religion specifically represent idolatry.

**Religion and Art**

Over time, religion and art have interacted. The former has often served as a motive and point of departure as well as inspiration for the latter. Art, when employed by religion, has demonstrated the strongest aspects of human spirituality. According to Trevor Pateman, “Art is a medium through which people sought to express their religious beliefs or a vehicle through which societies seek to represent religion.”

We can therefore argue that both phenomena had serious spiritual dimensions. It should be mentioned however that the two phenomena can mutually exist or co-exist, while not denying their exclusive significance.

Religion may need symbols, which often are produced by artists to express its substantial values. It does not suggest that religion inclusively relied on art to make it imperative to human existence. In the same vein, an artist could be inspired by other factors beyond religion to produce his or her works. These include the society, people, nature, vocation and imagination among other factors.

However, in an environment where there is no strict dichotomy between the sacred and the profane this separation may not be possible. For example in the Western world (Europe and America) artistic works could be socially exclusive. In Africa, where there is a symbiotic relationship and interaction between the sacred and the profane, such separation is not realistic. Therefore, an artist’s work is based on his faith. In some cases they may even be commissioned agents of religion. Although Trevor Pateman observes that religious faith may not be a certificate for an expression of faith in art works, he was unable to deny the reality of faith in artistic creations and conceptions. He writes:

> Artworks are in some sense an attempts to articulate something ineffable, something which transcend everyday reality and that it is consequently religious art or whatever is the conscious belief of the artist or the audience.

Pateman’s submission suggests that artistic works constitute religious acts. Man Ray is emphatic in his own argument on the religiosity and spirituality of artistic forms and works when he says that to reproduce is human, to create is divine. Therefore we can say that art and artworks are sacred, and that the experience of art is quasi-religious in the sense that the attention paid to art may be seen as an act of piety or worship. In this regard he also writes:
Anyone who feels shock or outrage at the destruction of an artistic work (the breaking of a sculpture, the destruction of a canvas, the burning of a book) is probably not far from seeing such acts as literally sacrilegious.  

George Stainer further explained the reality of religion and art by invoking the name and presence of God in defense of art. He argues that:

On the secular level, on the pragmatic psychology of general consensus, the claims of nothingness cannot be adequately answered....
Art is not meaningful without a wager on transcendence.

Herbert Marcus also argues that art transcends its social determination and involves a beautiful image of another reality which has an overwhelming presence. This is perhaps because the world formed by art is recognized as a reality which is suppressed and distorted in the given reality. In other words, there can only be aesthetic creations because of the reality of spiritual creation. Furthermore, scholars such as Peter Fuller, Roger Scruton, Dennis Donoghe explain theological values and forms within the content and context of art.

From the above discourse, it is implied that religion and art have been interacting from the beginning of human history. While we cannot deny the mutuality of this interaction, it is observed that they could also operate exclusively. In practical terms, art has been used by religious people to demonstrate their faith. In Islam prophet Muhammad was quoted to have said, “God is beautiful and love [is] beauty.” This statement is an encouragement to Muslims not only to appreciate art as beautiful but also to see its production as beauty. Beauty in this context cannot be found in variety of artworks, such as paintings, sculpture, carving, etc. but rather in created architectural masterpieces in the form of splendorous mosques and minarets as well as calligraphic designs and decorative arts.

Christianity can also boast of cathedrals that are masterpieces of architectural design. In the same vein, pictures, paintings and even sculptures have been developed to represent the saints and patriarchs of the religion. Likewise, traditional religions in Africa and southern and eastern Asia have made use of art in creating images of their deities to which supplications are often referred. These symbolic representations of the deities have generated some debate and comments to the extent that the patrons of these traditions are called idolaters. The value and importance of the deities could also be damaged or reduced by the creativity of the artists. In the opinion of Bolaji Idowu, this may not suffice. The symbols that represent the deities are based on accumulated evidences which have come down to us overtime, making it possible to symbolize the unseen with objects such as stones, wood, plants and plastics in order to make the invisible visible.
ARTISTIC WORKS AND YORUBA RELIGION

Many terms have been used in the past, and even now, to describe the traditional religion of the Yoruba people. Some of these terms are derived from the people’s reliance on cultic arts (objects) in demonstrating their belief in and worship of the Supreme Being and lesser deities. In fact, this is aptly captured in the opinion of Bolaji Idowu when he submits that the Yoruba fundamentally believe that truth can only be grasped when they are presented in descriptive patterns. This is to concretize what is palpable in the form of modeled figures.

Therefore we can say that artworks representing the people’s perception about the supersensible world have played and are still playing symbolic roles in making the spiritual world perceptible through material and mundane works. Artists are employed to create images for the deities, and some artists could also be inspired by their own belief and conviction about the religion. However, the question could be asked, to what extent are artists free to express themselves when portraying religious subjects? They may not be totally free. They are often guided by traditions and historical evidences, which are often placed at their disposal by forebears in the religion and in the depositories of its traditions. This could explain why some deities are presented symbolically as aggressive characters while others have gentle dispositions. The case of Sango and Yemoja in the Yoruba pantheon may be apposite here.

Sango is presented as an aggressive divinity that is often used to spread carnage and destruction. Therefore his liturgical color is red (portraying danger) and he spits fire to confront his enemies; he uses the thunderbolt (edun ara) to strike perceived enemies and ritual offenders in his cult; he possess an axe (Ose Sango) with which his enemies are cut down to size. Even the prose and poetry about the deity in Yoruba literature depict him as a wicked deity. On the other hand Yemoja is often presented as a benevolent deity who is always willing to bless her patrons with children. Her liturgical color is white and purity is emphasized in her cult. Water plays a significant role in her worship, demonstrating her relevance to the people. She is represented symbolically in the art by a half-woman and half-fish, or in some cases by a python weaved around the neck of a woman. Ironically, both Sango and Yemoja possess the same tendency, to punish their patrons for any cultic and ritual offences. They also bless and protect their patrons from evil and social calamities.

The examples cited above demonstrate that the artist could be misled in creating forms for the deities. This is because he could be a commissioned agent. This will confirm the opinion of Trevor Pateman that religious faith may not be a certificate for a free expression of faith in artwork. He writes further:

Artworks are in some sense an attempt to articulate something ineffable, something which transcend everyday reality and that it is
consequently religious art or whatever is the conscious belief of the artist or the audience.\textsuperscript{12}

Even where the artist and his works are not commissioned, he may be misled by the prevalent stories and myths in his environment that inform his creation. This can be explained in the claims of most Yoruba drama artists and writers that Sango was the 4\textsuperscript{th} King of Oyo—a story which has been found to be untrue.\textsuperscript{13} This fear is often expressed by worshippers and patrons of traditional religion. That is, they ask to what extent the images and stories about the deities will reduce their values, existence and cultic relevance? Also, can we accuse the people of being idolaters? In Yorubaland, like some ancient civilizations (Roman, Greek, Egypt, etc.), where the king is seen as a god, or where they claim their political power from the divine, religion has played a pervasive role in art. In this regard, architectural masterpieces are produced with bare hands and dedicated to the divine, and they remain a marvel up to the present. It is further demonstrated in Jewelries (\textit{Iyun}), beads (\textit{Ileke}) and sculptures (\textit{ere}) among others, which still provides great fascination up to the present day.\textsuperscript{14}

The images may not reduce the values and cultic relevance of the deities, since they are only symbolic representations of the reality which they represent. The real objects of worship are in the minds of the people. It is true that the Yoruba bow down to these images, but it is not the artworks that take the glory; rather, it is the realities that are represented by the images. This is why it is sacrilegious to debase these objects—to destroy, break or burn them for any reason. Their value transcends the ordinary. This only goes to support the opinion of Steiner that there is aesthetic creation because there is theistic creation. Herbert Marcuse also argues that religious artwork transcends its social determination and acts as a way of invoking a beautiful image of another reality which has an overwhelming presence.

On a general note, the Yoruba people live in a religious world where all things including art are only meaningful and appreciable within a religious orbit. This may explain why Idowu argues that the people are in all things religious.\textsuperscript{15} Therefore, many artworks produced in Yorubaland in the past and even in the present have an overtly religious content; celebrating or representing the symbolic values of the people’s tradition, culture and appreciation of the divine. Unlike the west, where artistic works could be strictly social, Yoruba artworks often execute a religious commission which makes the people see themselves as part of a spiritual community. This, in the conception of Idowu, is to:

...present visible and tangible evidences of the invisible, intangible and spiritual entity. They (artworks) are only means of an end, therefore, a means which for the Nonce man find necessary and adequate for the apprehension of things which are supersensible.\textsuperscript{16}
As a consequence of the above, it will be wrong to refer literarily or practically to the Yoruba as idol worshipers or pagans based on artworks used symbolically in the religion. After all, Christians remain theistic and monotheistic in their religion in spite of the reverence and cultic relevance given to the crucifix (the cross), rosary, Bible and saints modeled in paintings, pictures and sculptures. The Muslims do not give themselves over to these kinds of art, but they express the oneness of Allah through calligraphy, design and decorative arts. Even then, they remain notionally monotheistic.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter we have been able to demonstrate the interaction between religion and art on a general note, with particular emphasis on Yoruba religion. The realities of this interaction and interplay have enhanced spirituality over time, thereby suggesting that we should encourage this relationship so as not to disrobe religion of its primary concern by making it social and materialistic. On the other hand, it is crucial to recognise art as a veritable tool in making religion realistic to humanity through its works without losing its attendant values. In our time (in the 21st century) art and religion are becoming more social than spiritual. We seek a reunion that will bring back spirituality to the everyday life of man through the bond between the two realities. In this regard, art will give up its formalism and religion its priesthood, so that art and religion can become the sciences of our time.

The Yoruba example has demonstrated the fact that art could be a vehicle through which the essence and substance of religious beliefs, rituals, worships and fundamentals traditions could be expressed. Further, our study has shown that the reality of artworks in Yoruba traditional religion is not a premise to reach the often- vexed conclusion that the Yoruba are idol worshippers because they represent their deities with artistic symbols. Since artworks are not limited or exclusive to the religion. Islam, Christianity and Judaism are religious traditions in which appropriations of artwork have not reduced the theistic and monotheistic value of their faith. To the Yoruba people, fundamental truths of religion can only be meaningful and understood when presented in descriptive patterns and modeled forms.

**Notes**

3. Ibid., 152.
4. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
9. These terms include “primitive,” “native,” “savage,” “pagan,” and “idol worshipping.”
14. Some traditional rulers in Yorubaland such as the Oni of Ife, the Alafin of Oyo, and the Ataoja of Osogbo, still have these artworks adorning their palaces as decorative and cultic objects.
16. Ibid., 61.
Chapter 22

THE CONTEXT OF AGEMO FESTIVAL IN IJEBULAND

Jubril Adesegun Dosumu

INTRODUCTION

By nature and purpose, African festivals are mythic and religious. They encapsulate the totality of the peoples’ history, beliefs, values, mores, behaviors and practices. Like their larger kith and kin in Yorubaland, the Ijebu people have different festivals serving different purposes, the mythic and the religious inclusive.

Among the several festivals that dot the Ijebu cultural landscape, Agemo ritual festival is the most common and remarkable. The reasons are their spectacle and pervasiveness with not only the Ijebu in Ijebuland but also those whose ancestry are traceable to Ijebu in other parts of Yorubaland. By nature, the Ijebu are itinerant traders with significant cultural visibility. This chapter explores the richness of the Agemo ritual festival in Ijebuland, taking into consideration the context of its performance.

THE IJEBU: ORIGIN AND GEOGRAPHY

The Ijebu, a sub group of the dominant Yoruba ethnic group, are found in Lagos and Ogun States (Southwest Nigeria). Their neighbors along the coastline are the Ikale, the Ilaje and the Ijaw, located along the Bight of Benin and predominantly found in Ondo State. To the West, the Egbado or Yewa people,
the Awori and the Gunufi (adulterated as Egun) are their neighbors. In the heartland of the Yoruba nation, the Ondo and the Edo are their neighbors to the East; the Egba to the West; and the Ibadan and Oyo people border them to the North. Ijebuland as a whole can be divided into two: namely Ijebu Ode and Remo Divisions. Ijebu Ode Division occupies the east of Ijebuland while Remo is located westward.1

The origin of the Ijebu is hard to determine. This is because of its heavy reliance on oral tradition. Their ancestry as commonly agreed is traced to different people and places, and migration in phases. According to E.A. Ayandele:

> The precise time when Ijebuland was peopled is a matter of speculation. What is clear is that in remote past, at least some parts of the territory were inhabited by the Idoko, one of the autochthonous people who the Yoruba conquered and wiped out. ...The Ijebu are not a monolithic group. The first to arrive were waves of immigrants who came under different leaders and from different directions—some from Ile-Ife, others from Benin, others from Ondo.2

However, the most common and widely rendered account is that the Ijebu migrated from Waddai, a location between the White and the Blue Nile in modern Republic of Sudan, to Ile-Ife with Oduduwa and his fleeing party from the Middle East. From Ile-Ife, Ijebus’ ancestors migrated southwards to the present location.3

Ogunkoya’s views are corroborated and affirmed by Ayandele in “The Early History of the Ijebu,” where, relying on oral tradition, he traced the migrations to Olu Iwa, Arisu and Ogboroganida (Obanta or Awujale).4 The Remo, according to Ayandele, “migrated to their present habitat from the Remo quarters of Ile-Ife at a much later time than the Ijebu proper.”5

**Agemo Festival: The Beginning**

Since the early history of the Ijebu is largely unwritten, this makes tracing the origin of the Agemo festival performance in Ijebuland a difficult task. The origin of Agemo festival performance like the history of the Ijebu relies heavily on oral traditions with diverse woven myths and legends. Sakirullah Badewa premised the deity’s origin on a legend that Agemo migrated to Ijebuland from the present day Saudi Arabia. According to him:

> Agemo was one of the polytheists that escaped religious war in the east and...came with his entourage to Ijebuland. (On) his entourage is Ija... his oracle consultant (Babalawo). (He was) received by Olisa and Awujale of Ijebu-Ode. Agemo was later driven out of Ijebu Ode
Imosan, the yearly host of Agemo adherents’ convergence, is derived from ‘igi osan’ literally translated to mean “orange tree.” It is a small town adjacent to another called Imodi, located some few kilometres north of Ijebu Ode.

Another version of the Agemo legend corroborates the migration. According to it, Agemo left southern Egypt on Olu-Iwa’s invitation to join in the southwards migration because of his prowess and popularity. On arrival, he and his party settled at Odo-Esa in the heart of Ijebu Ode but were relocated to Okun Owa and then moved to Imosan because of the inconveniences caused to the women folk, his growing influence which threatened the Awujale’s institution, and the threat that the Oko-Omayan River posed to the annual performance at Okun-Owa during the reign of Awujale Baruwa.

**Agemo Festival Significance**

African festivals, like most human actions, are purpose driven. Unlike Oyekan Owomoyela who believes that “festivals are social institutions by means of which men satisfy their fun-seeking instinct,”9 Ijebu festivals are performed for different reasons (entertainment inclusive). Their performance at most times, unlike Owomoyela’s view, goes beyond the desire to satisfy “fun-seeking instincts.” Agemo festival in Ijebuland is driven by different purposes.

Agemo is the Ijebu god of harvest, life and fertility. Because of the agrarian nature of the Ijebu, they believe that Agemo as a deity causes bountiful and poor harvests. Therefore, it becomes pertinent for them to placate him and prevent incurring his wrath through the yearly festival performance. Besides the deity’s importance to Ijebu’s agrarian life, Agemo, as the Lord of life, aids fertility. During the annual Agemo festival, barren women throng Imosan and Isasa performance grounds for prayers and blessings. Despite the multi-religious nature of many Ijebu towns and villages, the people still strongly believe in Agemo’s ability to cause fertility.

In Ijebuland, the annual performance of Agemo festival marks the beginning of a new calendar year. Across the world, most cultures have different means of calendar counting. The Ijebu use the performance of Agemo festival as the start of their calendar. In addition to this, New Year in Ijebuland is a time for harvest and consumption of new yams. Immediately after Agemo Festival is performed a new planting season begins. In a way, Agemo festival is a binary synonym for new yam festival performed in Igboland.

To the Ijebu, the significance of the annual Agemo festival performance is not restricted to the deity’s ability to give bountiful harvest, life and cause fertil-
ity alone; Agemo festival is also significant to the people’s traditional medical practice. In Ijebuland, one reptile of immense medicinal value is the chameleon. The performance of Agemo festival at Imosan and Isasa certifies the reptile’s use for medical purposes. In Ijebu and some Yoruba dialects, the chameleon is otherwise known as Agemo or Alagemo. The chameleon is a major symbol of Agemo deity’s worship.

THE CONTEXT OF AGEMO FESTIVAL PERFORMANCE

Festivals in different parts of the world are performed for diverse reasons, as stated earlier. These range from the religious to the historical, the social to the political, and at times can even be motivated by economic imperatives of the people. When festivals are performed to serve religious ends, Richard Schechner believes that they inoculate the society against falling into interminable violence. Like most festivals serving religious ends, many Yoruba festivals are “purification festivals.” They are periodic ritual efforts of the community “to rid-off of all evil generated by citizens since the last celebrations.” Beyond these reasons, festivals are sometimes performed because of their aesthetic values. Agemo festival, apart from serving these functions, is spectacular. This is because of the presence of features associated with ritual drama performance.

In oral literature scholarship, the terms “festival” and “ritual drama” are interchangeable synonyms, although, used in different contexts. G.D. Ekpeyong describes festival as:

> periodic recurring days or seasons of gaiety, merry making set aside by a community, tribe or clan, for the observance of sacred celebrations, religious solemnities or musical and traditional performance of special significance.  

Ugonna Nnabuenyi identifies the features of most African ritual festivals to include the performance of rites, the communion of people at a place (usually shrine, village square, market square, groves or any solemn spot) dramatic dancing, music playing and athletic displays. These characterize most ritual drama (Agemo festival performance of the Ijebu inclusive).

Ritual drama for its part is elusive in definition. This is due to the difficulty at determining the stage at which dramatic performance becomes ritualized. Not only that, but also controversial is the interchangeability of the terms ‘festival’ and ‘ritual drama.’ Beginning with the point at which dramatic performance becomes ritualized, it is pertinent to understand the term ‘ritual.’ Ritual, as Richard Schechner puts it, is “ordinary behavior transformed by means of condensation, exaggeration, repetition and rhythm into specialized sequences of behaviour serving specific function...”
The Context of Agemo Festival in Ijebuland

Tracing the origin of ritual drama, Yemi Ogunbiyi corroborates Schechner’s definitive explanation. According to him, ritual drama arose as a result of man’s quest for food and “how to make nature work according to his needs.” The “condensation” and “repetition” of this quest is the genesis of ritual drama.

