

Research

SUSTAINING THE HERITAGE: ASSESSING THE AESTHETICS OF VERBAL SYMBOLISATION AND SIGNIFICATION IN IDANRE ORATURE

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Abstract. This study shows how oral poetry permeates the culture and activities of Africans. In almost all African communities, there are poetic expressions such that poems are sung to express mother/father/child's emotional state for and at every occasion. These include marriage, age grade celebration, departure or separation from one another, death, farming, hunting, trading and religious celebrations. The paper x-rays cultural configuration with the application of cultural theory to delineate societal transformation.

Keywords: heritage, symbolization, signification, history, religious transformation

Introduction

The word 'culture' is derived from the Latin *cultura* stemming from *colere*, meaning "to cultivate". It is a term that has different meanings. However, the word "culture" is most commonly used in three basic senses, this includes: (1) excellence of taste in the fine arts and humanities, also known as high culture; (2) an integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon the capacity for symbolic thought and social learning; (3) the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution, organization or group.

This discourse is aimed at the third sense, and it is this third sense we shall examine as it relates to the typical Idanre man. Deconstruction theory will also be employed for the analysis of the paper. Deconstruction does not assume that a poem has a 'harmonious equilibrium' but rather that it is always conscious of what Derrida (1972) calls a 'violent hierarchy'. It is this that makes a poem to have capability of evincing multiple, albeit conflicting interpretations and meanings, otherwise known as the 'aporia'. For the deconstructionist therefore, two forces are at play with each other in a literary text, a war which has generated the term 'dangerous supplement'. This has often manifested in the instability among the signifiers and thereby, upsetting the meaning of even a traditional performance and recitation as reverberated in this essay. The three characteristics Derrida (1976) confers on writing in his 'Signature Event Context' will be useful in our deconstructive examination of Idanre cultural practices and oral tradition.

Engagement with oral literature in contemporary Africa is usually informed by an epistemological and sociological need, to recuperate the past in order to appropriate the inherent dignity grounded in African cultural values for the sake of transacting the past with the present. Consequently, this paper sets out to collect and transcribe Idanre oral-literary tradition situated in oral expressive practice which intersects the integral role of audience participation

and the involvement of the audience community. In this paper, Idanre culture, history, song and tradition provide the variables of orature appropriated for its analysis.

In traditional African communities, the evaluation of artistic performance is usually given prominent emphasis, because no poetry recitation and story-telling session were complete without a corresponding form of evaluation and assessment. It is a common practice, to see every poetry recitation subjected to oral evaluation and analysis by the audience, especially the communal elders, who themselves possessed the virtuosity required in poetry recitation, rhetoric and story-telling. Oral performance usually take place in lively and informal village settings: during festivals; market day; beginning of the month or year, harvest or hunting seasons and the after-dinner sessions, 'the atmosphere in which these activities took place was usually lively and informal(the after-dinner type of affair with the elders sipping palm-wine and occasionally blowing a cloud of smoke into the air from their huge elongated pipes) so that the critical evaluation was rendered in leisurely, or unstructured form' (Iyasere, 1980).

An African oral tradition critic is expected to be an entertainer, a historian and an orator, because criticism and creativity are intertwined. As such, oral recitation and performance are often regarded as products of the same process which is all encompassing, a vital human activity and creative enterprise that requires entire community participation.

Historical background and the understanding of Idanre community

Oral tradition has it that the little town of Idanre, situated 14 km away from Akure, the Ondo State capital with a latitude of 9° 00' 8" N of the equator and a longitude of 5° 05' Greenwich Meridian; a total land area of 1584.65 km² had her origin from Ile- Ife. The town with an area of about three and a half

square miles is some 14 km away from Akure the Capital of Ondo State, Nigeria. Historically, it is unique in both outlook and standing. In the first place, it is situated in a valley, with rocks (some of which measure with the highest in the country) surrounding it like body guards. Behind each of these rocks in turn, is at least one poetic history or the other. Sometimes these stories are mythical as in the case of a rock – ‘ojimaba’, which is said to contain soldiers that came to invade the town during inter-tribal wars in the past. The story had it that the rock would spread out at the approach of invaders with ripe, eye-catching fruits growing on it. The hungry soldiers seeing this would rush at it only for the rock to fold up with its victims enclosed in it forever. During a child’s growing years, he is told that the echo of pounding mortars heard in the area of the rock belongs to those soldiers that had earlier been captured and are forever enslaved by the rock.¹⁾ (Akintan, 2007).

