

THE SEMIOTIC AESTHETICS OF RITUAL CHANTS
AMONG NIGERIAN FISHERMEN

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the chants used by the fishermen across the river Niger, in Nigeria during annual river ritual theatrical regatta; a phenomenon known by this occupational set of people as *eniyanwo* of Nupe people. The chants of the fishermen are realized to be of pragmatic relevance to the context of their use. The chants are collectively rendered and dramatized during ritual proceeding in paddled canoe race on the river. The nature of the myth, ideology and subsequent religious practices of this set of Nigerians are represented in the people's folkloric poetry collated into chants.

INTRODUCTION

Michael Mason (1980)¹, S.F. Nadel (1942)², A. W. Banfield (1905)³, are the major scholars who gave extensive environmental descriptions of this river Niger area without dwelling on this crucial oral pragmatic performance of the area. The ritual chants (*eniyanwo*) are for the sustenance and continuity of the society where they are used. Hence, the people's world view, philosophy and vision are signalized in their annual aesthetic practice mainly sustained by the poetic chants analyzed here. These chants reflect

the mythological imagination of the riverside setting and origin. The research methodology here is based on the archetypal theory which best accounts for the ways the fishermen chants are produced and transmitted to symbolize the people's historical and mythical basis. The ultimate comprehensibility of the traditional forms (chants) should be through archetypal placement of the socio-ritual poetic compositions. In addition to the archetypal theory, the writer has used a eye witness approach during personal participation on the river theater. All chants were recorded. And rather than rely on translations, coinages and code-switching methods used by foreign researchers on the area, the writer used the advantage of being a native speaker to get the most valuable interpretations. Parts of the findings of this research is that a review of the chants helps to reconstruct aspects of the Niger people's oral tradition composition. As aesthetic poetic forms, the chants serve as the major ritual factor that unify the river Niger people's geographic and economic livelihoods.

The chants are rendered in prayer, praise, incantation and invocation forms. In terms of location the people across the river Niger live in the heath of Nigeria, spread over the low basin spread by two major Nigerian rivers known as river Niger and river Kaduna.

The Nupes are distinct group of people who dwell mainly in the trans Niger area of Nigeria. The river Niger people, the Gwari, Borgu and especially the Nupe refer to these two rivers as Edu and Lavun respectively. The chants used during performance on river Edu is the one known as eniyanwo. 'Eniyanwo' is a generic ritual theatre involving functional mythical symbols and metaphors. The chants created consist of the myth of setting and the folkloric tradition of the people. The chants employ the use of native nuances, symbols, metaphors and icons to reinforce their functional application.

The theory of semiotics in language analysis has a part to play in the analysis of the occupational chants done here. Signs, symbols, and signal made by the river Niger chanters. These add to the overall communication of the fishermen. Thus, semiotic becomes a major tool for the poetic analysis carried out here.

A RECONSTRUCTION OF MAN AND SOCIETY IN MODERNITY

This article exposes the existence of an unpublicized riverine setting that uses its occupational base to restructure itself. The aspects of river settlement are related here to the mythical and religious world view of the river-Niger people. S.F. Nadel (1942) is rightly, perceives: "the geographical features of the environment,

such as the nature of the soil, the rivers, the climatic conditions and vegetation as the major determinants of the people's practices".⁴ And in the line with this, Karl Marx (1844) agrees that;

The genius in human society is economic.

Under the economic structure, there are two things:

the mode of material production and the social relationship between the different groups. The economic structure forms the foundation that dictates the society. And this is called 'superstructures'

This river Niger serves as the basis for the ritual-mythical regatta, an organized cult canoe race. The content of the chants, indicate the fishing activities of the fishermen. As the fishermen move their canoes, the tempo of the poetic rendition is synonymous with the type of occupation at hand i.e. the fast paddling movement in the river is, in line with the tempo of the chants. The aim and function of this work poetry becomes primarily become to unite the fishermen, ease their work and also promote the fishing occupation itself. The chants are meant to ordinarily motivate the workers. Hence, the fishermen are part of each canoe's ensemble and their chants help to aid intense concentration in the crew. The canoes are well decorated with colourful banners, buntings and mascots to make gracious the ritual occasion. What then is a ritual?