In an attempt to explain the stage at which dramatic performance becomes ritualized, Philip Adedotun Ogundeji dichotomized drama from ritual drama. He explains that:

Whereas theatre and drama are believed to emphasize the aesthetic function, the emphasis of ritual is foregrounded largely on its efficacious function rather than on its aesthetic function. The efficacious or utilitarian function of ritual always involves a magico-religious undertone.

Beside the “efficacious or utilitarian function” that distinguishes ritual drama from drama, other differences can be located in the limitedness or restrictiveness of dialogue which occurs in either statement and response form, or question and answer, or litanic structure, and is enhanced by music, chant, songs, drumming, dancing, acrobatics and miming; trance or spirit possession; impersonation through masks or costumes; non-elaborateness of plot structure; absence of artistic director and other stage hands; setting; audience participation; and characterization.

On the controversy of the semantic interchangeability of “festival” and “ritual drama,” Nnabuenyi clarifies that “before ritual performance becomes drama the element of ritual festivity must have ceased to operate.” The word festival embodies “celebration and has its purely religious and ritual aspect as well as purely aesthetic features.” Based on this, ritual drama could constitute a part or a whole festival. The Agemo festival performance of the Ijebu is ritually religious because it involves propitiation of the deity through condensed but repetitive religious acts of worship. The condensation and repetition of the “acts” make Agemo performance ritually dramatic.

The qualification of Agemo festival as “ritually dramatic” is as a result of both extrinsic and intrinsic aesthetic features. Extrinsic aesthetic features refer to those characteristics that are external to the performance. They do not require special expertise for identification. Their absence disqualifies Agemo festival’s reference as a ritual drama. They are externally essential to the performance categorization. They include characteristics such as setting (plus scenic design), plot, audience etc. The intrinsic aesthetic features of ritual drama are those elements that are inherent (but very crucial) in the performance. Without critical observation (except by ritual performance scholars and others in sister discipline like drama), a misinterpretation such as likening it to some other things may occur. These intrinsic factors associated with the identification of ritual drama
include modes of ritual actualization (speech, song, chant etc.), props (sacri-

cifical and stage), action (whether dialogue, mime, dance, or a combination of the

three, and point of trance) and costumes (including the use of masks). Whether

intrinsic or extrinsic, Oyin Ogunba, in “Yoruba Festivals: Yesterday, Today and

Future,” prunes and accounts for just only the use of masks, costumes, dance and

stage (including staging) as features of African ritual drama using the Yoruba

festivals as example.18 Andrew Horn explains characterization in ritual drama.

According to him:

In ritual the actor is seen either as a representative (a priest) or as

another being entirely (a spirit). As a priest, he is rarely assumed

to be someone or something other than human, but rather to be

the repository of certain arcane knowledge and the skilled or even

inspired master of magical process.19

The sacred Agemo ritual festival, in Ijebuland, consists of two main perfor-

mances. The first is the general performance at Imosan and Isasa (in Ijebu-Ode)

and the other is Ifobu or local performance which takes place in all locations

where Agemo is worshipped in Ijebuland and beyond after the Imosan and Isasa

performances are over. At Imosan, the characters are principally the Oloja. They

are principal priests from about seventeen indigenous locations in Ijebuland

that throng Imosan for the performance of the annual Agemo ritual festival.20

These priests, apart from the Oloja title, have different titles by which they are

known in their different locations. The head amongst them is Tami. He hails

from Odogbolu. The Olojas have dual roles. As priests, they oversee the pro-

pitiation rites of the Agemo deity. They also represent the medium through

which the deity is brought to life. The Agemo characters during Ifobu are made

of the Oloja (known by different names) and about four other priests. Using

Igbile-Ijebu near Omu as a model, the Oloja, otherwise known as Serefusi, is

ably assisted during Agemo ritual performance by the Alase, the Abore, the

Abogunborisha and the Olotu Atiworo, each performing different roles. For

instance, the burden of applying sacrificial props during ritual rests on the

Abore’s shoulders. These characters, in ritual drama, are players.21

Next to characterization is the setting in which the ritual performance

takes place. Most African ritual displays’ setting has two determining criteria.

These, according to Oyin Ogunba, are availability of space and significance of

location.22 Perhaps a criterion which is not mentioned by Ogunba but a strong

determinant of the setting of most ritual enactments is the nature of such

displays. Nature here refers to the degree of openness or otherwise of the per-

formance to audience.23 This determines the size of the performance location.

Ogunba explains that the stage and staging of African ritual drama are usually

located in places considered “face of the earth” or ibi ti ile ti loju, or simply put,
land marks. Such locations, according to him, do not require stage construction as commonly found with most western theatres. They are located in places such as “outskirts of the town or village,” “historic places,” “particular routes,” “women’s cult houses,” “frontage of a house,” and “on water surfaces.”

Within the purview of Ogunba’s location of ritual drama stage, Agemo ritual festival of the Ijebu has route and the Agbala or Arala (in Remo sub-dialect) stages. The “route” stage accommodates all rites performed by the Agemo procession enroute Imosan and Isasa (in Ijebu Ode). Ogunba explains that the route stage of Agemo festival is:

some considerable distance.... the longest being about fifteen (15) miles. With Imosan at the centre, these routes are like the sixteen (16) radii of a circle, all converging at the centre... Each character’s route is a path through the forest most of the time, except when the route passes through a town or a village...

The Agemo’s party processions are no longer through the forest paths; they connect the Agbala stages (at Imosan and Isasa) through modern networks of roads. The Agbala stage similar to the “outskirts of the town or village” stage mentioned earlier is described by Ogunba to have

two apartments. One contains the Agemo....The other apartment of this building is like a little hall and this is the real sacrificial apartment. A section of this place is raised and reserved for the Agemo Chief characters. There they sit down and sing, watch, or participate in some other ways as the performance goes on.

Besides setting constituting an essential element of ritual drama, plot is likewise vital to most ritual performances. The difference between drama in its real sense and ritual drama could be explained through their plot structure. According to Horn, the plot of ritual drama is

not essentially story showing, although, it may sometimes involves bits of story, usually not fully enacted but rather recounted or recalled (in narration, recitation, oration, or song) and perhaps partly visualized in dance, tableaux, or mime.

Because of its mythic and religious nature, Agemo ritual enactments have a rigid plot structure. The performance is made of symbolic ritual acts such as sacrificial props application and dialogues during sacrifices either in the form of songs and chorus or prayer and response between priest and devotees.
The intrinsic features of Agemo ritual drama of the Ijebu refers to those characteristics that demand some level of scholarship in performance to appreciate and analyze. They contribute to the wholesomeness and spectacle of the performance. At the pinnacle of these features is the mode of ritual actualization. This in itself is self-explanatory. The bulk of Agemo ritual festival texts are realized in speech, song and chant modes. The speech mode is used especially in formal and informal contexts. In formal situations, the speech mode is used for prayers. Informally, the speech mode occurs in conversation during the rites (aito) to the Agemo deity. During Agemo ritual enactment, the song mode is used for prayers and entertainment. On its part, the chant mode occurs during sacrificial rites, the long trek to Imosan and Isasa, and the administration of prayer or curses (epe).

Props are essential to most theatrical and ritual performances. They contribute to the overall spectacle of the performance especially stage scenic design. The sacred Agemo ritual festival props are of two kinds: sacrificial props and stage props. Sacrificial props refer to materials used for sacrificial rites. On the other hand, stage props contribute to the scenic design of the stage. Agemo festival sacrificial props include a bull or cow (eran nla or maalu), kolanut (obi), locally brewed gin (ogogoro), palm fronds, leaves of different types, tortoise (ahun) and dog (aja). All these are applied at various stages of the rites to the deity. Tents (known as saago), stools (agbele), lamps etc. constitute some of the stage props used during Agemo ritual performance. Each priest and their party are domiciled in the tents for the period of their stay at Imosan or Isasa.

Using the Bori ritual performance among the Hausa, an ethnic group in the Sahel/Guinea Savanna belt of West Africa, as an example in a comparative study of ritual and drama, Andrew Horn believes that “The ultimate end of ritual is to have an effect on the spirits, to make the god act.”28 In ritual dramas, the impersonated spirit or god act through occasional dialogue, the spirit medium is also felt through mime (i.e. symbolic non-verbal body movements) or dance. Sometimes these three means are interspersed with each other. For the sacred Agemo ritual festival, the spirit medium (be it costumed or otherwise) combines these three modes of ritual actualization. A combination of the three means catapults the medium into a state of trance or possession. Phillip Adedotun Ogundeji explains that “trance or possession” in ritual drama occurs

when the performer reaches state of spiritual ecstasy in which he or she does not control any more his action or speech, the character being impersonated is believed to have taken over the acting. This point marks the visitation of the spirit (god or goddess).29

The Agemo spirit medium is thrown into hysteria at the height of the rattling of hand bells (ipawo) by the Oloja and the high-tempo beating of the Aran and
Apesi drums, striking of gongs (agogo) and bamboo sticks, and accompanying lyrical songs. The point of trance is usually the climax of most ritual performances.

Costumes and costuming constitute a very important feature of ritual drama. The spectacle that characterizes most ritual performance is due largely apart from stage design, song and mime, to the costumes don by the spirit medium. It may therefore not be wrong to approximate spectacle with costumes and costuming in ritual drama. Nnabuenyi, while explaining the spectacle of Mmonwu (a ritual drama of the Igbo), did admit the power and contribution of costuming to the colorfulness of the ritual performance. According to him, they make “an illusion appears real.”30 The overall beauty of Agemo ritual performance is largely attributable to the costume of the Agemo spirit medium.

Agemo costumes are of two kinds. As a priest, it is made up of a large cloth spread that covers the body, a dansiki (sleeveless native wear) or an agbada (traditional robe or gown) with a long skirt, a small towel like cloth placed on the shoulder (saaki) and sometimes wrapped on the head, beaded neck, beaded or bangled hands holding a hand bell (ipawo) on the right and a long thin iron staff in the left hand. The spirit medium dons two types of costumes: raffia straws (iko) and a colorfully designed mat made from reed straws (eni). When the medium appears in the iko, there is always a mask-like crown (ade Agemo) with figurines that depict Ijebu’s historical past or animals (most times bird-like) that are associated with the veneration of the Agemo deity, that hide the medium’s identity. Masks are therefore important to most ritual enactments. They make impersonation possible, protect the medium’s identity and enhance the spiritual ecstasy (trance or possession) of the medium during performance.

**Conclusion**

This chapter foregrounds the reference to Agemo festival as a ritual drama. It identifies the basic ingredients of ritual performance that are present in Agemo, the Ijebu scared ritual drama. In doing this, the effort locates the Ijebu as a people, the origin and significance of Agemo ritual festival to aid appreciation of the religious essence despite the commitment to aesthetics. The study then moves on to discuss the controversy over the point at which dramatic performance becomes ritualized. It examines scholarly opinions expressed in this regard. It then makes a nexus between the expressed opinions and the performance of the Agemo ritual drama among the Ijebu. The study also looked at aesthetic features of ritual performances and how appropriate it is to refer to Agemo festival as a ritual drama based on these features.

From the foregoing it can be assertively said that Agemo, the sacred ritual festival of the Ijebu, is qualified to be referenced ritual drama. The observable
aesthetic features, which contribute to its spectacle, make it so. Added to these, and more important, the content and context of the Agemo ritual festival of the Ijebu sub-group of the Yoruba represent a coagulation of religion, history and entertainment.

Notes

7. Oral interview with Prince Oladapo Dosumu (60 years), a member of the extended Olowa family in Ijebu Ode, and a retiree of Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (Kaduna National Station), conducted June 6, 2001.
17. Ibid.


26. Ibid., 82.

27. Horn, “Ritual Drama and Theatrical,” 197.

28. Ibid., 196.


Chapter 23

ÒRÎSÀ ELEGUN SANGO AND THE DIVERSITY OF SPIRIT POSSESSION

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INTRODUCTION

The Yoruba people are in the forefront of both historical and contemporary shaping of the African religion and culture. Indeed the influence of the Yoruba religion and culture has transcended the African space. Based partly on the unfortunate human migration through the slave trade and other forms of migration, the influence has become global, forming a significant part of Yoruba religion and culture in the worship (veneration) of divinities known as orisas.

The venerations of the various orisas are usually socially based. This is because the religion of the Yoruba is not one of solitude, but rather it is a community religion; there are hardly any private moments between a person and an orisa.\(^1\) The venerations are usually accomplished in various festivals and one of the components of the veneration is spirit possession (Egun), through which there is communication between the spiritual and human worlds. Among Sango devotees, spirit possession is regarded as a significant part of veneration. Characteristically the “Elegun Sango” (Sango spirit possessed person) brings to reality a personality momentarily subsumed in the divine, and consequently speaking not as a human but as an orisa. The spirit possession here definitely finds collaboration in the concept of prophecy in the Old Testament such that when the prophet says “Thus says the Lord,” the words which follow are no longer his, but those of Yahweh and in contemporary Christianity, the speaking
in tongues and going into trances in Pentecostal Churches. Also outside Yoruba land and particularly among the Yoruba Diaspora in Haiti, it is this practice of spirit possession which finds comparison with the vodou practice.2

The focus of this chapter is the significance of spirit possession in the veneration of Yoruba orisas as a unique paradoxical linkage of the spiritual and human realms. Though the practice as found in the veneration of Sango is discussed, it only demonstrates a concrete example of the significance and relevance of the practice, which finds parallels first with the concept of sainthood,3 speaking in tongues and going into trance in Pentecostal Christianity, and can be compared to voodooism as practiced among the Yoruba in the Diaspora. The discourse is articulated under the following sub-topics: spirit possession, Orisas and their veneration in Yoruba land, Sango veneration and spirit possession, and spirit possession in global diversity.

SPIRIT POSSESSION: GENERAL CONCEPT

Spirit possession is a common phenomenon and is indeed an important feature of most religions.4 Though, its antiquity is not in doubt, it is at the same time a controversial concept in the field of religion, cultural anthropology and psychology. Generally, spirit possession is based on the belief that supernatural powers, whether spiritual or divine, may become embodied in a human being temporarily or permanently, leading to abnormal behaviors and/or utterances. These behaviors and utterances are displayed with super-human strength often accompanied by fits and convulsions, having knowledge of the future or other secret information. The possessed may also be able to understand and converse in languages previously unknown.5

It is important to point out that spirit possession may often be confused to demonic possession.6 However the difference in the two lies in that, in demonic possession a person is taken over by the evil spirit for harm, while spirit possession is a culturally sanctioned displacement of personality.7 Unfortunately, modern science has brought more problems for spirit possession, particularly with Western influence; many psychiatrists and psychologists regard spirit possession as abnormal and a demonstration of an unhealthy mental state. Sometimes the possessed is taken to be suffering from acute schizophrenia.8

However, for Africans in general and Yoruba in particular, it would be a gross oversimplification and out of context to regard spirit possession as mental or psychological disorder. The significance of spirit possession is properly put in perspective by the fact that religions specialists such as prophets, diviners, seers and so on operate within its context.

Within the Yoruba context, belief in spirit possession presupposes the existence of divinities (orisas) who inhabit the timeless realm, and who want
and are able to communicate with human kind. Thus, Lewis’ position that there
preconditions must exist before spirit possession can take root in a culture is
applicable to the Yoruba. The first is that the Yoruba believe that there are higher
spirits (orisas) who want to communicate with humans. Secondly, they believe
that these gods (orisas) are capable of bridging the chasm between the finite and
the infinite by taking control of the senses, speech and actions of individuals.
Thirdly, Yoruba religious belief holds that a person who is possessed conforms
to a known behavioral pattern.

For the Yoruba, spirit possession is viewed positively as a genuine means of
intermediation. This is because the possessed provide needed information for
the peace and orderliness of the community or the welfare of individuals.

**Orisas and their Veneration in Yorubaland**

The orisas in Yoruba land are otherwise called divinities or gods. The
orisas are next to the Supreme Being in the hierarchical structure of the Yoruba
religious belief system. The orisas are sub-divided into primordial and deified
divinities. The primordial divinities are believed to have been with Olodumare
since the beginning of creation. Such divinities include Obatala, who is believed
to be the agent of creation and the molder of man’s body. This is why he is
referred to as “Alamo rere” (the fine molder). The deified divinities are those
who were once living beings but who became deified because of the awesome
power they possessed while on earth. Sango mythically belongs to this category
of divinities.

Essentially to the Yoruba, the orisas are creatures of Olodumare, the
purpose of their creation is to assist Olodumare in the theocratic governance
of the world. Indeed to the Yoruba they are intermediaries between man and
Olodumare. This is why there is usually a near fanatical devotion to them.
Indeed the belief of the Europeans has been that the worship of the divinities
has superseded that of the Supreme Being to the extent that the religion of the
people is often referred to as ancestral worship or polytheism.

Because of the high esteem in which the orisas are held, the Yoruba venerate
them. This veneration through festivals usually contains spirit possession
by the devotee of the divinities. The Yoruba belief is that the festivals, which
are many and take place at different times of the year, reinforce the unity of
the community. Thus anybody including the Oba in the community is usually
involved in the festivals. Not only do the festivals unite the community, but they
also bring blessings such as rain and good fortune to the people. Indeed festivals
are the most attractive and public veneration of the orisas. Through the festivals,
the orisas ensure the unity, peace and prosperity of the land.
While spirit possession can be part of the festivals, it also takes place at other times. However, the essential thing is that there is a relationship between the orisás and their devotees. The one chosen to be possessed by the orisa is called the orisa’s egun, and has the privilege of having the orisa “settle” on his/her head. This devotee then becomes the vehicle through which the orisa returns to Earth to receive the adulation of other worshipers.10

**Orisa Sango, Veneration and Spirit Possession**

The veneration of Sango is a typical example of spirit possession taking place. This may have arisen from the myths concerning the orisa, which depict him as a ferocious and fire-spitting deity. Different traditions have emerged about the personality of Sango. For a long time the most prevalent traditions regarded Sango as an historical figure who ruled as the Fourth Alaafin of Oyo, who because of his tyrannical and wicked rule had to abdicate the Alaafin throne and then hang himself (oba so). Some friends of Sango had to obtain some magical substance which attracted lightning, and they used it in Oyo town against those who said oba so (the king has hanged himself), and then admonished them to say oba koso (the king did not hang) to save themselves from disaster. Thus began the worship of Sango as an orisa with offerings such as fowls, oxen, sheep, kola nuts and palm-oil.