History has it that a man known as Lamurudu, a onetime king in Mecca had an only son called Oduduwa. Lamurudu was a traditionalist who rejected all entreaties of the Muslim jihadists to accept the Muslim religion. On refusal, he was murdered and his city was devastated. After the death of Lamurudu, one of his faithful followers took his only son, Oduduwa as well as some of the faithful servants and journeying for a long period of three months, he arrived at Ile-Ife where he settled and later became their king. Oduduwa gave birth to a son called Okanbi who also had seven sons. On arrival of Lamurudu at Ife he met the natives, one of which, Olofin, he made his chief warrior. It was this great warrior, Olofin that later founded the land of Idanre where he became the first king. Olofin therefore becomes the progenitor of the Idanres and till date, there are festivals dedicated to his memory¹⁾ (Table 1).

Table 1

Igi oko	There were several trees,
gh'oko	in the forest, yet,
Orisa i	The deity chose
m'obi	the Kolanut tree
s'aghayo	as His favourite
D'urun ma ma	Let no ill
s'opo odede	befall the lobby-pillar,
ma ma	that
d'ule yeghe	The house may not fall
Oyi ma	No Storm, no, no great storm
p'igi gherekeke	may bend the tree-branch
d'eye r'ibo ba le;	that birds may have a resting place
D'urun ma p'Oloja udanre,	Let no ill befall the king,
d'Ogwa jer' oye o	Long live the king.
E unhun un.	We agree.

Structure of Idanre oral poetry

This is a panegyric poem, that is, it is one expected to be spoken or chanted in praise of the king of Idanre who is regarded as the most important personality in the land. One wonders why an individual would be so praised as to compare him with the creator in the name of poetry. To answer this question, one will need to take a cursory look at the structure and classification of poetry. The Webster Third New International Dictionary defines poetry as a piece of "Writing that formulates a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience in language, chosen and arranged to create a specific emotional response through its meaning, sound and rhythm". If the above is internationally received as representing what poetry stands for, then oral poetry may be taken as referring to a verbal recitation of a piece of writing, not only because it is not written but because it has all the traits of speech and tradition as distinct from the conventional forms of writing. Since all poems are expected to be read aloud for auditory effect, one may tend to agree that almost all poems

are oral (Iyasere, 1980). That which distinguishes the oral poem of traditional origin from the convention of written form of the English and other developed societies is the main focus of this study.

We may want to ask the following: ‘Of what value is the various poems read, performed and recited to the lives of the Yoruba man?’ ‘Why does oral poetry feature so prominently in nearly all aspects of the African’s live and in what areas is poetry most prominent and vital to him?’ These and many other questions are what this write-up seeks to answer. The paper shall also examine the signification of oral poetry, the relationship between oral poetry and its poetic performances in general as it impact on Idanre man in particular. The paper also seeks to have a glimpse into the relationship between oral poetry and the cultural life of the Idanre man and consequently his cultural development (Elder, 1987).

Verbal signification of oral poetry

Performance in oral poetry is a function not only of the skill or virtuosity of the reciter, but also of the type of occasion and the nature of the material being performed which may be pure recitation or invocation, chanting or full rhythmic singing with or without instrumental music (Finnegan, 1977).