'A ritual is a cultural patterned symbolic action created by man to explain the problems and mysteries of the bewildering complexities of existence.'⁶ The people's chants incorporate a larger corpus of ideology, religion, myth and philosophy and other cultural materials. The impact of this oral literary poetry on the land can be seen in the scope of the existing natural poetic compositions and their subsequent use for ritual processes. Every oral aspect of the river Niger chants contains the ritual form and structure of the people's religious ideology, belief and philosophy transmitted to its audience. The oral performer formulates and regulates his performance in the process of delivery, to suit the people's present existence. This indicates cultural adaptation and assimilation. It also accentuates the theory of archetypal theory applied here. The chants act as philosophical records of the society. This is why scholars like Benison Gray (1975) in The Phenomenon of Literature⁷, Northrop Frye (1957) in Anatomy of Criticism⁸, Maud Bodkin (1934) in Archetypal Patterns in Poetry⁹, Carl Jung (1967) in Four Essays¹⁰, Sir James George Frazer (1922) in The Golden Bough¹¹, among others see the approach as the basis of new criticism. Northrop Frye in his archetypal theory for another example, recognizes the inevitability of historical factor in oral

literary analysis. He urges that the existence of man in time and space is determined by the happenings around him in which the metaphysical forces play a prominent role. Thus, archetypes are prototypes of the past occurrences of any present society. Archetypal criticism can therefore be premised on historical, ideological, philosophical and cultural formations. In the river Niger community of Nigeria, which is the focus of this aesthetic study, ideological beliefs and philosophical thoughts serve as the basis for the people's co-existence through ritual practices, using chants as resource materials. And this is better revealed in the archetypal elements reoccurring in virtually even line of "eniyanwo chants"

ENIYANWO CHANTS AS ARCHETYPAL SYMBOLS

Chants are formulated oral poetic rendition used as a source of magical and physical powers. They are said to be melodious, monotonous, rhythmical shorts meant for ritual realization¹². They are integral parts of the annual performance of the river Niger fishermen in canoe-races.

Hence, for easy comprehension, the *eniyanwo* chants are categorized here according to their functional themes and values. The ritual itself involves the performance of rites in worship forms.

for the purpose of ensuring some control over the elements that determine and affect the existence of the Nupe Riverine Niger people of Nigeria. In ritual performance, Victor Turner (1968)¹³, affirms that performance is not only multi vocal but also non-vocal (using ritual symbols understood by the producer and the consumer). The enchanter is the producer in this case while the audience is the consumer. The archetypal symbols are clearly glaring firstly in the form of the eniyanwo production.

There is usually three (3) days preparation preceding the performance day. The three days are used by the river priest to find out at midnight when the goddess will come to the surface of the river to accept the communal sacrificial offerings, consisting of a he-goat, red kolanuts, red wine, python etc. which the priest places there every night. Acceptance of this offer gives the priest a great relief as it is sign of worship, request in the search for reestablishment. The priest heralds the acceptance of the offer by blowing a special trumpet known as the 'kakati'. This priest is welcomed back to the midst of his people by drumming, feasting and dancing. The collective communion with the river begins, the following day, which marks the beginning of a new traditional calendar year. It becomes sure too that fish, the major source of

livelihood of the people will flow in abundance, close to the white sundry surface of the river, to be caught even by children with bare hands. As the chant lines are rhymed, the river overfills itself and rushes forward to cover the sandy area as if in response to the jubilation. Suddenly in quivering voice, the chanter echoes the following endless search tone.

*Chant: Bayade mukoteo
Mukote sai mukote ikan*

*Chant: Para danbo
para*

*Chant: Where shall we get shear butter
shear butter fish*

*Chant: From the flat surface
flat surface!*

The canoes are decorated with colour flags while the chanters hold on tightly to their river paddles, which they use at the same time with speed to push the river backwards in a way that enables a 'forward movement' of the canoe. It is a skill understood by them through continual practice. Forward movement symbolizes progress. The movement of this fish artifact is emphatically in alignment with the tone of the lines chanted at each procedural moment. The paddles are fasted in and out of the river if the chant rhythm becomes heightened when the rhythm becomes slow, the paddles

are put in sleepy momentary positions in the river. Both happy hailing and slow wailing lines are composed to the matise the happy and sad experience s of life. These archetypal prototypes in the chants are the traditional materials and forms that the chanter uses to depict historical and social circumstances. And he does this through a deliberate in plantation of appropriate rivers symbols. Gittunter (1978) defines a symbol in the following terms.