However, further research has come to show that this tradition may not be totally accurate. Based on the Yoruba worshipers of Sango themselves and as derived from four *odu-ifa* (*ifa*), the idea that Sango was the fourth king in Oyo has become suspect. For example, *odu ogbatura* points to Sango as having been taken to Oyo from Ile-Ife as a divinity by Jagbe, the first Alaafin of Oyo, who thereafter established the worship of Sango in Oyo. On his part, *odu otusi oriko* tells the story of Sango’s initiation into the cult of *ifa* and the origin and source of his power. Odu eko describes Sango’s profession as dancing especially to the popular bata drum with its aggressive rhythm. Moreover, *odu owariniyeku* narrates how Sango married Oya.11

From all of these sources a new myth about Sango is emerging, which tends to present Sango as an orisa that represents the wrath and judgment of Olodumare. He is against stealing, lying and wickedness. Indeed, he strikes down those who involved themselves in such iniquities. Thus children are named after him, such as Sangoseyi (Sango has done this), Sangotoyin (Sango be praised) and Sangosegun (Sango is victorious).

The controversial strength of the earlier and latter day traditions is of no consequence with regard to the veneration received by Sango as a popular Yoruba orisa. The devotees of Sango are quite numerous in Yoruba land and to a large extent among the Yoruba in Diaspora. The trademark of the devotees
is the plating of their hair and the traditional bata drum. Festivals are held for Sango in different locations in Yoruba land. As earlier pointed out, Sango was known as professional dancer and his popular drum was the bata drum. This has also remained a trademark of his devotees. Spirit possession in the veneration of Sango is symbolized in the *elegun* Sango. The possession is attained amidst strenuous beating of the bata drum, singing and dancing. The unique thing is that any of the devotees could be possessed by Sango. Whatever the possessed devotee utters is the word of Sango himself, which must not be altered.

Apart from the festival period when Sango possess one or more of his celebrating devotees, the elegun Sango becomes prominent when someone has been struck down by lightning and thunder believed to have been sent by Sango. Amidst the rituals of singing and dancing in calculated steps, the elegun Sango pronounces the items that the family of the one struck by Sango should provide, including all the property of the deceased. Carrying out the instructions of the elegun Sango is mandatory. Sometimes the language spoken by the elegun Sango may not be understandable by those present; thus an interpreter comes handy. The symbolic aspect of the spirit possession of the Sango devotee is the paradox involved in that though the devotee is a human being he has taken on the personality of Sango. He/she is not just a representative of Sango, but the deity himself personified. Thus all through the period of possession whatever utterances, actions, gestures and admonishment come from the elegun are believed to be divine and must be regarded as those of Sango himself. Thus the elegun has the power to bind and unbind, to dispense curses and blessings, and all he/she says will on most occasions come to pass. This elegun Sango himself may not be fully aware of his state until he has been dispossessed. During the period of possession the elegun Sango becomes as it were a unification of the human and spiritual realms, perhaps unconsciously but with unique efficacy.

**Spirit Possession in Global Diversity**

The diversity and pluralism arising from the Yoruba worship of orisa and spirit possession, which has found global application, may be approached in two different ways or at two different levels. The first is perhaps finding acceptance for the concept of orisas and spirit possession with the global plurality of religions and emerging cross-cultural influences. The second and fitting byproduct of the first is the movement, or better put, the migration of the Yoruba worship of orisa and spirit possession as found in elegun Sango that has emerged in the practice of voodooism among the Yoruba in Diaspora in places like Brazil, Cuba and parts of the United States, where the practice has become almost a religion by itself.

At the first level, the concept of divinities known as orisas in Yoruba religion can be compared to that of saints in Christianity, particularly if the
aspects of meaning, significance, relevance and functionalism associated with the concepts in the two religions are brought to light. For example, graphic enunciation of angels in the Christian tradition as co-residents of the heavenly court and messengers of God, find similar traditions in African religion. The angels are participants in the creative work of God. Thus Genesis 1:26 says “let us make man in our own image and likeness”. Also as God’s messengers, angels in both Old and New Testaments undertake specific tasks commissioned by God. They deliver messages, for example at the birth of Samson (Judges 13:1-24), John (Luke: 1:5-24) and Jesus (Luke 1:26-38) the shepherds at night (Luke 2:8-19). They were to minister to Christ after the Temptation (Mt 1:11), and at the grave of Jesus (Mt. 28:1-7) to give the news of his resurrection.

Spirit possession can also be located in the tradition of Christianity, both in the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, there are many instances of the spirit possessing personalities which vividly depict the phenomenon as found in African religion with relation to the orisas. For example, the prophets of the Old Testament are regarded to have been possessed by the spirit of Yahweh once they pronounced “Thus says the Lord”. A specific example of this is found in the story of the esthetic ban of Nabis in 1 Samuel 10, who prophesized after been spiritually possessed through singing, clapping and dancing. Even before the time of the prophets, the idea of spirit possession emerged in the early part of Israel’s leadership history: when Moses complained of the burden of leadership, the Lord instructed him to choose 70 elders among the people and He put the spirit of Moses on them. Numbers 11:25-26 puts it thus:

The Lord came down in the cloud and spoke with him and he took the spirit that was in him and put the spirit on the seventy elders. When the spirit rested on them, they prophesized and continues to do so.....

In the New Testament, spirit possession can be identified in two basic ways. The first originated from the first descendant of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles: possessed with the spirit they began to speak in languages they were not familiar with before. This tradition has translated to speaking in tongues among Christians today. A member of the Pentecostal churches who does not speak in tongues is yet to be fully initiated into the Baptism of the Holy Spirit.

The second presence of spirit possession in the New Testament is the act of going into a trance after aggressive singing, clapping and dancing. This has also become a prominent feature of the indigenous African churches, particularly the white garment ones. The worshiper in trance is regarded as a divine personality in human form. During the trance, having been taken over by the spirit, the person has uncommon knowledge, he sees into the future, he knows what has
happened in the past and can therefore begin to prophesize. This phenomenon in Christianity can be compared to voodooism.

Apart from the concept of Yoruba orisa and spirit possession finding parallel concepts in Christianity, of more interest to us here is that the Yoruba in Diaspora, particularly in Brazil, Cuba and parts of United States have to a large extent, through the migration of the Yoruba religion and culture to these places, globalized these phenomena, thereby providing a plurality in diverse parts of the world. For example the typical belief of the Yoruba in orisa has found a home among the Yoruba group in Cuba known as Lukumi. Originally taken to Cuba as slaves, they now practice the Santeria religion. The religion is characterized by gods and goddesses called orisas. Yoruba ideology, songs, religious practices and customs went along with them to Cuba. However due to linguistic divergence, there have been changes in the spelling and pronunciations of the names: Sango is now called Chango, Oshun is now Ochun and Y emoja is now Yemeja.

Another factor of the migration of the belief in Yoruba orisas as found in the Santeria is the process of syncretizing the Yoruba orisas with the Christian saints of the Catholic Church which the Yoruba Cubans came in contact with. For instance Chango is syncretized with Saint Barbara, Ochun with Virgin of Copper, Obatala with the Virgin of Las Mercedes (Young Lady of Mercy) and Ogun with Saint Peter. Another factor of the migration of the belief in Yoruba orisas as found in the Santeria is the process of syncretizing the Yoruba orisas with the Christian saints of the Catholic Church which the Yoruba Cubans came in contact with. For instance Chango is syncretized with Saint Barbara, Ochun with Virgin of Copper, Obatala with the Virgin of Las Mercedes (Young Lady of Mercy) and Ogun with Saint Peter. In addition, Yoruba Cubans seek the attention of the orisas worshipped in every aspect of their lives. Thus, in agreement with Toyin Falola and Anna Geneva, the orisas and their worship are global in the sense that they are transnational.

The phenomenon of spirit possession at the instance of the orisas has also found expression in the practice of vodou. When one compares the characteristics of voodooism and egun (spirit possession) in the Yoruba tradition, one finds the same basic content and functionalities. Fundamentally, it is the divine possession of the human who for the period of being under the influence of the spirit, sees and does things that are not available to the ordinary human. It is a functionalism in the spiritual realm which offers to link the two worlds through communication.

Just as with the Yoruba Songo divinity, spirit possession in Vodou is characterized by a number of features. First is the god which possesses the devotee. Here, Legba is the ‘Iwa’ (orisa) who is mainly greeted at the beginning of all Vodou ceremonies and is considered the leading god in vodou spirit possession.

Secondly, spirit possession is regarded in Vodou as the most vital manifestation of the communication between the vodou devotees and the spirits (gods) that guide them; thus the possession is demonstrated by going into a mystic trance during witch ‘Iwa’ incarnate themselves in one of the devotees. As Joan Degan indicates, this moment of incarnation is that in which the gods inhabit the head of the devotee and thus unify the material with the spiritual. To sym-
bolize this unification, the devotee called the ‘horse’ is said to be mounted and ridden by the possessing god.

Thirdly, music and dancing constitute very important aspects of spirit possession in vodou. This is because the total possession of the ‘horse’ is occasioned by complete surrender produced by the rhythms of the sacred vodou drums and the lyrics of vodou songs. The chants are employed as ritualized innovations to summon the gods to possess the devotees. For example the song to the god Agwe goes thus:

We are announcing to you, voodoo spirits
That a ceremony is about to begin
We are inviting all the spirits of vill-aux-cemps
we are asking Agometaroio to bring them in his boat
Please do use Agometaroio’s boat and do come to the temple.17

The dances are simple but specific in movement, mostly counterclockwise. A combination of the songs and dancing create the mystical medium for the ‘Iwa’ to take possession of the ‘horse.’

A fourth feature of spirit possession in vodou is the symbolic selflessness of the ‘horse’ in the process and outcome of the experience. This is vividly identified by Daren when he says:

The possessed benefits least of all men from his own possession. He may even suffer for it in material loss, in something painful, always exhausted physical aftermath...Never have I seen the face of such anguish, ordeal and blind terror as the moment when the ‘Iwa’ comes.18

Finally, as in all other phenomena of spirit possession, vodou spirit possession can be used for evil means, but it can also be used beneficially to foresee the future and to guide both individuals and communities.

CONCLUSION

The preoccupation in this chapter is to examine the concept of spirit possession associated with Yoruba orisas, as exemplified in the elegun Sango which is comparable with the concept of sainthood and spirit possession in Christianity on the one hand, and the practice of vodooism among the Yoruba in Diaspora on the other. Essentially, the focus is to highlight the unification of the human and spiritual worlds in the possessed. The significance involved is that the elegun in Sango worship among the Yoruba, speaking in tongues and going into trances in Christianity, and engaging in voodooism, bring to the fore the idea that spirit possession is diversely practiced globally, and that the origin
or source of the phenomenon indicates existence of a spiritual or divine world captured in the Yoruba belief in the existence and relevance of orisas.

Notes

3. Ibid., 107.
15. Ibid., 117.
17. Murphy, Working the Spirit, 19.
CASTE SYSTEM AMONG THE OKUN-YORUBA: THE OWE EXAMPLE

Ilesanmi Akanmidu Paul

INTRODUCTION

A caste system is a form of class dichotomy and discrimination among people or peoples that occupy a definite geographical area. According to Abdoulaye Bara Diop, a sociologist who specializes in caste systems among the Wolof of Senegal, he defined caste as a hereditary, endogamous group that are assigned specific occupations and governed by strict hierarchical relationships. It is an endogamous system in which people are bifurcated on the basis of certain variables such as skin, ethnicity, origin, and religious affiliation. The above elements constitute to some extent a major yardstick for discrimination in the socio-economic, political and socio-cultural hierarchy of a society. Sociological and anthropological studies have revealed pretty clearly that caste systems are a global phenomenon, which explains why some groups are privileged to have access to “social machines” to suppress the less-privileged groups to the status of “second class” citizens. The less-privileged groups are relegated to the background, deprived, tortured and humiliated through the weapons of the privileged groups to the level of a mere “object of servitude.” A classical example includes the experience of Dalits and Tamils in Sri Lanka and India.

Moreover, the experiences of Burakumin in Japan as well as the Neeno among the Wolof of Senegal are cases in point. The Osu in Igboland in Nigeria
is by no means different. Even though the nature of the system takes different forms among these countries, the features are more or less the same. They include oppression, segregation, humiliation and suspicion among others.

**The Okun-Yoruba People**

The group that are commonly and collectively referred to as the Okun-Yoruba in literature are the people that occupy the north-eastern part of the Yoruba, southwest-middle of the Niger Basin in the North-central geographical zone of the Middle Belt of Nigeria. Geographically, the group is circumscribed within latitude 7°, 30°N and 8°, 35°N, and longitude 5°, 20°E and 5°, 30°E. The region is bordered to the North by the Nupe, Ebira to the East, the Edo speaking people to the Southeast and other Yoruba groups to the West and Southwest.

The term ‘Okun’ is used in this context to designate the accephalous Yoruba grouping currently identified in their sub-categories as the Yagba, Ijumu, Abinu (Bunu), Owe and Oworo, in the present day Kogi State of Nigeria. They are called Okun after their mode of salutation, common but not absolutely peculiar to them. This is because the Ijesa, Ekiti, Akoko, even Oyo-Yoruba could, in a broad sense, be included among the users of that form of salutation. It is noteworthy that Okun was considered sufficiently distinctive (mostly by outsiders) to be applicable in a special sense to the groups under study here. Ade Obayemi’s assertion that, ‘the most (and only) stable basis for defining cultural identity is the linguistic or dialect,’ would appear applicable here. The Okun are not a “cultural island” unto themselves. As a Yoruba sub-entity, they share the basics of the Yoruba culture even though their speech is a variant (dialect) of the Yoruba. To outsiders, Okuns’ mode of salutation stands out, and now serves as an acceptable marker for the purpose of group identity. This group consciousness is reinforced by common historical experiences, a peculiar socio-cultural pattern and shared legends of origin and migration.

Oral tradition has remained the most viable evidence of their past historical reconstruction. This is however not peculiar to them; it is rather a general phenomenon of pre-literate African societies. Different traditions agree that the origin of the Okun-Yoruba people is traceable to Ile-Ife, the cradle of the Yoruba nation.

We do not have evidence to justify the exact time or period when the first crop of immigrants from Ile-Ife settled in Okunland. All we know through archaeological evidence of the area of our focus was that as early as 1800, substantial evidence of civilization had been noticed. D.T. Davies in the notes on Kabba Division writes:
The peoples are of Yoruba stock speaking dialects of the Yoruba. They follow more or less the same custom as regard age-grades, birth, burials, marriages and religious beliefs. However, a close interaction with their neighbors in the general Niger-Benue confluence area such as the Nupe, Igala and Ebira among others, have no doubt influenced their cultural traits. They have imbibed in varying degrees aspects of the cultures of the neighboring peoples, and the course of their history has been very significantly affected.

Politically, the Okun-Yoruba is more or less an acephalous society. They have no central tradition of Obaship in the classical pattern of the Ife or Oyo. This probably justifies the reason they have been numbered among societies dubbed segmentary by anthropologists. Their socio-political organization is gerontocratic in character and is tied closely to the clan system.

The clan is the most important socio-political unit. The village (or village group) made up of a number of clans constituted the largest political formation in the pre-colonial days. The clan is identified by a distinct name and a set of Orikis (appellation or praise titles), which among other functions tell the story of its development.

**The Owe (Kabba) People**

The group that occupied Oweland are referred to as Owe/Kabba people and their language has the same appellation. They formed one of the major groups that constitute the Okun-Yoruba people. The geographical location of this group is harbored within latitude 07° 50′N and longitude 06° 05′E. Oweland is bordered to the Southeast by Okene, Bunuland to the Northeast, Ogidi to the West and Okoro Gbedde to the Northwest; all in the Middle Belt in the present Kogi State, Nigeria. Owe language enjoys intelligibility with other Okun-Yoruba groups such as Bunu, Ijumu, Igbedde and Oworo. Owe/Kabba’s political and commercial significance among the Okun-Yoruba pre-dates the colonial period in the 20th century. During the Nupe invasions which culminated in the establishment of their hegemony over the Okun-Yoruba in the 19th century, Owe/Kabba assumed the status of administrative headquarters of the region.

This probably was informed by its geographical location as an entrepot to Okene, Lokoja, Ikare, and Ibilo from Ilorin and other Okun-Yoruba settlements long before the Nupe invasions in the 1830s. Its position facilitated trade networks around the Middle Belt region. Thus, Owe/Kabba has almost assumed a commercial emporium over the areas generally referred to as the Okun-Yoruba before 1800. It is most probable that its position as the commercial centre
attracted an influx of immigrants from different places to Owe/Kabba for commercial activities.

During the colonial era, both the officials of the Royal Niger Company and Lugard that took over the administration of the area later gave social recognition to the position of Owe as the status quo of headship was maintained. To enhance the full economic exploration and smooth indirect rule over the newly acquired territories, the British administrators appointed the Obaro of Kabba as the District Head of Kabba District, made up of Owe, Bunu, Ijumu and East-Yagba in 1918. Similarly, the British administration established a single Native Court in Kabba (Owe) in which the Obaro of Kabba was also to preside. Owe/Kabba became one of the thirteen provincial headquarters that made up the then Northern Region of Nigeria during the colonial era; and throughout the period, it remained the headquarters of Kabba Division. After Nigeria’s independence in 1960, Owe/Kabba became the Oyi Local Government headquarters, which accommodated all the Okun-Yoruba communities in the then Kwara State.

The situation remained until 1991 when more states and Local Governments were created. Kogi State was carved out from Kwara and Benue States. The whole of Okun-Yoruba fell under Kogi State while Oyi Local Government that has hitherto accommodated them was bifurcated into Kabba/Bunu and Ijumu Local Governments. The position of Owe/Kabba during this period explains why the whole of Okun-Yoruba people are called “Kabba” by the outsiders.

The historical account as exemplified above illuminates our understanding about the significant position of Owe/Kabba in the historical antecedent of the Okun-Yoruba people from pre-colonial times to the present among the people generally referred to as the Okun-Yoruba people.

**The Historical Origin of Owe People**

Like many other settlements in Nigeria, the origin of the Owe people is still shrouded in obscurity. We still await more realistic archaeological evidence to ascertain the very exactitude of diverse historical origins of several ethnic groups in Nigeria of which our place of concentration is a part. However, historians and anthropologists have hitherto relied mostly on oral traditions, myths, legends and folklore among others as relative bases for their historical analyses about the historical origin and evolution of many groups in Africa.

Several myths and traditions give palpable insights into the origin and evolution of the Owe people. Historians have come to consensus on the myth that traces the origin of the Owe people to Ile-Ife the cradle of the Yoruba family.