Typology of oral poetry

Ruth Finnegan (1977) opines that oral poetry is not a strange phenomenon to any linguistic community. It is neither an aberrant phenomenon in human culture, nor a fossilized survival from the far past destined to wither away with increasing modernization. In fact, it is one common occurrence in human society; literate as well as non-literate. It is found all over the world, past and present, from the meditative personal poetry of the Oyo and Oshogbo people to medieval European and Chinese ballads or the orally composed ep-

ics of pre-classical Greek in the first millennium B.C. It is not in the far past but around us yet.

Notopoulos (1964) claims that: “The society which gives birth to oral poetry is characterized by traditional fixed ways in all aspects of its life”. Oral poetry then is a thing that is clear and distinctive with well known characteristics and settings. Oral Poetry can take many different forms and occurs in many cultural situations; it does not manifest itself only in one unilateral model envisaged by some scholars while these various forms are expressions of the people’s poetic imagination.

Finnegan (1977) gives four forms of oral poetry which are: Epic, Ballad, Lyric and Panegyric poems. However, the four forms do not cover all areas of oral poetry like the elaborate mythological chants of traditional religion, chalogene verses as in prayers, street-cries and counting out rhymes or the special oral poetry of African drums and horns. Oral poetry as it applies to the Yoruba people, is observable in all aspects of life as in manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs, myths, etc and is transmitted by words of mouth.

Among the people of Idanre we may record the following types of poetry ‘oriki’; ‘owe’, ‘ewi’, ‘ekun-iyawo’, ‘alo-apamo’ and ‘ofo’ or ‘ogede’ which in Idanre is call ‘oun’. ‘Oriki’, ‘owe’ and ‘ekun-iyawo’ are used by all members of the society while ewi is used by the worshippers of ‘ogun’. ‘Oun’ is used by the male worshippers of ‘orosun’ and ‘olofin’ while ‘ekun-iyawo’ is sang by brides on the eve of their wedding and ‘alo apamo’ which refers to tales under the moonlight is told by elders to children including mothers and grandmothers for relaxation in the evenings especially after supper. Only a few examples of these can be covered in this piece for a lack of time and space.

There are also diverse kinds of oral poems used for festivals and other social activities. These include praise names for different kinds of people run-

ning from individuals to families and large communities. The town itself is praised since it has its own praise names. The use of incantations (oun) pervades the town and is most commonly used among the male members of the community especially those considered to have attained the age of puberty. This makes those outside the cult fear and respect them (Finnegan, 1977).

Religiously, many festivals are held. We have such festivals as ‘ujusu’, ‘ase’, ‘araapon’, ‘uden’, ‘Ogwa bo aba e’, ‘orosun’, ‘ola’, ‘ogboogodo’ and such others. It is the period where a male youth is initiated into adulthood that is referred to as ‘araapon’ and male youths during this period, are also distributed into the clans they wish to belong i.e. among the male religious group where they will climb into the status of a chief in the town. During this period the men are exposed to the various myths and legends surrounding Idanre and are taught all the protective strategies of the war. Such strategies include: the ‘oun’ where words are produced and things begin to happen. For instance, when ‘oun’ is to be practised, the speaker stands on a rock say some incantations and the victim begins to sink instantly. ‘oun’ may be sent to a building for example to cause it to collapse’.

During the ‘ujusu’ festival, there is a poetic performance in songs that is chanted to the amusement of the spectators. For instance, the women chant a kind of song known as ‘ola’ during the festival. Here is an example (Table 2).

Table 2.

1	<i>E do a gbegbe E do a gbegbe n`oja alaye e</i>	<i>You are called upon to carry the masquerade There is no space for a masquerade in the king’s market</i>
2	<i>Men r’ibo gbegbe o men r’ibo gbegbe n`oja</i>	<i>I will not carry a masquerade, not in the king’s market</i>
3	<i>Aba jare o. W’o jare ma`lope ye se e rijo</i>	<i>Please father. Owner of the palm tree that gives out wine daily, I plead with you..</i>