A single item, even something as traditionally fraught with meaning as a smoke or a rose, symbolic meaning is confirmed by something else in the story, just as a point needs a second point to define a line. Reading for symbols then becomes a matter of connecting the dots, so to speak to form patterns through repetition and explicit statement. Symbols can be in signs, speech and writing. ¹²

In the identification and interpretation of the archetypes in the river Niger chants, it is discover that each word of the lines of the chants are neatly connected to stand for something more than the word itself. This is perhaps why the allegoric chants accommodate other themes ranging from individual conflicts to public issues of politics, age group moral societal beliefs, sorcery, witchcraft, greed and social justice as will be seen shortly in the analysis Didactic constructs in the chants orientate the young ones towards societal

norms and practices. At the point of warnings, the head fishermen complicates the scenes and episodes by transforming himself from one moving canoe to the other in speedy actions. The general public applauds him. The assumption is that the sea goodness transmits this quality to the river priest. The created dialogue mode is rhetorical. The multi-purpose essence of the river is further made evident in the chants. Let us listen to this part, for example:

Atabi egba na ba nuwon nan
A man tabi nuwon na yin egba min nan

There is no axe that can cut water into two
And no water can damage the axe's mouth

Two elements of necessity are juxtaposed in the above lines – the axe and water, since water is also a source of livelihood for the fishermen. The Niger people are essentially fishermen and farmers. Water is life. It's symbolic of a renewal of hope. The river space generally provides the symbolic movement for the chanter to extrapolate the principle of good and evil:

Emi maa, ka gbo jin yele
Soko bagura ikan nchie yayan a
Kinin gig e gan wundu
Elu ya min nyelo zuman
Tan kpolo e lele para a

Quarrelsome household, power demands for intervention

owl does not cut fish sack
Before generosity
Good standing, is better than insult
Bird allows one to look backwards
Frog does not sleep flat

The image of a united house is insinuated in line 1, this metaphorises the/fish storage sack.: a common source for the search for feeding. The resources of fish bag, bird as 'in 'elu' a frog as in 'tanpolo' are depictions of the riverside scenery. These animals are the greatest adaptors of a man. The chanter decisively takes permission from the versatile bird/'elu'. This visual and very imaginative river picturesque conceptualizes the river Niger environment in a nutshell. The diction used in the chants is therefore purely local. Other renditions in support of this are as follow:

The cover that covers the fish net
It covers the inside of the net
Is it the same cover that covers you?

The essence of collective consciousness is reinforced by the words "sameness of fish sack, common cover, house and bird

Relevant to the discussion here on poetry as means of acculturation is Benjamin Ray's (1976) reference to archetypal symbols thus:

*Sacred images whether they be gods ancestor, sacred actions or things make up the traditional universe. Such images, enshrined and communicated in myth and ritual provide a network of symbolic forms, uniting social, ecological and conceptual element into locally bounded cultural system.*¹³

Ray's assumption here identifies the sacredness and divine power in a communion between two parties, one being powerful and the other subordinate. Other universal definitions of symbols can also be of relevance to the observation made here.

TYPES AND AESTHETICS FUNCTIONS OF THE ENIYANWO CHANTS

This verbal occupational form is part of the aesthetic of the fishermen performance on the river. The Niger-river eniyanwo chants are evocative communication devices used for the control of the people terrestrial and celestial forces. The fishermen chants, linguistic and non linguistic parts are interwoven in the dramatic content of the entire practical output of this riverine eniyanwo. Apart from the ritual essence of eniyanwo – river ritual chants, a canoe race is also staged to promote peace and good relationship that must exist among the people. The rivers serve as a forum for

meetings. The attempt is to promote this major occupation of fishing of the natives. The chants are also used for entertainment of the highly placed kings and queens of the society .

One of the findings of the data interpreted here is that the river chants also serve as resource empowerment devices used annually for reinforcing the fish production and the entire native fish industry of the land as a larger audience come in attendance and trade in the process. The Nupe Niger people's livelihood depend on the river, the fish and the chants.