The tradition traces the origin to the migration of three brothers who were presumably hunters from Ile-Ife to found the three Owe settlements that
Caste System Among the Okun-Yorùbá: The Owe Example

became known as Katu, Kabba and Odolu. Owe as the inhabitants of Kabba people often called was said to be a nickname of “Oba Akaiyeja,” the father of the three hunting brothers from Ile-Ife who founded the three Owe settlements. Oba Akaiyeja was given the nickname in recognition of his great command of Yoruba proverbs known as “Owe.” Akaiyeja’s three sons who founded the three settlements were not remembered by their names but by their pet names: Aro, Reka and Balaja from the eldest to the youngest. Each of them founded one of the three settlements as pointed out earlier.

We do not have evidence to suggest the very year that the migrants left Ile-Ife and why they left. All we know based on oral evidence was that by 1800, substantial evidence of civilization had been noted in Oweland. One tradition argues that the three hunters left Ile-Ife due to protracted wars there; the other suggests a quest for better fortunes. Be that as it may, the three brothers founded the three settlements as mentioned before. Katu refers to the place where they unpacked their luggage, Kabba—a shortened form of Oke-Aba—referred to their resting place, which was full of “fork trees” (Aba) on which they hung their hunting implements and packages. Odolu was used to describe the downtown of the other two settlements. Each of these settlements was headed by one of the brothers with the eldest, Aro at Katu, Reka in Kabba and Balaja, the youngest, in charge of Odolu. The three settlements were jointly called Owe and together constitute the three lineages in Oweland.

After a long period of political and economic activities, the settlements grew and merged into one unit generally known as Kabba. In addition, each lineage grew in numbers to form new clans. A total of thirteen clans (Akus) now exist with three, six and four originating from each lineage. Aro lineage has Atipa, Abata and Isoro. Reka lineage has Lemila, Idogba, Ilajo, Odogba, Ugbo and Okere. Balaja lineage has: Ogbagi, Ijemu, Irasi and Teko. All together making thirteen clans in Oweland. Every clan in each lineage has right to family farmlands, worshipped the same “Ebora” (the supreme Owe deity), identifies with similar historical praise names (Oriki) and shares common sacred groves, where age-grade initiation are performed and chieftaincy titles are conferred. Members of the same clan are distinguished by common clan names and often by the observance of certain ritual prohibitions sometimes called “avoidance” connected with particular objects. More importantly, they cannot marry one another, this is the rule of exogamy.

**THE EMERGENCE OF CASTE SYSTEM IN OWELAND**

Exploration of the emergence or historical origin of a caste system in Oweland is indeed a herculean task. Many inhabitants of Oweland and scholars would rather frown at any discussion on this subject. Such discussions have been
tantamount to an attempt to open a “Pandora’s box” and as such, a no-go area for academic research. This perhaps justifies the dearth of information about the system in Oweland. It is however evident that a caste system is very strong in Oweland.

The people of Oweland were said to have settled down for socio-political and economic activities for several years as earlier examined when there were influx into Oweland of some immigrants whose origin could not be identified. This group were called Idamori (the origin unknown). In spite of this general perception however, several traditions give clues to their probable origins. One tradition refers to this group as descendants of slaves. If indeed they were originally slaves, it is possible that they were captured during the various inter-ethnic wars. However, the very war is unknown. Another tradition argues that the Idamori group belongs to the original inhabitants of the area, overcome and enslaved by the later founders of Oweland. Yet another tradition has it that the Idamori group is an offshoot of the three to four decades Nupe’s imperialism in Okun-Yorubaland. It was argued that Kabba was the headquarters where slaves that were captured during the Nupe raid of Okun-Yorubaland were assembled before they were wriggled to Nupeland as slaves.

It was emphasized that many of the captured slaves died in the process as a result of unbearable rigor and lack of proper health care, coupled with malnutrition. It was however stressed that some of the slaves escaped while others surrendered themselves willingly to the local bourgeoisies and chiefs in order to avoid being transported to Nupeland as slaves or partly for the fear of the unknown. Some of these slaves were hidden, sheltered and fed by their overlords. It appears that this group of people is today referred to as Idamori invariably became slaves to their lords, kings and other important personalities. This is different from the Osu caste system in Igboland, which referred to the “Osus” as people sacrificed or “dedicated” to the gods. That is, those that were set aside as properties of the gods. They lived separately and cannot be married by the free born. People could become Osu by birth, crime and for protection in time of wars and invasions.

The Idamoris are equally referred to as Omo Odo. The etymology of the word, ‘Omo Odo’ is traceable to the Owe original settlement locations. The three Owe settlements, Katu, Kabba and Odolu were built on the three hills that lay behind Kabba settlement because of the fear of external invasions.

When the Idamori group came they were not allowed to live in the mainstream or on the hill top where the original settlements were initially built. They were rather allowed to settle in the valleys down below the hills. This explains why they were called Omo Odo (children of down below). The original Owe people that lived on the hilltops were called Omo Oke (children of the hilltops). The Idamoris became laborer, guards, household assistants, while majority of them were used as slaves.
My personal interactions during interviews with one of the prominent Idamori elders who failed to disclose his identity, argued that, Owe people were never enslaved by any group, neither did they enslave any. How come then he quarries, that they have slaves living with them? He however argued that the caste phenomenon became entrenched when some privileged people began to claim superiority over others as a result of their socio-economic advantage. Whatever their origin might have been, it is certain that Omo Odos have the status of second class citizens in Owe traditional society. The note compiled in 1928 by Capt. H.S. Bridel, the then divisional officer (D0) in charge of Kabba Division has it that:

The Omo odos ...were the original slaves of Kabba people, they were slaves up to the time of our coming to Kabba when they were liberated and their descendants have always lived apart in a ward to the south of Kabba called Idamori.

**Special Features of the Caste System in Oweland**

A cursory look at the inter-personal relations among the inhabitants of Oweland, one might hardly notice any differences between the people. This is because there are no obvious signs such as “tribal” marks, dialectical variation etc., that distinguish between the Omo Oke and Omo Odo, or Idamori (the unknown origin). However, a critical study of the inter-personal relations in the community reveals that certain features show some high degree of class variations.

In the first place, there is discrimination in the traditional religion. This sharply divides the people along the line of historical origin. Owe traditional religion has two major denominations—“Ebora” and “Egungun” cults. The Omo Okes predominantly dominates the “Ebora” cult. The Omo Odos are restricted by tradition from appearing at the shrine during the annual “Ebora” or “Oka” festival. They were expected by tradition to remain indoors throughout the period of the festival. Adherents of the “Ebora” cult believe they are the real indigenes of Oweland. As such, they look down with contempt on the Idamoris who are the adherents of the Egungun cult. This annual “Ebora” or “Oka” festival is an important occasion during which the Omo Okes express their pride and unleash terror on anybody from the Idamori group who violates the taboo imposed on them during the festival. The Idamoris who are the worshippers of Egungun cannot restrict the Omo Okes from witnessing their annual celebrations. They therefore capitalize on this occasion to unleash insults and abuses on their Omo Oke counterparts through proverbial songs.

In the world today where plural societies exist, inter-marriage between groups is encouraged to foster cordiality and mutual understanding. The caste
system in Oweland however, seems to have defied this universal truth as it is more or less a taboo for an Omo Oke to get married to an Idamori except those who are ready to damn the consequences of being disown by their parents.46

Another major feature of caste system in Oweland is noticeable in the area of land ownership. Based on Owe tradition, land belongs to clans. The Idamoris who do not belong to any of the three lineages and by extension, the thirteen clans, invariably have no land. They therefore live on the mercies of their Omo Oke counterparts. They depend mostly on lands given to them on rent or leasing for agricultural and building purposes.47

Furthermore, the Idamoris were not allowed integration into the mainstream of the Owe Age Grade System. This is structured into layers of hierarchy. At the apex is the Ololus (three title chiefs), which the Obaro, Obadofin and Obajemu of Oweland belong. This group is followed by the Orotas, (two title chiefs). The third group is called the Igemos (one-title chiefs), while the rest people are known as Gbarufu (young men). The groups were further divided into two viz: Olusele and Omeko. These two groups constitute the labor force of the Oweland. While the Olusele did the bulk of the manual works in any projects, the Omeko engaged in the supervisory capacity.48 There is room for upward progression from the least to the apex of the strata. However, the Idamoris or Omo Odos are not allowed membership of any of the groups.

Oral evidence has it that in the, Owe Traditional setting, when Ololu died, two to four slaves identified to be (Idamoris or Omo odos) were buried alive along with the dead body of the Ololus. While four slaves were buried along the dead of the Obaro two each were buried along the Obadofin and Obajemu. The rationality behind this act was said to be that the slaves were to clear the way and guard them as they journey along the path of the unknown.49 However, this practice has long been eradicated in Oweland probably due to the missionary activities in our area of study.

**The Conflicts**

The situation in Oweland as examined above remained until the wind of modernism began to blow across the Owe terrain in the opening decade of the 20th century. The appearance of the missionaries and the penetration of western education in the second decade of the same century into our area of study impelled this. The dawn of civilization made the Idamoris or Omo Odos to begin to query traditions and taboos. Before 1960, the conflicts were more or less in forms of a “cold war.” However, in 1964, the bottled resentments by the Idamoris or Omo Odos exploded during the Oka festival. Contrary to the tradition that restricted the Omo Odos indoors during the celebration of the Oka
festival, one of the Omo Odos, Ewule Adebo decided to claim his fundamental human rights i.e. right to free movement without molestation.

As he journeyed from Obelle (the extreme village of Owe in southeast) to Kabba, he incidentally walked into the Ebora worshippers in a large group. For coming out to gaze at the Ebora, he was mercilessly beaten. The traditional hatred between the two segments of Oweland became heightened and tensions were induced into the society. In the same year, Akobe Ajide was attacked in one of the Owe settlements for similar offence. The educated elites of the Omo Odos reacted sharply calling on the government to come to their aid. In a circular passed to all sons and daughters of Idamori parentage, they were enjoined to fight for their rights until victory is won. The concerted efforts put up by the Omo Odos to break the yoke of restrictions during the Oka festival energized their teenagers to become obstinate to the traditional beliefs of being kept indoors during Oka festivals. For example in 1972, one Emidu Ajigiri, an Omo Odo also suffered similar fate for violating the traditional law of restriction during the annual festival. Up to the turn of 1994, the annual Oka festival has been the major source of conflicts between the Omo Odo and their Omo Oke counterparts.

Land is another major source of conflicts between the Idamoris and the Omo Okes. As it has been stated earlier, land belongs to clans in Oweland. Because the Omo Odos are regarded as slaves and strangers, they invariably have no land. As more and more Omo Odos are becoming educated, they began to enlighten one another that they are being denied of their fundamental rights. They reacted against what they perceived as injustice of the Omo Okes by claiming some parts of Oweland in Gbeleko. Land rented or leased out to the Omo Odos would annually attract Isakole (tenement), which could be in cash or kind payable to the clan that owns such land. Omo Odos suddenly began to contravene these regulations in Gbeleko in 1970s. This resulted into violence in which some people lost their lives. The violence resulted into a court case between the two groups in which Omo Odo lost eventually.

Between 1960s to 1980s in spite of the occasional skirmishes between the two groups, government was rather passive to any concrete efforts to allay tensions in the land. Even though at times it would appear there was peace, it was merely a peace of the graveyard. There were bottled resentments here and there that were only waiting for an occasion to explode. This was the situation in Oweland before 1982 when there was a succession dispute among the thirteen clans that claimed ownership to the Oweland. The dispute arose basically from the claim of the Ilajo clan to have a sole paramount right to the Obaro stool of Oweland. The other twelve clans opposed what they perceived as falsehood and distortions in the Owe history. They upheld a general view that there was no royal family among the clans. They argued that Obaro stool had always
been rotated among the thirteen clans. The result was a serious problem which prompted the government to set up in 1982, an investigative panel headed by Justice Sule Olagunju with a mandate to make recommendations.\textsuperscript{55}

The Idamoris (Omo Odos) who were not part of the recognized Owe clans by tradition allegedly went to give a witness in support of the Ilajo clan during the panel’s investigation. This explains why Ilajo clan was victorious as Obaro was installed from the clan in 1985. This episode engendered an unhealthy reaction from the other twelve clans against the Idamoris (Omo Odos), perceiving them as traitors. Violence demonstration eventually engulfed Kabba. Score of houses and property worth millions of naira were destroyed.\textsuperscript{56} It was revealed that the focus of the attacks were on the Idamoris, which rendered many of them homeless and others displaced. It took the intervention of the law enforcement agents before the situation could be arrested.

Unimaginably, the wounds from 1985 succession crisis was yet to be completely healed in the land when in 1994, a more devastating violent attack was launched on the Idamoris (Omo Odos) again. The major cause of the imbroglio was the annual Oka festival celebrated by the Omo Okes. Contrary to the taboo restricting the Idamoris indoors during the festival, they decided to come out with their Egungun (masquerade) to break tradition. The Omo Okes who with their numerical advantage went out in full force to set ablaze many houses belonging to the Idamoris again,\textsuperscript{57} perceived this as insults and affront to the “Ebora” deity.

After the 1994 episode, the Omo Okes, except Ilajo clan decided to ban all the Idamoris from using the lands belonging to them. Not only that, during these crises, the Omo Okes who constituted the majority slammed an embargo on the purchase of products from the Idamoris. This was an attempt to put them in economic dislocation. The brutalism engendered against the Idamoris became rather unbearable to many of them, which occasioned their migration from Kabba to other neighbouring villages such as: Iyara, Aiyede, Ikare among others.\textsuperscript{58}

\section*{The Inherent Dangers of Caste System in Oweland}

The situation in Oweland as critically examined undoubtedly portrays Oweland, a “danger zone” in Nigeria. Economic boom flourishes in the atmosphere of mutual interaction and cooperation among the people that live in any giving area. This can only be sustained in an environment where there is peace and tranquility. Contrary to the above, the “cold war” that occasionally engenders open confrontations and violence between the Omo Okes and Omo Odos in Oweland has to a greater extent done a lot of damage to inter-personal relationships between them. Caste system thrives on mutual suspicion, bitterness and rancour.\textsuperscript{59}
A society where these abound cannot claim to be at peace. Such is the situation in Oweland—where two classes of people do not want to have anything in common with each other, such as marriage. The situation is so bad that even with the introduction of Christianity into Oweland, no change has been noted. This is because intermarriage between the Omo Okes and Idamori (Omo Odo), even in the churches could still be seen as a taboo. Except for those who are ready to face the consequence of being disowned by parents.

There is the danger of permanent loss of wealth. The continuous exodus of people especially the able-bodied Idamoris from Oweland as a result of discrimination, tension and unhealthy rivalries, invariably means loss of wealth. Indeed, economic boom flourishes in a peaceful environment. No matter the abundant natural resources, which serve as the bedrock of economic development, it will require human endowments to harness and utilize. The continuous exodus of Idamoris unchecked could mean exodus of both human and material resources, which in turnd could affect the economic wellbeing of the community and Nigeria at large.

Similarly, there is the danger of the future generations yet unborn to suffer a cause of not their own making if no effort is made to eradicate this phenomenon. Indeed, stories of the past experiences will definitely create a psychological hatred, acrimony, lack of cooperation, disunity, discrimination and suspicion in the minds of the future generations yet unborn thereby deepening the hatred and animosity against the others.

Moreover, there is the danger of future resurgence of the past occurrences. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights caters for the interest of mankind irrespective of race, religion, etc. The less privileged Idamori (Omo Odo) class who are outrightly discriminated against as strangers would not fold their hands to be lorded over perpetually by their Omo Oke counterparts. Western education has enabled them to be aware of their rights and privileges. Moreover, according to the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, “no citizen of Nigeria shall be subjected to any disability or deprivation merely by reason of the circumstances of his birth.” An attempt to claim such rights will continue to lead to the violation of some taboos placed on them by tradition. Of course, this will continue to attract negative reactions from the Omo Okes that might lead to violence and destruction of life and property.

Lastly, there is the danger of loss in politics. Politics as it were, is always a game of numbers. Due to the dichotomy of caste system and high tension in Oweland, between the Omo Okes and Idamoris (Omo Odos), the voting pattern of Owe people had changed from what it used to be before 1980s. Investigation reveals that the Idamoris would not belong to any political parties in which Omo Okes are dominant. This phenomenon has not been helpful as the Owe community is often divided against their common opponents in
every election. Idamoris prefer to cast their votes in support of the outsiders to Omo Okes that stand as aspirant during elections.\textsuperscript{61} If this trend continues unchecked, the votes of the Owe people will continue to be divided at each election and “smarts” politician from outside the territory could exploit the situation for selfish ends.

Hitherto, the passivity of government to legislations and lack of societal sensitization account for the major reason why caste system prevails in Nigeria. Nigeria is such a country where they claim there is law, and where people contravene the laws and go scot-free. Nigeria is such a country where people flagrantly and willfully violate the laws and nothing comes out from it. This justifies the reasons there are moral, social, and value decadence at every level. It is high time the Nigeria government realized its weakness in terms of its legislations against criminal offences. Caste system and other related socio-cultural beliefs are outlawed. This should be tenaciously followed by serious related punishments against the violators.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has carefully examined the historical origin of the Owe people as one of the major sub-groups in the Okun-Yoruba grouping. It examines their interconnectedness and identity with the Yoruba nation. Not only that, the various traditions that surrounded the emergence of the caste system in Oweland were carefully explored. The study unravels the inherent features of the system and the disparities between the two major groups that dominate the land. It further reveals the arising conflicts inform of a “cold war,” which sometimes aggravate to open confrontations and violence; resulting in setting ablaze of houses and destruction of property. It finally highlights the inherent dangers in accommodating the system in Oweland.

**Notes**


6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.