- | | | |
|---|--|---|
| 4 | Ona teere apefon o.
Ona teere apefon ye r'ubini
e | The path leading to <i>Apefon</i> (market) is narrow
The narrow path that leads to Benin. |
| 5 | Obuko asese o.
Obuko asese
ye ren pepa e | The male goat with a broken leg.
The male goat with a broken leg.
Uses the wall for support |
| 6 | E 'deji ka ro o
E 'deji ka ro
Ewe ya riwo e | Let the rain fall
Let the rain fall
And we shall not shelter from it. |
| 7 | Mo t'ota 'Loren, o
Mo t'ota 'Loren
M'en gba 'nen 'wo e | I got to the 'Lorin rock
I got to the 'Lorin rock
Refused to offer a handshake to anyone |

During the '*orosun*' festival which ushers in the rains, various invocating songs are chanted while the worshippers will be heralded with shouts of "*Yeeremi o*", "*Yeeremi aghoro*" meaning '*I will see tomorrow*'

Gods like '*ogun*', '*abaji*' and '*sango*' are worshipped alongside the three main gods of the Idanre. These are:- '*orosun*', '*olofin*' and '*ogun*'. While the '*ogun*' festival is for everyone, '*orosun*' and '*olofin*' are restricted to the worshippers who take a large population of the community. '*Abaji*', '*sango*' and other gods are worshipped by individuals. Each of the members is usually initiated with poetic verses and incantatory chants.

The above then are the different poetic forms and the poetic types as it applies to the Idanre people and their poetic harmony with traditions and cultures. We shall now take a look at the different cultures and social inheritance of the people.

Poetry and the culture of the Idanre people

The word "culture" refers to the advanced development of human powers; in the body, mind and spirit by training and experience. The Yoruba tribe of the Western part of Nigeria is very rich in cultural heritage and this is distributed all over the land surface covered by the Yoruba country. Since these people were not opened to reading and writing early in history, the main

means of communication is through verbal instruction; such as verbal training in occupations, story – telling, poetry, songs and music.

The people of Idanre are a sub-unit of Yoruba ethnic group emigrating from the major Yoruba source – Ile-Ife. To this group of people like their counterparts in other Yoruba speaking areas, oral transmission of cultural heritage is of paramount importance as this is the only means by which training could be achieved. As a result of this, it becomes evident that oral poetry serves as a major tool of communication and it permeates all areas of lives. The history of the establishment of the town for example is poetic in as much as someone has to compose it, making use of the art of verbal composition. As earlier pointed out, oral poetry cannot be separated from the life, custom, values and orientation of the Idanre people. Poetry is seen in all aspects of their lives such as social, psychological and religious values as elaborated upon during the discussion of the forms. It appears as if life for them is not complete without the oral tradition.

Socially, poetry plays a major role in the issues of birth as in naming, marriage, age group initiation and death rites. Psychologically, oral poetry is seen in proverbs, myths, legends and songs as well as music, in praise and abuses, in satires and criticisms. Religiously, poetry is found in all areas. The essence of religion is mythical thus in itself poetic. Poetry is used in the invocation of the gods and during incantations (Akporobaro, 1994).

Poetry and birth

As Olajubu (1975) points out: “Yoruba Oral poetry is a living and dynamic verbal art. It is meant to be sung, chanted or intoned in performance at the presence of an audience at a given social religious, cultural, political or informal occasion”.

This is emphasizing the fact that poetry is a part of life and upbringing of the individual child. When a woman becomes pregnant, a lot of myths and legends surround her and this circumstance will influence the birth of the child. That is, the child is born into a poetic world. The baby's name is usual-

ly suggestive of the poetic happenings at the time of his birth. For example, a child is given three types of names by his Yoruba parents. The first reflects the poetic circumstances of his birth as in Taiwo (first arrival of the twins), Oke (a child with his umbilical cord round him at birth), Abiona (one born by the road – side), Abidemi (one born when the biological father was away on a journey), Ilori (one whose mother was still menstruating during his pregnancy).

There will also be an “*Abiso*” (a name of the parents’ choice) such as *Abiola* (one born into wealth), *Olayemi* (wealth suits me) *Adeyemi* (the crown suits me), *Oluwafirofunmi* (God gave this gift to replace a lost one), *Iteoluwakiiti* (God’s throne is forever honoured) .