17. Ibid., 66-69.


21. Ibid., 20–23.

23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
30. Ibid., 20.
32. Personal interview with Chief Dada Owonogbon (91 years old), Kabba, 23/11/2003.
34. Paul, “The Socio-Economic Impact.”
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. The Idamoris (The unknown origin) denotes the groups that are generally referred to as “stranger elements” in Oweland. Different traditions give credence to the fact that they were displaced people. However, their original place of displacement is yet to be ascertained.
42. The Owe settlements were initially built on the three hills that are today located behind Kabba town. The popular Kabba Journal, *Oke Meta*, (three hills) derives its name from the three hills. The Owe initial settlements were probably situated on the hill tops due to constant raids and impromptu invasions during the Yoruba warfare. For details on Yoruba warfare, see among others Ade Ajayi, and Robinson. Smith, *Yoruba Warfare in the Nineteenth Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964); Robin Law, “Chronology of the Yoruba Wars of the Early Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, (2) 1970.
43. Personal Interview with one of the Idamoris elders who pleaded anonymity during my fieldwork in Kabba, 25/11/2003.
46. Ibid.
50. Oral history related by Chief Aladesola Ajibade (C87 years old), Okedayo, Kabba, 1983.
51. Oral history related by Mr. Eletu Ajagajigi (C71 years old), Gbeleko, Kabba, 1985.
52. Ajibade op cit.
54. Eletu Ajagajigi. Personal Interview.
55. For details, see Mallam Sule Olagunju’s reports submitted to the Military Government of Kwara State, 1984.
57. Ibid.
60. See Federal Republic of Nigeria Constitutions Sec 42(2), 1999.
61. Personal interview with Mr. Clement Adebola (51 years old), Kabba, 2004.
AGBELEGE: A YORÙBÁ VERBAL ART

Deji Medubi

INTRODUCTION

Agbelege is a traditional verbal art practiced by the Kaba, a Yoruba-speaking people of Kogi State of Nigeria. An Agbelege orchestra is made up of artists including a songster (òkorin), dancers (olíjó), refrain singers (elégbè), and drummers (alù). Unlike many contemporary traditional musicians, the Agbelege artist views the performance as a pastime or a secondary vocation, not a means of livelihood. This chapter discusses Agbelege as a verbal art with particular focus on its artists, their musical instruments, and their performance. It also examines the Agbelege folksong in relations to other Yoruba poetic genres.

AGBELEGE ARTISTS

Agbelege artists use call-and-response and chorus methods during stage performance. The songster is the lead performer and essentially the soul of the Agbelege orchestra. Indispensably, his main duty is to render the lead song while the other members do the refrain. Although the songster plays no musical instruments, he remains the central focus of the Agbelege performance. In traditional Kaba society, Agbelege was a duet-cum-relay type of performance. However, in the contemporary times, it is not unheard of for the songster to go solo.

The Agbelege orchestra also consists of dancers who double as refrain singers. They are required to have strong vocal and dancing ability. In the formative years of the Agbelege art, women participated as dancers and refrain

...
singers alongside men. In the contemporary period, Agbelege is fast becoming an all-male orchestra.

The songster works hand-in-hand with the drummers to produce the unique Agbelege rhythm. While drumming is usually a professional art in Yoruba traditional society, Agbelege drummers are not professionals. Their mastery of the art of drumming is derived from practice. A drummer also versed in singing could also take part in the refrain.

Agbelege artists have no formal costume or mode of dress for stage performance. Rather, they adorn themselves in simple but smart attire, ranging from bùbá-sóró (jumpers) to Agbádá (embroidered, free-flowing attire for men). The female dancers and refrain singers wear any dress (like iró and bùbá) that enhances freedom of movement.

Yoruba artists place important on training and apprenticeship. Music scholar and composer Akin Euba, has identified two ways in which traditional musicians in general have obtained their training. The first is “observation and imitation”; and the second is “directed, formal, and organized instruction.”1 Agbelege artists obtain their training the first way, through observing and imitating already well-established artists. No formal training or apprenticeship is required of them.

Musical Instruments

William Echezona has pointed out that without an artistic tendency, musical instruments cannot be made.2 The drum is indispensable to Agbelege performance as a verbal artist. There are two types of drums used by Agbelege artists. The first, the bigger of the two drums, is the iye-èlù (literally, mother drum) which measures about thirty-two centimeters long and thirty-eight centimeters wide. The second and smaller type of drum is the obele (also known as omele or omo-èlù; literally, child drum), and is twenty-eight centimeters long and twenty-three centimeters in width.

The Agbelege drum is carved out of a black plum tree called ọrì. The drum belongs to the “membranophone” class; that is, as described by Echezona, “those instruments that depend on the membranes of animals for their source of sound.”3 The drum membrane is most often made out of the skin of a very young sheep which can easily be stretched to a desirable length. Another type of skin used is antelope skin. Goatskin is never used for the drum’s membrane.

The cylindrical Agbelege drum is also decorated in clothing. The hollow, wooden cylinder is covered with the animal membrane. Another important part of the drum is the row of strings across its surface which produces rhythmic waves when struck with the drumsticks. As important as the drum itself are the drumsticks, the keke-èlù. These are made from the ụbó (pomegranate tree).
because of its flexibility. Cassava sticks also make good drumsticks if harvested early. The drumstick for the *iye-èlù* is thirty-eight centimeters long, while that of the *obele* is twenty-three centimeters long. Without the drumstick, the drum cannot be beaten to produce the desired sounds.

There is also the horse-tail which, though it does not produce audible sound, is accorded a musical role. It is usually held by the songster and wielded within calculated intervals in various directions towards the audience during the actual stage performance. It is believed to bring good luck to the orchestra as it is laced with charms and covered with animal membrane.

**Agbelege Songs and Other Yoruba Poetic Genres**

Agbelege songs are related to other genres of Yoruba traditional oral poetry. Like other forms, Agbelege performance is purely in musical form. As an orchestra, it is closely related to Wákà, Àpàlà, Dadakuàdà, Etiyèrì, Orin Agbè, Íwòrò, Ago, and Êrìgbò. Agbelege also shares common thematic attributes such as salutation, dirge, and social commentaries with Ráà, Orin Efè, Orin Àdámò, Orin Ogbele, and Orin Kete. Also, Agbelege songs, like many other Yoruba traditional poetry forms, belong to the folksong genre.

**Occasions for the Performance of Agbelege Songs**

There is no particular time of day when the Agbelege songs may or may not be performed. Therefore, performance can take place in the morning, afternoon, evening, or night, although night performances are the most common. Occasions for the performance of Agbelege songs are manifold, as listed below:

- Àjòdún (anniversary)
- Ìgbéyàwó (wedding)
- Ìkómọjáde/Isomólórúko (child-naming)
- Ìyoara/İdúpé (thanksgiving)
- İdágbére (send-off)
- İkínikáábò (reception)
- İsílé (formal opening of a house)
- Iwúyè (chieftancy celebration)
- Isinkù/Okúsíse (funeral celebration)
- İfílólè (launching/foundation-laying ceremony)

The sponsor of an Agbelege performance may be an important personality such as an *oba* (traditional ruler), a chief, the leader of a household, or an influential and respected individual in the society. However, rather than being restricted to the royal courts and the quarters of the affluent, Agbelege is performed for all and sundry irrespective of social-economic status of its sponsor.
The Religious and Secular Character of Agbelege

Agbelege songs are not primarily religious. The most seemingly religious aspect of the art can be found in the chanting of *ibá* (homage) to the spirit of human and superhuman forces, such as revered elders or dead ancestors. These forces are called upon to guide and guard the artists through the course of their performance.

Incantations are also incorporated into the songs to make pronouncement of blessings effectual. The incantations invoke the power of the high spirits who, the artists believe, will protect and shower blessings upon them and members of the audience during the performance. Another use of incantations by the artists is to give spiritual backing to their performance, and to counter the activities of evil forces whom, they believe, could work against their success. It is in the light of the above that it could be said that Agbelege songs bear semblance to religion.

The performance of Agbelege songs is mainly for entertainment. The thrust of the performance is verbal salutation to particular individuals or even lineages. The performance is focused on the sponsor, though mention may also be made of specific individuals in the audience. The verbal salutes and eulogy give room for audience-participation, as people so eulogized are moved to acknowledge the praise by passing complementary comments and offering gifts, both in cash and kind, to the artists, especially the songster. It is also a common practice for audience members whose praises are being sung to want to outspend one another in the offering of cash gift to the performers.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to explore the artistic dynamics of the Agbelege performance among the Kaba Yoruba. As a verbal art form, it expresses some of the cultural behavioral stances of the Kaba people, as is true of a typically traditional Yoruba society. Its social utility is that it encourages cordial interaction and mutual relationship between members of the community.

References


Notes

3. Ibid., abstract.
INTRODUCTION

Every society has its own body of socio-political philosophy which can be regarded as the entire cluster of ideas that animates specific collective political actions, beliefs, behaviours, the structure and mode of institutions that are found in that society. Such a body of socio-political philosophy thus, in a way, becomes their ideology or, in a more metaphysically abstruse sense, their worldview. The survival of a people, especially in the face of several conflicts and crises of momentous degree in their collective histories and memories, sometimes is regarded as a way of demonstrating the truth of their philosophy of life. Since jurisprudence is subsumed, very largely, within the borders and confines of socio-political philosophy, and it is also accepted as conveying a modicum of truth that each society operates within the enclave of a political philosophy, it shows that every society operates within a reasonable amount of juristic thoughts within and amongst members of that society.

This is true of the Yoruba people of south-western Nigeria, just as it could be said to be true of every other society. Even though, according to Biobaku,
the Yoruba nation could not in any way be regarded “as a single political entity” before the nineteenth century, this does not deny the fact of commonality in cultural specifics such as language, dressing, music and so on. However, there is an aspect of Yoruba identity which appears to have attracted the intellectual acceptance of many scholars, which is the view that the definition of Yoruba identity is traceable to Ile-Ife. Falola thinks that this assertion may be accepted as true, very significantly, considered from two perspectives: one, Ile-Ife is regarded as the city where all Yoruba people originated; and two, Ile-Ife is the city of origin for their political dynasties.²

From this possibility, it behoves one to contend that a modicum of analysis can be conducted on Yoruba socio-political philosophy. In other words, from the existence of this minute sense of commonality, it is possible to construct the content of Yoruba jurisprudence, especially on the relationship between law and morality. It is a response to this problem of general jurisprudence that animates our present concern.

While a lot has been said about Yoruba history, politics, arts, religion, music and what have you, it seems evident to us that not much has been written concerning Yoruba jurisprudence, i.e. philosophy of law. This, however, does not detract from the spectacular efforts made by some Yoruba scholars in articulating what the nature of Yoruba law and legal institutions are. What is pertinently of immediate concern here is drawing a wealth of analysis based on these few attempts, in order to project and picture what Yoruba contribution to existing jurisprudential problems is.

The question, then, is what is the nature of Yoruba jurisprudence? What is the exact relationship between law and morality in the light of the nature of Yoruba jurisprudence? This question stands at the heart of modern debates in jurisprudence. For positivists, law and morality are conceptually separable. This is the separability thesis. For legal naturalists, no such conceptual separation exists between law and morality. This is called the inseparability thesis. This chapter attempts to build on my previous works on the possibility of an African jurisprudence³ by examining, very closely and attentively, the contents and contours of Yoruba legal culture in relation to the connection between law and morality.

The chapter argues that while several arguments have been made showing that the unity of African legal theory is a fiction, the analysis of and examples drawn from Yoruba legal history and culture shows that law and morality, in Yoruba jurisprudence, are institutionally and paradigmatically complementary.⁴

**The Boundary between Law and Morality**

Is law separable from morality? Is morality separable from law? One person’s guess is as good as another. But then, guesses do not provide answers to such
questions of acute and intense intellectual significance. This question appears to be one of the living and lively debates that keeps the wheel of jurisprudence going. In the literature on jurisprudence, there seem to be at least three intellectual positions on this question. These are the optimists, the pessimists and the neutralists or what can be called the indifferent school. The optimists are the naturalists, the pessimists are positivists and all jurisprudential schools such as the school of realism that follow that trail of jurisprudence. The neutralists are somewhat difficult to identify not because their position is not well articulated but in the sense that they do not see the question of relationship between law and morality as significant in solving the problems of human history and society.

Marxists, for instance, do not see the question as important. What is actually important to them is the problem of class in human society. The same can be said for feminists, who see law and morality as masculine institutions engineered to endorse patriarchy in the suppression of women, and as such should be revised to project more of a humanist than a masculine jurisprudence. Marxists, for instance, do not see the question as important. What is actually important to them is the problem of class in human society. The same can be said for feminists, who see law and morality as masculine institutions engineered to endorse patriarchy in the suppression of women, and as such should be revised to project more of a humanist than a masculine jurisprudence.5 Some versions of the neutralist thesis are actually suggested to redeem the pessimism encoded in the positivists’ separability thesis. Klaus Füßer, for instance, suggested the neutrality thesis as an alternative to positivists’ separability thesis.6

The separability thesis, as advanced by legal positivists, refers to the idea that law and morality are not necessarily connected. It means that both concepts are not related as a matter of necessity. The necessity in question means we cannot find moral issues, concepts and principles entailed in law. In other words, according to positivists, law and morality do not enter into each other. One cannot explain law in the light of morality and vice versa. The relationship is not logical but circumstantial or contextual. The contextuality denies its necessity since both are individually and separately analysable concepts and principles. The absence of entailment in the relationship between law and morality, according to positivists, is what accounts for the insistence on separation. Law is law. Morality is morality. Therefore, there is no connection between the two concepts. According to H. L. A. Hart,

... in the absence of an expressed constitutional or legal provision, it could not follow from the mere fact that a rule violated standards of morality that it was not a rule of law; and conversely, it could not follow from the mere fact that a rule was morally desirable that it was a rule of law.7

Naturalists’ contention, on the other hand, is the inseparability thesis which states that law and morality are not conceptually, logically and necessarily separated and separable. Saint Augustine’s famous thesis “an unjust law is no law at all” conveys the import of the view above. The same is hinted by Lon Fuller8 when he argues that there is a morality that makes law possible, hence binding
or obligatory. This he called the “Inner or Internal morality of law,” and “The external morality of law.” The latter explains the morality that makes law possible, i.e. some required moral foundations necessary for the existence of a legal order or system. Fuller described the former as those moral principles to which every attempt at law-making must conform or fail. These moralities, according to Fuller, serve as the basis of our obligation to obey the law. To him the obligation cannot be legal because law is not and cannot be built on law alone. In his words,

There is a two-fold sense in which it is true that law cannot be built on law. First of all, the authority to make law must be supported by moral attitudes that accord to it the competency it claims. Here we are dealing with a morality external to law, which makes law possible. We still cannot have law until our monarch is ready to accept the internal morality of law itself.9

Fuller’s thesis receives corroboration in the thoughts of John Finnis. According to him, obligation to obey the law has to do with the extent to which the law in question either contravenes or enforces the idea of what he calls “basic values” and “practical reasonableness.” Laws that contravene them are termed unjust because they are the ideas that help achieve the common good. Those that enforce or approximate them are just. Hence, “the moral authority of the law depends...on its justice or at least its ability to secure justice.” In his words,

The ruler has, very strictly speaking, no right to be obeyed; but he has the authority to give directions and make laws that are morally obligatory and that he has the responsibility of enforcing. He has this authority for the sake of the common good....Therefore, if he uses his authority to make stipulations against the common good or against any of the basic principles of practical reasonableness, those stipulations altogether lack the authority they would other wise have by virtue of being his.10

Summarily, the analysis above explains the heart of the controversy between the pessimists, i.e. the positivists, and the optimists, i.e. the naturalists, on the relationship between law and morality. With the brief analysis above, we can set out to entertain and establish the cultural perspective, taking a cue from the Yoruba culture, on the relationship between law and morality. The fundamental concern of this approach consists in asking what the nature of the relation between law and morality is from the Yoruba cultural standpoint. In the basic sense, worthy of note is the view that law and morality are not separate from culture. Moreover, both normative categories of human existence are not above culture; rather, they are part of culture. What then would be the nature of the relationship between law and morality in the light of Yoruba cultural jurisprudence?
African Jurisprudence and the Normative Significance of Yoruba Orature, Fiction and Culture

Inspirationally, it appears very instructive that no authoritative and valid conclusions can be arrived at on the contribution of Yoruba philosophy of law on the normative status concerning the connection between legal institutions and moral institutions except a conscious effort is made to peruse the theoretical basis of Yoruba socio-political philosophy. It is to this philosophy and the theory on which it is grounded that a modicum of hope lies in investigating the connection that exists between law and morality in traditional Yoruba jurisprudence.

Law is and has a cultural attribute in Yoruba society. It is believed in Yoruba philosophy that social ordering and public governance, management and administration are incomplete exercises without law. Thus, respect for law is a sacred feeling and attitude in both Yoruba fiction and orature. Moreover, law is a normative institution commanding and attracting attributes of awe and respect. So also is the moral life of every unit in Yoruba society. But then, both the moral and legal dimension of each society represents a body of thought on how interactions, exchanges and activities of that society are understood, carried out and how their implications are internalised altogether. Since man is said to be a political animal, it shows that morality and the legal frame of life in that society that he plays with are imbued, one way or the other, with a modicum of political messages and ideas. On the whole, therefore, politics, in line with legality and morality, are all indicators not just of the philosophy of the people in question but also of their cultural worldview.

Without any doubt, there is a kind of difficulty that every attempt at undertaking a robust and rigorous scholarly investigation into Yoruba philosophy or any other African society, for that matter, must surely seek to overcome. This difficulty is excellently captured in Hugh Trevor-Roper’s ignorance and pessimism about Africa. The pessimism in question is disturbingly outlined in the following comments after colonisation that:

Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none: there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness...and darkness is not a subject of history.11

A very insightful way of projecting this pessimism about Africa consists in what can be branded as the ‘mythical characterisation of Africa.’12 For example, many mythical characterisations have been employed in describing the authenticity of the Yoruba project. As it is expected, the usual culprits have
been the history, the unity of its history and archaeological facts, the creation of dynasties and, more pertinently, the philosophical significance of that history, institutions, beliefs, and worldview. In the significant sense, this includes their jurisprudence. The body of such mythical characterisations have, however, been positively transcended with budding and interesting scholarly discoveries made each day on almost every aspect of African life.

In the area of jurisprudence and philosophy of law, for instance, African ideas about law effectively combined with Islamic jurisprudence to produce not just an excellent body of juristic thoughts but refined, reformulated, home-grown, indigenous thoughts on law. According to Appiah, “Muslims have a long history of philosophical writing, much of it written in Africa....”13 In a further search for the light in the African past, Souleymane Bachir has provided scintillating examples of African scholars, beyond the prejudice of the ethnological paradigm,14 eminent in action and speculation in the areas of logic, jurisprudence and political philosophy.15

In the same vein, as argued by Adewoye,16 juristic thoughts among the Yoruba people can be discerned in their use of proverbs. There are proverbs among the Yoruba people that are of jurisprudential value. More recently, Idowu has also argued by providing a philosophical capstone, the reconciliatory thesis, on the nature of Yoruba law.17 These are significant attempts at underscoring the nature of Africa’s contributions to jurisprudence and philosophy in general.

Structurally, the theoretical foundation of Yoruba philosophy of law derives prominently from a number of institutional sources and/or paradigms that are not only interwoven but equally enmeshed in a deep variety of metaphysical richness that is second to none. According to Akanmu, these include widely used and accepted proverbs (owe), wise sayings and idiomatic expressions (asayan oro), myths (alo) and, most especially, Ifa verses (ese Ifa).18 Other sources and/or paradigms of the legal heritage in Yoruba land are institutions such as the palace (afin) signifying the legal, judicial and political importance of the throne,19 the market (oja) i.e. the public sphere indicating people’s interaction and encounter with the law,20 the Ogboni the body or council of elders reposed with the idea of making and enforcing laws and customs of the land or community.21 In the words of Falola, “the palace, the crown, and a cult were all too powerful political instruments of control, allowing the king to dominate the public.”22

From these sources and paradigms of the legal heritage in Yoruba land, it is posited that Yoruba socio-political philosophy displays a fluid but complex combination of both the philosophy of absolutism and the prevalence of a system of checks and balances. Propositionally, in Yoruba jurisprudential lexicography, absolutism represents the image of law while the concomitant systems of checks represent, in the same language of governance, the institutions of checks and balances with morality at the apex. The absolutism derives from the fact that
the *oba* i.e. king, from whom the law emanates, according to certain myths, was regarded as sacred (*igbakeji orisa*). This sacredness translates, in theoretical terms, to the absolute powers exercised by him. An example of such a power was the power to make laws (*ofin*) for the entire land, to ensure the laws are obeyed and often to command sanctions on disobedience. However, even though absoluteness describes the king’s influence over the land, it appears very strong in the literature on Yoruba history that the king was just a constitutional monarch; his power to make laws mitigated and curtailed by a system of checks and balances.

This system of checks and balances can be described as the modern equivalent of what Montesquieu described very tellingly and thoroughly in his treatment of the popular concept of separation of powers. While monarchical absolutism appears a permissible practice, it is however interesting to note that within this systemic arrangement of power in Yoruba land were formidable groups who could display fantastic dissonance with the reign of the monarch. For example, the council of chiefs and representatives of key lineages connected to royalty often served as limiting organs on the king’s power. Daramola and Jeje’s description of this practice and its relevance for jurisprudence in Yoruba philosophy of communal and societal governance is both poetic and dramatic. In their words:

> In the olden days, when a particular community wants to demonstrate the masculinity or masculine prowess of its monarch, the council of elders gathers together to prepare ‘the egg’ in a white calabash for the monarch. Once the monarch succeeds in opening the calabash and actually sees the egg in this white calabash, the end is a ‘glorious’ exit from earth.23

Again, the king’s display of monarchical irredentism is equally and meaningfully curtailed in Yoruba land by existing traditions, customs and moral principles. As a matter of fact, these principles are normally enshrined into the network of ideas which spectacularly defines what is known as the Yoruba quest for unity, peace and social order. This process of restraints on monarchical absolutism explains the nature of the boundary between orature and fiction in Yoruba history. Many of the practices which explains Yoruba attitude to monarchical despotism are sometimes encoded in fictions which bear an image of divine order while it is believed by others that such attitudes are historical in the sense that they explain the phenomenological experience of the Yoruba people in their belief in the sanctity of ancestral bond. Johnson’s imperial theory,24 Akinjogbin’s unity theory25 and Elias’ ancestral theory all are excellent paradigms for explaining the nature of the boundary between Yoruba orature and fiction as far as legal and jurisprudential matters are concerned. It is within these fluid though multifaceted sources and paradigms of central jurisprudence in Yoruba
land that one can posit that law and morality in Yoruba jurisprudence is not a once-and-for-all affair, nor is it a relationship explainable in terms of the notion of chance. The condition of socio-political life and the institutions built around that conception of life in Yoruba society is more than academic; the aspiration around that conception is a normative enterprise. That normativity is explainable as a cultural engagement and attributes than a mere physical affair. In a way, however, orature and fiction tends to form the content and anatomy of that normative and cultural attitude.

If what Daramola and Jeje described above were true and interpreted in the light of modern debates in jurisprudence, what it affirms is that the positivists creed that “it could not follow from the mere fact that a rule violated standards of morality that it was not a rule of law” remains a particularly false assertion in relation to and when doubt understood within the canons of Yoruba jurisprudence. Kings are no powerful, but those powers are tamed and trailed by traditions (asa, ise) and taboos (eeuwo) of which moral rules, principles and ideas are very intestinal and integral. Law and morality both acquire their mutual character as regulative mechanisms in Yoruba philosophy in light of the fact that they are both intestinal to the respective and replicable histories and evolution of the nation as a whole.

One way of validating this observation about Yoruba jurisprudence is by recourse to a bit of the theoretical and sociological basis of the history of Yoruba society. The ebi theory controversially advanced by Akinjogbin, in a way, provides daunting details about this picture of law and morality in Yoruba philosophy of social life and government. The ebi theory, from every indication, has a lot to say on the nature of Yoruba jurisprudence. For example, the concept of obligation in Yoruba land generates, for us, a world of limitless meaning when understood from the perspective of the ebi doctrine.

In matters of liability, for example, especially secondary liability, under the law and, respectfully, on the obligation to obey the law, the ebi concept cannot be ruled out. As a matter of fact, those concepts revolve around the role of the ebi. While the individual suffers primary liability under Yoruba law, the ebi suffers secondary liability. While the individual is known to understand the details of his obligation under Yoruba law, the ebi has a role in the enforcement of those obligations and, more particularly, in the advancement of reasons why he should obey and respect those obligations. The proverbial saying bara ile eni nje kokoro buburu, bi ao ba so fun, here huru here re loru koni je ki a gbadun, means that “when your neighbour is eating a toxic insect, failure to warn him will not spare us the bother of having to stay awake when his case becomes complicated in the night.” This proverb, among many other things, buttresses the concept of corporate obligation and liability in Yoruba philosophical thought.
And what is more, the proverb focuses intellectual attention on the salience and significance of the *ebi* in Yoruba philosophy of law.

More importantly, the *ebi* theory is implicitly invoked in matters of governance and public affairs in Yoruba land. Its relevance for the connection between law and morality is equally daunting. According to the *ebi* philosophy, governance and its several apparatuses flow from the heart of the history and evolution of the people which means every organ of government is viewed not in terms of mere institutional linkage which is impersonal, but essentially in naturalistic linkage which is personal. According to the *ebi* theory,

> The picture that emerges is one in which dependence, independence, master and servant are all unhelpful concepts. Interdependence within a family, in which everyone has well defined roles, responsibilities and privileges, is nearer the picture. The standard of judgement is whether each person has been discharging his roles properly within laid down family norms, not whether he possess the physical powers to compel obedience.26

The meaning one derives is that what is allowed in law, morals and religion are flowing details from that blood-kin kind of relationship. In all, the idea of blood explains relationship. Citizenship, for example, is thus primarily more of a moral and family affair rather than legal. And where it is legal, it behoves us to contend that the nature of the legality is also to be framed and tamed within a moral compass. Within the *ebi* legacy, there is, in obvious terms, a conflation of both the legal and moral realm. Since the definition of citizenship is moral and naturalistic, it shows that laws are very likely to be subservient to moral dictates and choices of the community concerned. Societies that are constructed and built around the ideals of the *ebi* theory cannot but entertain familial relationship, with the legal, economic, political and the moral buried within the rubrics of the same framework of assessment in both public and private life.

Even though laws represent and bear out the nature and characteristics of the structure of authority in Yoruba land, it is not preposterous to contend that the structure concerned is moral in nature. The organisation of political and social life in traditional Yoruba land was structured around the existence of a moral authority. This alone proves that morality and law have a mutually integrating and inclusive, rather than exclusive, character and relationship in Yoruba philosophy of law.

One obvious deduction from the conclusion of Akinjogbin is that obligation to obey the law in Yoruba legal philosophy is derivative, meaning that in Yoruba law the content of laws are very significant. Even though there are incidences of display of extremism in the use of power among Yoruba kings in the past, it behoves us to assert that such excesses are often regarded as unconven-
tional and contrary to the principles enshrined in cherished traditions of equity and justice, even while these concepts are conceived in very unsophisticated senses. In other words, obligation is neither imposed nor enforced but is rather owed or created. It is also derivative from the contents and nature of law. Since obligation to obey the law is external, it shows that, in Yoruba philosophy of law, law and morality are intimately connected. In other words, it shows that law and morality are inseparable under Yoruba law. Morality and the moral soundness of laws is a veritable basis for the acquisition and creation of obligation to the law.

From this it follows that the inseparability between law and morality stems not just from the history but from the kind of theoretical foundation that underpins that history: the ebi history. The familial and filial relationship in the family also explains Yoruba idea of law and justice as restorative and reconciliatory, neither retributive nor adversarial; since it is assumed we are omo iya kana i.e. offspring of the same mother and, in a family set up, restoration and reconciliation are crucial jurisprudential ideals. The proverbial saying ba a ba tori isu je epo, a tori epo je isu captures not only the significance of the ebi theory but also establishes the importance and the implication of the ebi theory for the relation between law and morality in Yoruba jurisprudence.

Following this general observation with respect to the ebi theory, relevant passages from the odu ifa, i.e. ifa verses, confirm the validity of the nature of Yoruba jurisprudence on the questioning of the illimitability often ascribed to law and the sovereign in western jurisprudence. The ifa system as conducted and operated among Yoruba sages and practitioners has, in recent times, become the subject of pertinent discussions and active ratiocinations amongst scholars both within and outside Yoruba land. While we may not be able to do several and severe justice to the significance of ifa for the law-morality polemic here, it is adopted here that the system has a modicum of truth on the nature of jurisprudence in Yoruba land.

Ensconced in silhouetted manifestation and explicative of the divine torch that Yoruba religion bears, the ifa geomantic system is a moral charter and institution on its own, for the direction and management of the social, political, legal and moral dimensions of existence in Yoruba cultural metaphysics. In the Yoruba process of judicial cross-examination, and which is repeatedly instantiated in the geomantic system, the essential goal is the search for the truth. Truth, therefore, is a significant focus in both enterprises as formulated in the wisdom of the Yoruba people. While this may sound obvious, it behoves us to contend that truth in Yoruba lexicography and parlance is both moral as well as epistemological.

In other words, cases of cross examination copiously cited in Ifa textual citations are tainted with a moral goal and purpose. This generates the impres-
sion that imbued into the system of thought in the *ifa* metaphysical realm is the interconnectedness between law and morality. As a matter of fact, the corpus or geomantic system is an expression and reflection of both the epistemological and metaphysical worldview in Yoruba land.

Within this epistemology and metaphysics, it is not hard to contend, in line with the observation of Idowu, that "Yoruba jurisprudence manifests a theistic metaphysics in which the legal or the moral are by-products or epiphenomenon of the relative interference or actions of the gods." Given the flavor of such a theistic metaphysics, the separability thesis is not and cannot be easily and commonly entertained in Yoruba jurisprudence. The argument is that law, in Yoruba culture, not only has an ontological moral foundation but also that the inseparability of law from morals derives not just because morality is one of the sources but also from the argument that no legal concept or rule exists without an ethical implication or dimension.

As discussed by Omoniyi Adewoye, "law in the traditional Yoruba society cannot be divorced from the moral milieu in which it operated...law in the Yoruba society derives its attributes from this moral milieu. It is this milieu which also endows law with an authority sufficient to dispense with the mechanics of enforcement." Three vital ideas, in connection with the relation between law and morality, can be discerned in Adewoye’s discussion of Yoruba jurisprudence. These ideas, in our understanding, can be rendered in the following terms as: the marriage or union thesis, the origin or source thesis and the enforcement thesis.

In the first place, there is the union or marriage thesis. But then, what kind of union can be ascribed to the relation between law and morality? For Adewoye, Yoruba jurisprudence presents an un-divorceable relation between law and morality. In another sense, the picture we get is that law is necessarily drawn in partnership with morality and this appears understandable if it is true that law will have to operate in a moral environment. Given the prevalence of a moral environment in which law will have to operate, the deduction is that law and morality are inseparable. Thus, an inseparable union is found to exist between law and morality. The problem with this model is that it does not ascribe an independent status to both law and morality while trying to draw out the relationship of union between both.

The question to ask for intelligible discussion is whether law necessarily operates in a moral environment. In actual fact, the question to ask is what constitutes a moral environment? Can it be the structures, attitudes or beliefs of the people of that society? Are there specific features of a moral environment? If there are, what are the features of the Yoruba moral environment? These are questions that make Adewoye’s discussion of law and morality in Yoruba jurisprudence worthwhile.
In the second place, Adewoye’s position tends to elicit the source or origin thesis. In this case, Yoruba jurisprudence posits an origin thesis on law and morality just in case it is acceptable that law derives indeed from morality. In other words, it shows that law is sourced in concepts and ideals of morality. The attributes of law are not independent of moral values. In this case, also, one can be led to the tentative conclusion that law and morality are inseparable. If something is the source of another, it only shows that its existence is defined in relation to its source.

Law, in this case, is founded on and intricately connected to morality. This model, in our estimation, also ascribes to law an impotent status undermining, in the process, the imposing and gargantuan character often associated with the instrument of the law. If law derives from morality in Yoruba philosophy, it shows that Adewoye’s explanation of Yoruba jurisprudence cleverly denies law of its vitality and force, all in the name of projecting a limited conception of law.

The third thesis concerning Adewoye’s position on the nature of Yoruba jurisprudence is what we have called the enforcement thesis. Unlike the positivists’ conception of enforceability, the Yoruba notion of enforceability has nothing to do with force or even sanctions. What it means is that law becomes unenforceable and meaningless when its moral import is jettisoned. It could also mean that law receives its sense of obligation when rendered and evaluated in a moral sense. Legal obligation, in this sense, is reduced to moral obligation. In other words, to be legally obligated is to be morally persuaded about the moral possibilities of the law.

Therefore, to contend that a moral milieu endows law with an authority sufficient to dispense with the mechanics of enforcement shows that what is strictly legal without a moral authority is strange jurisprudence. The implication of this position is that the separability thesis becomes insupportable in Yoruba jurisprudence. Further implications of this position on jurisprudence in general are obvious and it will take a conceptual platitude on which this can be discussed in essential details.

The significance of the proverbial model, no doubt, is intellectually helpful for African cultural worldview in view of the imposing resurgence of the scientific and empirical wave in global philosophy. Arguing for the scientificity of African proverbs, Kwame Gyekye observed that African proverbs not only bear philosophical contents but also products of the mental and scientific alertness of the African concerning events, situations and experiences of the lives of the people. Significantly, then, Hugh Kenner’s conclusion holds that proverbs convey a substantial portion of what the philosophy of life of a people is, or what that philosophy consists in.

However, such philosophical ideals as are expressible through proverbs, especially among the Yoruba, require not a little intellectual and cerebral alert-
ness since those ideals as entailed in proverbs may be elusive and hidden. In other words, proper reflections are needed to bring out the philosophical ideal that is intended through the expression of proverbs. For example, among the Yoruba people, it is often said that *ile oba to jo, ewa lo bu si*, meaning “beauty is not lost or is what follows after the destruction of the king’s house.” What this Yoruba proverb is trying to project is the Yoruba rejection of and response to the philosophy of fatalism and hopelessness. It also buttresses the fact that there is always room for improvement in any enterprise or exercise even in the face of certain unwanted impediments and calamities.

Although ideas of determinism are replete in Yoruba philosophy, caution is not lost in contending that there is always a balance in Yoruba appreciation of life events. Again, some of the proverbs instantiate the Yoruba conception of ethics. For example, a proverb says *semi nbi o logun ore*. This proverb is a declaration of the nature of true friendship and the nature of forgiveness amongst the Yoruba people. This proverb affords us an understanding of the management of crisis in friendship. The impression is that friendship does not remove the ethics of sincerity, cordiality and respect. Again, the proverb *iwon eku ni iwon ite* emphasises self limits and discipline. These proverbs and many others too numerous to mention here establishes Yoruba ethics and the conception of what is ethical.

In matters relating to law in Yoruba society, proverbs are also paradigmatically instructive and excellent tools in understanding the heartbeat of Yoruba jurisprudence. For instance, there is a proverb that says *ika ti o se ni oba nge*, meaning that “the finger that offends is that which the king cuts.” The importance of this proverb for Yoruba jurisprudence is four-fold: one, it tells of the fact that laws existed before the coming of Europeans; two, it shows that the idea of punishment was central to Yoruba conception of law; three, it stresses that Yoruba law has respect or consideration for the individual both in the positive and negative senses; four, law, punishment and the entire legal system operates within a moral framework. The third point receives corroboration in another proverb *Nitori ti a baa se ni a fi I l’oruko*, meaning that “we bear names (for purposes of identification) in case we would commit (criminal) offences while the last point is also emphasized and buttressed in another proverb which says *bi a ba rani ni ise eru, a fi ti omo jee*. The meaning is that an exercise or a task may be carried out entirely from the point of duty and obligation but there is always a morally accepted way of discharging such duties.

For us, the implication of this proverb for Yoruba jurisprudence is that of the distinction between lawfulness and expedience. Being lawful is a correct assessment of public life but in Yoruba jurisprudence, expediency carries a much weightier argument. Lawfulness must still satisfy or be found to satisfy that which is expedient. Theories and doctrines of expedience, given a literal
interpretation in Yoruba language, means morality or that which is morally valuable or acceptable. The law-morality picture in Yoruba jurisprudence can be discerned in the proverb *otun we osi, osi we otun ni owo fin mo*. No legal system is built and perfected by means of law alone. A complementary relationship between both law and morality is what makes and creates a perfect legal system. Thus, from the proverbial model, it is seen that Yoruba jurisprudence does not sever the connection between law and morality. Rather, that jurisprudence emphasizes and reiterates their inseparability.

Apart from proverbs, many other indices and expressions of Yoruba social and cultural life are significant in pointing out the nature of their jurisprudence and the theoretical and intellectual positions they hold with respect to the view whether morality serves as a limit to the nature of law and/or whether law is defined theoretically and conceptually in relation to morality. From this it shows that proverbs are very significant in sketching the nature of Yoruba jurisprudence. They are also very useful in underscoring, or better still, theorising the jurisprudence of Yoruba proverbs in light of the Separability-Inseparability controversy. But then, the nature of Yoruba jurisprudence is not limited to proverbs alone. There are other indices of Yoruba jurisprudence which are significantly and relevantly reflected in their art, songs, artefacts, even speculative stories about the universe and life, which are all of primary importance in establishing Yoruba jurisprudence.