The third will be child’s ‘*oriki*’ (praise name, descriptive or pet names. This is the baby’s main poetic name which may reflect some hope or feeling of the parents as in *Alake* – (one to be petted if she survives), *Ajani* – (one who conquers after a struggle).

The child grows within the same society passing through all the stages of social development, he attends functions of his age group like initiation rites, for instance, when the child grows between the ages of eighteen and twenty, he is nearing the age of marriage and must get initiated into adulthood. The child must first attend the ‘*aapon*’ festival of his age – group as well as get initiated into his religious leaning like becoming an ‘*aghorodo*’ or ‘*aghor-eke*’, into ‘*orosun*’, ‘*olofin*’ or ‘*ogun*’ religious groups. Each of these rites is attended poetically in songs, music as well as ‘*ewi*’ amidst praise songs (Elder, 1987).

When the child is fully grown, particularly when he is a distinguished person, the drummers will invent more and more names to build up the person’s public image. This often has to do with his public achievements within the community.

Poetry and marriage

The whole of the marriage institution among the Idanres or *Makanres* is characterized by poetry. The mode of choosing spouses and the general preparation for marriage are equally poetic in nature. Age of marriage in Idanre is not defined. A child might have been given to her spouse even before she is born and the spouse too does not need to be a grown up nor be an unmarried youth. He may be a child, an unmarried youth a married man or even a man whose child is old enough to be the girl's father. The bride too may be bestowed at any age but would not leave for her husband's house until she attains puberty (Finnegan, 1977, Akporobaro, 1994).

When it is agreed that the bride should marry, the husband pays the dowry which is usually seven cowries with a stipulated number of yam tubers, a trousseau and other petty things. The age-group comes to sing for her and remind her of things to do and not to do in her husband's house. Such songs may include (Table 3).

Table 3

<i>Yemi, bu we ti lo yi o ma ma b'oko e ja o</i>	Yemi as you marry, quarrel not with husband
<i>Yemi, bu we ti lo yi o ma ma b'oko e binon</i>	Yemi as you marry, don't be cross with your husband
<i>B`iy' oko se e o ma ja</i>	If mother-in-law offends exercise patience,
<i>B`iba ko se e o ma ja</i>	If father-in-law offends be patient
<i>Ul' k' es `ayubo wa o ,ee, 2ce</i>	It's a curse to marry and divorce
<i>Wa n'oyun o</i>	May you be blessed with children

The parents of the bride will give poetic prayers as well as other members of the family. The bride must weep to show that she would miss the love of her parents and while crying may chant the following (Table 4).

Table 4

<i>Baba mo mi lo e f'adura sin mi o</i>	Father as I leave, pray for me.
<i>Iya mo mi lo 2ce, e f'adura sin mi o</i>	Mother as I go, bless me;
<i>Ki n ma m'osi, ki nma</i>	That I neither suffer nor grow
<i>k'agbako n'ile oko</i>	wearry in my husband's house.
<i>Iya mo mi lo, Baba mo mi lo</i>	Father, Mother, as I leave,
<i>E f'dura sin mi o</i>	Pray for me.

The bride's age-group is supposed to send her off to her husband's house with songs and fun fare at night.

Poetry and religion

All religions of the world from Christianity to Islamic and other traditional religions make use of poems as seen in their songs, prayers, visions, invocation of spirits and other aspects of the religious rites. In Idanre, as earlier mentioned, there are two major religions – 'orosun' and 'olofin'. Other religions include 'ogun' 'abaji', 'sango', etc with a recent advent of Christianity and much more recently Islam. For each of these, there are festivals such as 'ujusu'; 'orosun'; 'olofin'; 'iden'; 'obiton' – a marriage festival; and other petty festivals.