As a round off on the perspectives from Yoruba jurisprudence on the nature of the relationship between law and morality, it is our submission that Yoruba jurisprudence manifests the theory of complementariness between law and morality. The argument of conceptual complementary relationship between law and morality as set forth here takes after the view that law is viewed in terms of the certain metaphysical principles operational within the society concerned, and in most cases, this metaphysical framework affords an independent reason for ascribing a complementary relationship between law and morality.

Thus, complementarism, as highlighted so far, explains the connection between law and morality in Yoruba jurisprudence, in an inseparable way, to consist in the fact that law (*ofin*) is the enforcement, or to use the proper Yoruba concept, fulfilment (*imuwa si ise*) of morality in fact; morality is the enforcement of law in conscience. Complementariness defines the Yoruba concept of obligation (*ojuse*) in terms of the corroboration that exists between law (*ofin*) and morality (*iwa to to*). This argument can be further buttressed in the light of a critical analysis of Yoruba socio-political and metaphysical philosophy.

In the first place, law and morality tend to be seen in a conceptual complementary kind of relationship.32 Law and morality are seen, from the Yoruba legal philosophical worldview, as complementary to each other, within the respective cultural, metaphysical template existent within the society. In other
words, legality is seen as an offshoot, a natural extension of the moral beliefs and charter of the society in which case both are often found to explain and encapsulate each other.

The conceptually complementary position of such a relation makes it difficult to divorce law and morality from one another. Law is seen as the expression of the moral life of the society while, in this complementarism, morality is a test of law. It is the complementary character and nature of the relationship between law and morality that needs to be accounted for. In other words, both enclose each other or are natural to each other or express one another necessarily in the regulation of affairs of man in Yoruba society. In other words, it appears very strong that, as far as Yoruba legends and myths are concerned, the certainty of law includes the moral relevance of that law.

The conceptual complementary character of the relation between law and morality in African legal theory derives from the language of the concept of law itself. This linguistic or semantic economy appears to be very important amongst the Yoruba people. It appears very strong that the certainty of the concept of law includes the moral relevance of that law. How that certainty or general principle of law is inclusive of morality is what is endorsed when it is said that law and morality express a kind of conceptual complementary relation arising from the idea of law and terms or concepts used in demonstrating it.

For example, among the Yoruba people it is often said that *ilu ti ko si ofin, ese ko si nibe* meaning that in a society where there is no law, sin cannot be imputed. The importance of this cannot be overemphasized. A little reflection is needed to point out some items of intellectual and jurisprudential interests. *Ofin* here means law in the literal, ordinary sense. *Ese* here means sin or transgression. From this adage or proverb, it is suggested that breaking the *ofin* makes one a sinner or transgressor, i.e. *elese* or one who transgresses. But then, in ordinary, normal English usage, the idea of law-breaking is not often conflated with the notion of sin. In other words, law-breaking is not often ascribed a moral status. But that is what the Yoruba linguistic economy has succeeded in doing. The breaking of law is defined in a moral, evaluative sense rather than a purely legal sense.

**Conclusion**

Is law separable from morality in Yoruba jurisprudence? Transcending the realm of surmise we started out with, law (*ofin, ase*), in Yoruba jurisprudence, is inseparable from morality (*ojuse, iwa rere, iwa omoluwabi, ohun to to ati ohun to ye*). *Ofin* or *ase*, in Yoruba jurisprudence, must not negate or contradict moral principles and values. As a matter of fact, it is supposed to promote those values. Laws that contravene such values are held to be sacrilegious and, like Jeje and Daramola pointed out in their analysis, kings and chiefs who are guilty of such
in traditional Yoruba kingdoms and states are either dethroned or are executed. Such laws are regarded as a breach on communal cohesion and collective consciousness.

The summary of the arguments above consists in the proposition that Yoruba jurisprudence subscribes to an inseparable relation between law and morality in the sense that law and morality are viewed in a conceptually complementary sense. This conceptual complementary relationship derives, first, in the conceptual metaphysical worldview existent within the relevant system and, secondly, is also corroborated in the linguistic economy that is operational within that system. An acceptance of the thesis of conceptual complementarity may end up being a likely strong challenger for the separability thesis propounded by legal positivists.

Some of the issues bordering on the separability thesis a propos of the thesis of conceptual complementarity can be considered in their minute details and it may be discovered that there might be the need for revision, perhaps, on the separability thesis. This does not, however, equate Yoruba jurisprudence with the jurisprudence of naturalism. A very strong line of distinction can still be maintained.

Notes


14. What is the ethnological paradigm in relation to Africa? According to Souleymane, it consists in the view that what is authentically African is simply assumed to be what remains once you have removed all the deposits that history has left on the continent.


Chapter 27

JUDICIAL CROSS-EXAMINATION IN YORÙBÁ CULTURE: A PHILOSOPHICAL CRITIQUE

Moses Òkè

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary world, the Yorùbá traditional society to a significant extent still maintains its unique cultural practices in almost all areas of social life. Very prominent among these practices is the culture’s system of judicial administration, which incorporates the practice of cross-examination. Although almost all the countries of Africa have adopted Western models of judicial administration as the official paradigm, it is noteworthy that alongside these Western models, the traditional pre-colonial models of judicial administration have remained vibrant and highly regarded in many parts of Africa till now.

From the available evidence, the origins of the practice of cross-examination in Yorùbá culture long predate Western contact. These origins are reliably traceable to the Ifá Literary Corpus—"the store-house of Yorùbá culture inside which the Yorùbá comprehension of their own historical experiences and understanding of their environment can always be found"—where it is recorded that Olódùmarè, the Supreme Being in Yorùbá ontology initiated the practice of cross-examination. It appears, however, that the divine initiation of judicial cross-examination was either not followed, or not sufficiently disseminated, or
too quickly forgotten by the early Yorùbá. There was, therefore, a human re-introduction of the practice later on in the evolution of Yorùbá legal tradition.

The features of cross-examination in the two original introductions of it in Ifá, and the subsequent contemporary uses of it in traditional Yorùbá courts, will be examined in this chapter with a view to giving a critical and comparative assessment of it in the context of contemporary social realities.

The divine introduction in Yorùbá culture is recorded in Odù Òtúrá-Ìrètè of the Ifá Literary Corpus.² The relevant excerpt runs thus:

’Splashing rain covers up the thief’s footprints,’
Divined for Òrúnmílà
Who had been sued to Olódùmarè’s courtyard by his devoted follower,
’Splashing rain covers up the thief’s footprints,’
Divined for Òrúnmílà,
Who was going to defend himself against the charges of his devotee in the courtyard of Olódùmarè.
Olódùmarè summoned Òrúnmílà to answer to the charge of not making his devoted follower prosperous,
On getting to Olódùmarè,
Òrúnmílà explained that it was his follower’s destiny that refused prosperity.
The situation then became very clear to Olódùmarè,
He was very glad
That He did not base his judgment on the testimony of only one party to the dispute.

In another passage from the Ifá Literary Corpus,³ the human introduction of the practice of cross-examination in Yorùbá culture is credited to Ògúndá. In his enraged reaction to what he considered as an unreasonable judicial system that had led to the punishment of many innocent persons, including summary executions⁴ in his community, Ògúndá beheaded the community’s executioner and his assistant, and would have beheaded his father who was the King and chief judge, too, if he had the chance. This led the elders to demand his explanation or justification for his action. In response, Ògúndá explained that he did what he did because the community’s system of judicial administration did not provide for the proper trial of alleged offenders. In particular, he condemned the lack of cross-examination of accused persons, a lapse which in his view had led to the wrongful punishment of many persons in the community. According to the text, Ògúndá’s action brought about a significant reform of the justice system among the Yorùbá. From that time, trials became more rational. Unlike before, accused persons were now to be questioned and judged according to their own testimonies, pleas and responses to questions during trial. The
demand of Ògúndá was that if an accused person was questioned and he/she pleaded guilty, then he/she was guilty, but if the accused upon questioning denied the charge, then he/she did not commit the alleged offence. Ògúndá’s further involvement in the introduction of the practice of cross-examination is contained in another Ifá passage—Ògúndá Mějì, verse 1.5

Common to the Ifá passages above is the emphasis on the role of inquiry in the dispensation of justice, both at the divine level and at the earthly human level. All the passages clearly subscribe to the sound “universal (legal) principle of ‘audi alteram partem’.”6 The principle of hearing all sides of a case is thus recognized in traditional Yorùbá jurisprudence as the practical rational way of ensuring that each party to a dispute discharges his/her burden of proof and exercises his/her right of refutation.7

**GENERAL THEORY AND PRACTICE OF CROSS-EXAMINATION**

From the legal point of view, cross-examination is a crucial part of the process of “systematically arriving at the truth, of establishing our claims, and of resolving disagreements...”8 It is at the heart of the method by which “reasonable disputants try to convince each other with arguments, fighting arguments with arguments, rather than using guns and machetes on one another.”9

In law, cross-examination is defined as “the interrogation of a witness called by one’s opponent.”10 It is further conceived as “the examination of a witness who has already testified in order to check or discredit the witness’s testimony, knowledge, or credibility.”11 The underlying assumption in these characterizations of cross-examination is that it is “a pathway to effective testimony.”12 The justification of the use of cross-examination in the judicial process lies in the realization that the gathering of evidence, which is a *sine qua non* in rational dispute-resolution, is generally infested with many weaknesses and defects, “such as poor observation, faulty perception, poor memory, and distorted reporting.”13 Thus, “to take care of, or reduce, the effect of these problems by way of seeing that they do not go unchecked, witnesses are to be rigorously cross-examined over their testimonies.”14

The aim of cross-examination is to lead a witness to either corroborate and fortify or to contradict and discredit his/her previously given testimony on direct examination. According to Òkè & Amodu:15 “The strategy of cross-examination is to see whether and where the witness will corroborate or contradict himself/herself in the course of responding to questions based on the previously given testimony.” In the words of Benjamin J. Cantor, J.D.,16

The right of cross-examination is one of the most powerful instrumentalities provided lawyers in the conduct of litigation. One of the most important purposes of cross-examination is to attempt to
destroy the testimony and/or the credibility of the opponent’s witnesses. Justice is not served if a witness is unable to communicate credibility to a jury. The search for truth is the ultimate and idealistic end of all litigated matter in a court trial.

The epistemic logic of this strategy derives from the assumption of a psychological warrant that “no one willingly testifies against his or her own interests,” which leads to the further assumption “that any testimony which undermines the interest of the testifier, the testifier knowing it to be so, is to be accepted as true.”17

Apart from the purpose of pursuit of truth, cross-examination as a procedure in either advocacy or inquiry seeks to offer the disputants in a case the opportunity to qualify their testimonies, provide further backing or warrant for their claims, and rebut the claims and testimonies of their opponents and their opponents’ witnesses. It provides the opportunity for each of the disputants to convince the arbiter(s) of his or her argument and the unsoundness of the opponent’s argument. Cross-examination is thus a unique aspect of legal reasoning or legal logic.

In practice, cross-examination involves essentially two parties—the cross-examiner and the cross-examinee. In Western legal traditions, the cross-examiner is usually a professionally trained and licensed lawyer, who is counsel to one or the other of the disputants. The judge and/or jury also act as cross-examiners on suitable occasions. The cross-examinees are usually the witnesses called by the litigants, and when appropriate, the litigants as well.

It is never gratuitously assumed that witnesses and disputants in a case before a court or any other arbitration body will always speak the whole truth, or that they will speak any quantum of truth at all, either in the direct or the cross. This is not to prejudicially impugn the character of the witnesses as to their being truthful persons or not. Rather, this is in realization of the possibility of a truthful person saying what is false, without lying, owing to mistake, ignorance, or illness, from which causes a liar (an untruthful person) could unintentionally say what is true.18 In order, therefore, to ensure that witnesses will not willfully distort what they know or hold or believe to be true, they are put under an oath of absolute truthfulness, the proven violation of which could constitute the punishable crime of perjury.

In all cases, the arbiters are trusted to be capable, in view of their training and experience, to discern the truth in each disputant’s or witness’s testimony and responses during either direct examination or cross-examination. The comportment and other behavioural manifestations of cross-examinees are also expected to aid the arbiters in arriving at their opinions and verdict in each case. It is thus possible, without prejudice to the sagacity and integrity of the arbiters, that with proper and ‘appropriate’ guidance of a counsel who is an expert in the
art of cross-examination a tutored cross-examinee could successfully mislead or confuse the arbiter(s) as to the truth of the matter in a case. This is easily possible where the other party is not sufficiently attentive, dramatic, articulate, or prepared. In such cases, informal fallacies often pass unnoticed and without any objections. Most prominent of such fallacies that feature in cross-examination are those of unwarranted assumptions, such as those of complex or loaded questions, leading questions, and poisoning the wells.

Though cross-examination is susceptible to its peculiar evidential weaknesses and possible procedural abuses, it still remains a veritable means of “ascertaining truth and falsehood in dispute settlement.” It is to be noted, however, that cross-examination is not limited to the resolution of civil disputes or conflicts, since it is also a vital integral part of the criminal justice procedure in any contemporary jurisdiction.

**Nature and Structure of Cross-examination in Indigenous Yorùbá Courts**

As is usually the case, judicial officers witness neither the onset of disputes between two parties nor the commission of justiciable offenses. In some cases, there are eyewitnesses to the events that eventually become court cases. In the juristic thought of the Yorùbá, therefore, it is acknowledged that only Olódumârè, the Supreme Deity, who sees all and knows all, is the perfect and ultimate judge. Olódumârè is regarded as the only one who can discern the truth of a matter that is not patently obvious to human beings. This is the import of the Yorùbá proverbs that say “Ọlọrun nikan lọ le sè dajó afeyínpinran”, that is ‘Only God can judge in the case of someone who uses his/her teeth to share a piece of meat with another person,’ and “Ohun tó pamó lójú ènìyàn, kedere ni lójú Òlórun,” that is, ‘What is hidden to human beings is clearly visible to God.’ Nevertheless, the Yorùbá still acknowledge that cases have to be resolved here on earth. Hence, they say “kà tayé yanjú è” (‘let us settle it here on earth’).

In attempting to resolve cases here on earth, the Yorùbá have developed their peculiar system of judicial administration in which cross-examination plays a significant role. The evolution of the practice and procedure of cross-examination in Yorùbá culture, as noted earlier, dates back to primordial times. It is in this regard pertinent to note that the administration of justice in Yorùbá culture is tightly bound up with the Yorùbá cosmos. The Yorùbá cosmos is existentially hierarchical in its structure. The society is also essentially structured after the people’s conception of the larger universe. This is without prejudice to the variations that exist among Yorùbá analysts concerning the relationships and relative positions of the ‘supernatural’ beings to one another. Nonetheless, there are four primordial factors in the Yorùbá cosmological order that are
relevant to the issue of judicial cross-examination. These are: (i) Òrúnmilà (also known as Ifá—the Deity of knowledge and wisdom (or better referred to as the omniscient primordial sage), (ii) Olódùmarè (the Supreme/High Deity), (iii) Òrisà and Ajogun (benevolent gods and malevolent gods, respectively), and (iv) Ará Òrun (Ancestors). Òrúnmilà, as the deity of knowledge and wisdom, plays the role of the ultimate custodian of truth in all matters. Where truth appears permanently veiled to humans, therefore, he is consulted through divination to reveal the truth. Olódùmarè is regarded as the omniscient and omnipotent being that sees and knows all, such that what is hidden to humans is clearly visible to Him. The primordial benevolent gods, Òrisà, are believed to see to it that there is no permanent miscarriage of justice, and that the course of justice is not perverted among humans. They are thus routinely invoked to judge between disputants when the truth appears impossible to discern from the testimonies of the disputants, and their witnesses, if any. When litigants and their witnesses are to swear the oath of truthful testimony, it is by one or the other of these Òrisà (benevolent gods), rather than the Bible or the Quran. On the other hand, the testifying parties invoke the Ajogun (malevolent gods/anti-gods) to punish them in case they are untruthful in their testimonies. The ancestors are taken to be the spiritual guardians of the family, the community, and the race. They are the spirits of the dead noble elders who are believed to continue to exist in the spiritual world from where they continue to participate in the affairs of their offspring on earth. The ancestors are believed to abhor any action that could cause disaffection, disharmony, disintegration and strife among their earthly offspring, and would punish anyone who gave a false testimony in the course of a trial. Parties in a case thus often invoke the ancestors to punish them if they testify falsely, as follows: “Kí alájọbí / alálè dá a fún ẹni tó bá paró” (‘May the ancestral spirits of our common descent/of the land sanction whoever lies’). The deployment of this array of supernatural forces is believed to be sufficiently intimidating as to make almost every wise Yorùbá person to speak the truth on oath always.

In Yorùbá society, traditional and contemporary, the indigenous administration of justice is still carried on in a hierarchical order, both of judicial officers and of courts. The pertinent point to note here is that the practice of cross-examination is the same in all the different types of courts, which include the family, ward/quarters, market/business and palace courts. The customary court is a modern adaptation of the traditional court system. The customary court differs, however, in a number of respects. Unlike the traditional courts, the customary court is mandatorily documentary, its officials are paid employees of the state, and lawyers may represent clients there. It is also procedurally relatively formal and subject to the control of the national judiciary. Like the traditional courts, the customary court is the grassroots court, with a minimum of legal and
procedural technicalities, and having its presiding judicial officers appointed from among the reputable elders in the local community. The atmosphere in the customary court is often as relaxed as in the traditional court, as the aim is often more reconciliatory than punitive; it is like the traditional court in which the aim is to restore the bond of community harmony that has been broken or that is being threatened by the action of certain members of the community, without increasing the sorrow of the community and without tolerating injustice or encouraging lawlessness among the people.

The traditional Yoruba way of adjudicating cases has also been popularized in the mass media. In many of the radio and television stations in the Southwest of Nigeria—“the homeland of Yoruba culture”26—there are dispute-resolution panels to which members of the public take their grievances, rather than to the courts. This, undoubtedly, is an indication of the people’s continued respect for their traditional system of resolving cases. The panelists on the radio and television dispute-resolution programs, with the exemption of the producer/moderator, are not employees of the radio station. Rather, they are reputable persons in the local community on the basis of the station management’s assessment of the wisdom, integrity and capability of each person nominated for inclusion on the panel. The atmosphere in the radio-vision courts is also as relaxed as in the traditional courts. The parties in the cases have implicit confidence in the impartiality and competence of the arbiters and are thus willing freely to submit themselves to the directives and verdict of the panel. However, given the increase in the rate of literacy among the Yorubas and the increasing complexity of cases being referred to these panels, and because of the urban setting, there has been an increase in the use of documentary evidence and documentation of proceedings on these programs more than at the indigenous courts.

By way of summary, the salient points to note about the traditional court system of the Yoruba are as follows. The courts are local community based; they are presided over by ‘elders’27 of the respective levels of the community; a general feeling of oneness and mutual familiarity pervades the court; reconciliation of the aggrieved party/parties), rather than punishment of the offender/offenders is primary; respect for the ancestors is prominent in the disposition of all participants in the proceedings; and fear of the ever-present intervention of the supernatural powers conditions all parties in a case to want to be truthful, cooperative and sober.28

**Cross-examination in Yoruba Legal Tradition**

The primordial use of cross-examination in Yoruba culture is to be found in *Odù Òtunà-òtò* of the Ifa Literary Corpus, as given in the introduction to this discussion. Essentially, the legal principle in focus in this Odù Ifá is that
of hearing the other side (‘audi alteram partem’). In the case recorded in Odù Òtúrâ-Ìrêtè, only the disputants were interrogated. This situation represents a category of disputes in which there are no witnesses who could be summoned. In such cases, the Yorùbá expect that the judicial arbiters at any level will be sufficiently sagacious to perceive the truth in the testimonies of the litigants. In effect, when neither of the litigants can provide a witness to corroborate his/her case or to refute the opponent’s claim, it is the word of one against the other that the arbiters have to examine and analyze with their acquired wisdom, intelligence and sense of justice, in order to decide the case one way or the other.

The human introduction of the need to interrogate alleged offenders also focused more on the accused person than on witnesses. According to Ògúndá in the Odù Œgúndá-Ìròsun (or Odù Œgúndá) cited above, the court should always give an alleged offender the opportunity to affirm or deny the allegation against him/her before a judicial decision is taken. In this case too, the issue of a fair hearing is highlighted. The tradition of fair hearings as introduced in the Ifá, however, appears to place too much trust in the honesty or truthfulness of the accused. In Ògúndá’s view, whatever the accused says, either in direct or cross-examination should be taken as the truth. However, given the relative simplicity of the ancient Yorùbá society and the absolute belief of the people in the unbroken fair intervention of the supernatural powers in the affairs of humankind, it is understandable why the accused should be believed, especially where there was no witness to corroborate or refute his/her testimony. It was believed that if the litigant lied and human beings were unable to refute him/her, the supernatural powers would act appropriately to punish the liar.29

Contemporarily, except where it is practically impossible to have a witness to an event, the Yorùbá expect every party to any case to provide witnesses. Hence, they say proverbially that only an intending liar will say that his/her witness is in heaven (“ẹni tí yí ó puró, ni yí ò wí pé ĝerì òun wà ní òrun”). The current practice of cross-examination thus requires the questioning of witnesses called by the litigants. We may refer to this as an evolutionary stage in Yorùbá traditional judicial procedure—that is, as a developmental stage from the point at which the procedure involved only the arbitrators, the litigants and perhaps a motley crowd as in a casual street-side court, to the more organized market, family, quarters, and palace courts.30

As in many situations, eliciting the truth indirectly could be very difficult. Indeed, it is extremely difficult from the philosophical point of view to claim to have discovered the truth through another person’s report or testimony. As Wittgenstein rightly noted:

From its seeming to me—or to anyone—to be so, it doesn’t follow that it is so...For it is not as though the proposition ‘It is so’ could
be inferred from someone else’s utterance; ‘I know it is so’. Nor from the utterance with its not being a lie.

Two situations could thus arise to compound the process of arriving at the truth of a case through judicial cross-examination. The litigants, as well as their witnesses, could be mistaken about the facts, details and consequences of an event. In the second place, the litigants as well as their witnesses could also deliberately choose to lie about what they believe to be the truth.

In Yorùbá culture, whether in ordinary issues or in judicial matters, lying is expressly and copiously abhorred, in one’s own interest. However, since it has been realized that, in spite of everything, some people may still not want to speak the truth or abide by their commitments willingly, the Yorùbá being an inherently religious people, traditionally make litigants and witnesses comport themselves in line with the culture’s pervasive spirituality. Doing this often involves a deployment of supernatural powers in a number of ways, among which are oath-taking, invocation of the anti-gods (the malevolent supernatural powers) and the ancestors. The average sane Yorùbá adult is expected and assumed, unless otherwise shown, to be sufficiently knowledgeable of the efficacy of these methods of eliciting the truth and complying with the society’s norms of moral behavior such as to be sufficiently dissuaded from lying, wholly or partly, either under cross-examination or when alleging someone else of wrong-doing. It is also expected that the spiritual and social considerations will persuade the arbiters to be sufficiently honest in the performance of their judicial duties.

In the attempt to identify, differentiate and separate truth from falsehood, it is considered necessary in Yorùbá judicial procedure to adopt extra-logical and extra-epistemological devices. However, it is to be noted that these devices do not amount to foolproof guarantee of the truth of witnesses’ and litigants’ statements. In the contemporary Nigerian legal system, administration of the oath on witnesses is also an invariable aspect of the judicial process. However, because only Christianity and Islam are recognized by the country’s legal system, oaths in the national courts are sworn to only on either the Bible or the Quran. The use of the Bible and the Quran has been considered ineffective for ensuring that litigants, witnesses and judicial officers will always be truthful in the course of court proceedings. It has been argued for instance that although many Nigerians profess either Christianity or Islam, most of them do not feel sufficiently intimidated or compelled by oaths taken with the sacred texts of those religions as they usually are when they take an oath on sacred objects of traditional African religions. The salient point to emphasize here is that oath-taking on its own can neither encourage truthfulness in the participants in court proceedings nor guarantee that when the participants are truthful their state-
ments will be wholly true. It appears therefore that what cross-examination on oath ordinarily produces is either consistency or inconsistency of testimony, which can always be achieved with the guidance of a skilful counsel in Western legal systems. Inconsistency alone, however, does not say which if any of a witness's statements is true; it means only that both (or all) statements are not true and that both (or all) might be false. It is thus left to the arbiters, given the total context of each case, to determine which testifier to take as truthful and which testimony to accept as true. Similarly, consistency of a testimony does not establish its truth. On the other hand, inconsistency may be sufficient to discredit a witness, impugn his/her integrity and credibility, and thus vitiate such a person's testimony as a vehicle of truth that could corroborate the affected party's claim.

There appears, however, in Yorùbá cross-examination procedure some form of safeguard against willful falsehood or the triumph of falsehood in the arbitration of cases. The phenomenal respect and reverence which the Yorùbá are noted to have for their elders and ancestors serve as an internalized mechanism for the feeling of compulsion to speak the truth at the court of the elders and/or when the ancestors have been invoked or referred to in a case. It is in view of this deferential aspect of their culture, coupled with the prudential avoidance of the punitive intervention of the supernatural powers, that Yorùbá elders, chiefs, and others in the position of arbiters or judicial officers always strive to take their duties with all seriousness and sense of responsibility. The truly wise and knowledgeable among them will not want to do anything that might tarnish their personal and family reputations, or incur the wrath of the supernatural powers and the ancestors.

The occurrence of false testimonies is excluded or minimized during cross-examination in traditional Yorùbá courts through the posture of the arbiters relative to the disputants. In Yorùbá culture, the objective of judicial administration is reconciliation of disputants in the spirit of communal unity. The procedure is thus not adversarial and litigious as in the Western legal tradition. Since there are no professional fee-earning lawyers involved, the arbiters are better able to ask questions freely as they arise in the course of the trial without any prior preparation for a cross-examination. The arbiters thus are able to maintain a neutral, cooperative method of questioning disputants who are regarded as brethren who should be reconciled rather than separated by the court. The unity-seeking neutrality of the arbiters and the absence of counsels make it possible for the court to try within the margins of fairness to help each party to a dispute to present his/her case most intelligibly. The arbiters at any level of the judicial system believe that their duty is to the entire community, the ancestors, the gods, and the Supreme Deity, rather than to the disputants. Thus, although the Yorùbá encourage proficiency in rhetoric and logical argumentation (as they say proverbially: “Ejo la n ko, enikan ki i ko ija,” i.e. ‘one
should learn argumentation rather than combat’), the argumentatively weaker party or witness is prodded through appropriate cues to express his/her case as clearly as possible. This is because the aim of the court is not victory for one party in a game or battle, but socially beneficial, peaceful resolution of a dispute that could otherwise constitute a threat to the purity, well-being and prosperity of the entire community. In this perspective, the arbiters are better able to see through the participants’ testimonies to discern the truth as much as is humanly possible. The outcome of a case is thus neither a victory nor a defeat for a counsel or a disputant. The cost-efficiency of the Yorùbá practice of cross-examination is also noteworthy. Disputants do not have to pay legal fees to counsels, and the arbiters do not draw remuneration from the public coffers; if any payment is demanded, it is usually to facilitate the summoning of witness or such other mobilization/logistical expenses.

Furthermore, the arbitration of cases is not the fulltime work of the arbiters; rather, their judicial functions are willingly and proudly performed freely in return for the honor of chieftainship or eldership conferred on them by the family, the ward, the trade association, and the village or town. Unlike what obtains in Nigerian courts at present, cases are speedily disposed of, and cheaply too. A dispute in the community is regarded in Yorùbá traditional culture as a fire on the roof, and as they say proverbially, no one leaves a fire burning on the roof and goes to sleep (i.e. a kí fíná sórí órùlé sún). Cases are therefore quickly resolved in order to restore the peace and contentment of the community. Also, since the arbiters have to engage in other activities to earn a living, they cannot afford to let cases drag on unnecessarily.

From the Yorùbá perspective, the invocation of the ancestral spirits of the family or community is considered both legitimate and efficacious in making disputants and their witnesses give truthful testimonies in all cases. Such invocations involve each participant in cross-examination asking the ancestral spirits to punish him/her should he/she lie against any other party or not answer questions put to him/her truthfully. It is assumed that since no average Yorùbá person would want to experience such ancestral punishment, everyone would speak the truth during cross-examination. Such ancestral spirits are referred to as alájobí (spirits of common family origins) or ‘alálè’ (spirits of those who own the land). The belief of traditional Yorùbá people is that these ancestral spirits are always unsparing of any manipulator of the truth after they had been called as witnesses to the veracity of his/her statement or testimony.

The fact that it sometimes happens that opposing parties mutually continue to disagree over the truth of each other’s testimony after each had invoked the ancestral spirits poses a serious epistemological challenge to this aspect of cross-examination in Yorùbá judicial tradition. It is conceivable that someone lies under oath during cross-examination but he/she does not suffer any spiri-
tually inflicted punishment known to the public within a reasonable period of time. Thus, it is possible that a false accuser or a false witness escapes either detection or punishment. It is in recognition of this possibility that the Yorùbá grant that a lot of havoc may sometimes have been done before justice is done. As they say, “Kílè tó pòsìkà, ohun tó dára le ti bâjé”, (i.e. ‘before the ground consumes the wicked, good things may have been ruined’.) The point that is settled for the Yorùbá, however, is that in the long run the truth will be revealed and all liars and undetected offenders will be duly punished. In this regard, The Yorùbá say proverbially: “Eni tó tafà sókè, tó yídó bòrì; bóba ayé ó rí i, óba ọkè ń wò ọ” (i.e. ‘The person who shoots up an arrow, and hides under a mortal; if the earthly king does not see him/her, the king above sees him/her’), and “Adákédájó l’Ọlórún”, (i.e. ‘God is a silent judge’). This perception of judicial reality restrains the Yorùbá from willful falsehood, unnecessary disputes and frivolous accusations.

**CONCLUSION**

In the profound view of Barry Hallen,

> Whether a military strategy or an agricultural technique, a tradition deserves to remain as a tradition only if it does what it is supposed to do.\(^{37}\)

In the context of the present discussion, it is pertinent to ask whether the Yorùbá tradition of judicial cross-examination has proved effective so as to know whether it deserves to be retained in the culture’s judicial system in the context of contemporary social reality.

Empirically, the Yorùbá judicial system must have continued to thrive until now only because it has proved itself effective in meeting the people’s expectation and sense of justice. In particular, the method of cross-examination must have sufficiently approximated the people’s shared sense of both substantive and procedural justice for them to continue willingly to submit themselves to it even when an alternative judicial system is available to them. For those matters, therefore, that can be resolved traditionally and outside the national Western judicial system, the Yorùbá do not appear to have any serious problems or doubts about the efficacy and effectiveness of their traditional practice of cross-examination to lead to the truth in a trial.

In comparison with the co-existing Western tradition of cross-examination, the Yorùbá tradition appears to be preferable. Oath-taking is a feature common to both systems, but as has been noted, the Yorùbá tradition has the added appeal of administering the oath in indigenous ways with which most of the people identify and feel bound. In particular, the taking of oaths with
invocation of curses on oneself should one fail to tell the truth is more serious and more likely to influence most people to speak the truth than the ceremonial supplicatory ‘so help me God’ oaths of the Western courts. In the different traditions, it is recognized that the fear of punishment for detected lying on oath could effectively serve as deterrence to would-be perjurers in the course of cross-examination. In the Western tradition the offence of perjury might always go unpunished owing to legal technicalities and inconclusiveness of proceedings. In the Yorùbá tradition, on the other hand, it is strongly believed that the spiritual supernatural powers are relatively more reliable than human beings to detect and punish perjury. When someone who happens to have lied had invoked the supernatural powers to punish a liar, the effect is usually as effective, immediate and dramatic, as in the Biblical example of Ananias and Sapphira.38

The practice of cross-examination in traditional Yorùbá culture is very unlikely to become cumbersome and complicated by legal technicalities and stage-setting, as it is in the Western tradition, by counsels’ questioning strategies that very often involve differential mastery of the art of cross-examination among lawyers, quite often to the detriment of the client with the less skilful counsel. This indicates that the goal of cross-examination in the Western tradition might not be the discovery of truth but the demolition of an ‘enemy’. The goals in the Western courts are principally to prejudice the opponent’s case and to bolster the plaintiff’s case. In the view of Howard L. Nations, for instance, “there is never an outcome of a cause contested that is not mainly dependent on the advocate’s skill in cross-examination.”39 In the context of the adversarial, confrontational nature of Western judicial systems, it has been noted that cross-examination therein

requires the greatest ingenuity; a habit of logical thought; clearness of perception in general; infinite patience and self-control; power to read men’s minds intuitively, to judge their characters by their faces, to appreciate their motives; ability to act with force and precision; a masterful knowledge of the subject matter itself; and extreme caution; and, above all, the instinct to discover the weak point in the witness under examination.40

In contrast to what obtains in the Western tradition (in which cross-examination is an “adversarial skill”), since there are no counsels engaged in the judicial process for a fee and reputation in the Yorùbá tradition, cross-examination is strictly for the uncovering of the truth for the exclusive purpose of reconciling feuding parties so as to achieve social justice and communal harmony. Since dispute resolution, rather than adversarial litigation, is the objective of the justice system in Yorùbá culture, the court therein is more flexible, more relaxed and more productive of voluntary truthful testimony than in Western courts
with their rigid rules and procedures that are alien to the comprehension of the majority of the population outside the legal profession. In the context of this comparison, the resolution of cases in the Yorùbá tradition is exceedingly faster, less expensive and often more socially satisfying than in the professionally litigious Western traditions. Unlike in the Western tradition wherein “it is the love of combat which everyman possesses that fastens the mind of the jury on the progress of the trial,”41 the adoption of the in locum parentis position of community leaders by the judges and arbiters in Yorùbá judicial tradition ensures that the process of cross-examination is fairly and impartially moderated to encourage each cross-examinee to recall relevant facts and to answer questions as truthfully and fully as they can. It is noteworthy that the practice of reconciliatory dispute resolution that is emphasized in the Yorùbá judicial tradition, as in other African cultures,42 has now been introduced into the Western judicial traditions in parts of Africa43 in recognition of its advantages over the emphasis on accusatorial and adversarial litigation.

Hence, in the appropriate Yorùbá contexts of traditional judicial administration, the traditional practice of cross-examination should be retained. This is because in addition to satisfying the essential features of cross-examination in any tradition, it is easy and most natural for the average Yorùbá to understand and subscribe to it and all its peculiar features. It deserves to be mentioned, however, that it may now be impossible to universalize the use of the Yorùbá practice of cross-examination. This is because in cases where any of the litigants/disputants, the witnesses and the arbiters either does not belong to the Yorùbá culture or is not sufficiently committed to it, there may be a permanent disagreement among them. In such a situation, the matter will have to be transferred to the national courts of justice, at whatever level of the judiciary, where the nation’s unrestricted constitution operates uniformly over all citizens within its territorial jurisdiction.

In conclusion, it is posited that if any tradition of cross-examination deserves to be retained as a tradition, then the Yorùbá tradition fits that description. In the context of judicial administration, the Yorùbá method of cross-examination has not been found wanting in efficiently realizing the purpose of truth-detection from the testimonies of disputants and witnesses in the service of justice, peace, reconciliation and social harmony. It has also not been demonstrated that other traditions have any comparative advantage over the Yorùbá African tradition. Rather, what has been shown is that other traditions, notably the Western, have comparative disadvantages relative to the Yorùbá tradition of judicial cross-examination, particularly in the African context.
Notes


2. See Yemi Elebuibon, *Ifá: The Custodian of Destiny*, (Ibadan, Nigeria: Penthouse Publications, 2004), 57. This mixed Odù is the 245th book of the 256 books of Ifá Literary Corpus (see Kola Abimbola, *Yorùbá Culture*). This precept is proverbially expressed as “Agbejo enikan da, agba osika,” i.e. A person who passes a one-sided judgment is a wicked elder (see I. O. Delano, *Owe L'esin Oro*, (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1966), 30.

3. This is found in Odù Ôgúndá. See William Bascom, *Sixteen Cowries: Yorùbá Divination from Africa to the New World*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 482 – 489, for the full text of this Odù. In the 256-books version of the Ifá literary corpus, it is the 249th book (Ôgúndá-Iròsùn).


8. Ibid., 63.

9. Ibid.


14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.


17. Òkè and Amodu, *Argument and Evidence*.


Abimbola, *Yorùbá Culture*, 51.


Abimbola, *Yorùbá Culture*, 25.


Abimbola, *Yorùbá Culture*, 25.


Abimbola, *Yorùbá Culture*, 25.


Abimbola, *Yorùbá Culture*, 25.


Abimbola, *Yorùbá Culture*, 25.


Abimbola, *Yorùbá Culture*, 25.


Abimbola, *Yorùbá Culture*, 25.

41. Ibid.


43. In Nigeria, for instance, as at March 2007, some Federal High Courts have become ‘multiple door courts,’ where facility for Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) mechanisms has been provided as an alternative for entities having cases in the courts.
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