What runs through each of these festivals is the use of songs, music, proverbs, dance and incantations. For example, during the 'orosun' festival, we have the chanting of 'ola' by the female worshippers followed by the chanting of 'ogboogodo' by the male worshipper during the 'ase' festival before the actual 'orosun' day crowns the celebrations. Worshippers are expected to be in white apparels on the day of the festival set aside a day when they 'wash' their white clothes. Food and drink are usually in abundance on the day, depending on the financial status of the celebrant (Finnegan 1977, Elder 1987).

An example of 'ola' has earlier on been given. 'Ogboogodo' is sung in praise of eminent personalities such as the Lisa, the Ojomu the Sasere, or any

member of the Ogwa's 'Ugha' (the highest chieftain gathering in the town). Lisa for example is praised as follows (Table 5).

Table 5

<i>Lisa Male</i>	Lisa the deity
<i>Oolonso Iragb` Awo</i>	<i>Ololonso</i> from <i>Awo</i>
<i>Y'o m'aye ghon 'made</i>	He gives life to children
<i>Olomaijupairo</i>	Forbids eating of Bush fowl
<i>Yo Gbe sa 'kun le Igb`awo</i>	Who keeps a pot of rare beads in <i>Awo</i>
<i>Awo je gwo</i>	When <i>Awo</i> is destroyed,
<i>Ma gbe'sa' kun mi ma ka lo</i>	I will carry my pot of beads and leave.
<i>Eletu kun yo, to Reju dot`awo</i>	Owner of the dinker that scalters <i>Reja</i> and <i>Awo</i>
<i>Tawo M`eku n` aka</i>	<i>Awo</i> holds the dinker`s fore-limbs
<i>Tu Reju M`eku n`ose</i>	<i>Reju</i> holds its hind –limbs
<i>O di gbere O</i>	Bye for ever,
<i>Uja igb' ugha</i>	There is no reconciliations.

The above tells of the power and importance of the Lisa who is second in command to the king.

Oral poetry and other social activities

Social activities like death, initiation burial and rites attract a lot of songs, music and performances. In the king's palace, two gentlemen are employed mainly to blow trumpets and sign the praise of the king every day (Finnegan, 1977). There is also a palace jester who twists proverbs and other things to the amusement of everyone. The king is praised on some occasions as follow (Table 6).

Table 6

<i>Kabiyesi Oludanre</i>	Long live the Lord of Idanre
<i>Oma lofen</i>	The son of Olofin
<i>Makane ye f'aira</i>	Makanre who discovers the disappeared sacrificial slave
<i>Monde ia `kadon</i>	Son of the great hunter from Ikadun

<i>Oman sun n`eke</i>	He sleeps on top
<i>Oman a`iyan n`ola</i>	He takes his share of wealth
<i>I`a Dedon, Oma jo gbe`ru</i>	Son of Odedon whose dance attracts a gift of slaves
<i>Egbo `roko</i>	Root of the African teak.
<i>Oma lu kiki mu gho</i>	He beats drum to capture a slave.
<i>Oma p`adan s`ebo</i>	He uses bats for sacrifice.
<i>Oma `jimaba,</i>	Son of Ojimaba (god)
<i>a lu b`ote ja</i>	Who uses a drum to fight conspiracy.
<i>Wo la ni a mon`de</i>	You are great today son of the great hunter.
<i>Wo la ni o mo`ji</i>	You are honoured today, son of Moji.
<i>Elegbe on`pe</i>	Owner of the thousand palm trees.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it will not be an over statement to say that oral poetry is a tradition that runs through the life of Idanre people. You find poetry in their daily conversations as in proverbs and wise sayings, songs, music and dance. In music you find poetic use in the talking drums which are also a major instrument of praise. Mothers to their children say their praise names especially when the children have just achieved a success or feat and in any pleasing thing they do. More so, there is virtually no Yoruba name that is not accompanied by an oriki as in Ojo, Ajayi, Idowu, Kehinde, Orosundakinte, Obogbemi and others. Each of this is accompanied by praises and this is why it may be a logically rational thing to say that poetry to the Idanre people is another tradition.

NOTES

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