Chants among this set of fishermen therefore have diverse usage. The chants can be categorized into (a) invocations, (b) appellations of ancestors of the rivers, (c) incantation, (d) metaphors, (e) icons of the land, (f) prayers etc. Each chants has its own purposes. Each category has poetic qualities. They are cultural needs deviced from the material land and religion of the people. This multi-dimensional essence of the fishermen chants is evident in the glamorous expression on the faces of the men on the canoe river when these chants are being rendered. Contanze Welse (2002) observes ritual performance of a group in this setting and states that: "Ritual performance helps to strengthen . and safeguard the values and religious ethnic of a set of people". And is explains why

the poetic renditions used to accomplish ritual actions are quite metaphorical and symbolic. The importance of rites in Nupeland is heavily connected to the people's legendary figure known as Tsoede. Tsoede is actually review as legend, the mythical ancestor of the people. See Michael Mason (1980) and S.F. Nadel 1942. Nupe ideology is still rooted in the religious complex practice of the people. The geographical layout, economic advantage and social political activities of the people are given imprints, earmarks and clear insights by the ritual chants. Other utterances in river ritual chants are reference, to heroic persons and objects involving signs with special pragmatic meanings. And this is what makes them symbolic. Some chants have transferred usage. An instance, is the following spiritual reference:

*Be yi gidi
na la be nae*

*By the sunlight
that spreads cover the land.*

The word sunlight is symbolic of the powers that be; the unseen chants are closely related to the mythical figures of the area and to the riverine geographical settlement in which the people find themselves. The poetic chants on the river are strongly coded with the image of the ancestral figures. The ancestors are customarily

represented by symbolic costume of leadership described in other poetic lines. Used some of these lines in form of the chants aiding have in them other aesthetic forms of language use such as aphorisms, appellations, hyperboles, rhetoric etc, all acting as symbolic pointers to cultural nuances. The belief according to oral sources is that fishermen can stand all magical and spiritual feats in their river experience. The display during performance is an evidence of this. For instance, the chanter fisherman pays homage to the powers that be on the vast land using the following invocations:

Ikere da be elu lo a
Zandoro ga danbo danbo
Wan abe danbobe
Despite dry season, birds remain.
Surely people die and return long
existence predicts long non-existence

The invocation lines are signifiers of the cyclical nature of man's existence. We should note that birds are riverine and agricultural avid. Man is likened to a bird in the song to indicate that both man and the bird have temporary settlements on the Niger rivers farmlands and in the world. The notion of the divine is very much accentuated, and contrasted with what is human.

There is an extensive fluctuation of vital rhythms, common and spiritual images as the chants progress. This enables the observer to see the poet fisherman as a thoughtful remitter, who successfully brings experience into poetic imagination. The chanter remits further information in the following lines:

Bachabache
Kara tia gan yengban
Manza gban
Manza zo yinjin

Throwing, throwing
The head load is heavier than the shoulder load
old is wise
Old is difficult

Stratified age groups within the setting is emphasized in the line where 'the head is said to be heavier than the shoulder'. Other chants also involve the rope image to indicate the orderliness in history in the extended lineage, tradition and societal expectations. Other metaphors diction observed in the lines of the chants are in the following utterance:

Eguni a de wun be elangi
Dzia kan a o?

Spiky fish has a quarrel with the tumbling one
Who settles them?

The function of the different fishes are observed and spelt out by the chanter. The fishermen chants range from warnings, laments, prayers, invocations, divinity tones and sarcasm in order

to aid the fishing profession and also use the chants as medium of communication with the people. The chants have high poetic qualities. What is traditional remains domineering and remarkably persistent, in the rhythm that comes from the chants. Certain iconic materials are the weapons used by the chanter to depict ancestral symbols.

All the lines are rhythmic and the rhythmic line therefore serve dialectal essence for the people. The people's myth, ideology, history, work view; serve as the resources for the production of river chants. The chants contain aesthetic elements, which are basically peculiar to the riverside, and agricultural formations used to reflect the people's setting. It is hoped that further researches related to this field of oral literary studies would use the laid out pragmatic-semiotic aesthetics of this river chants in Nigeria as paradigms for similar researcher. Language (signs and symbols in this case study) has been conceived here as a social entity. This research is a viable contribution to the research field in which the ideological and philosophical belief and practice of a people is reflected in their oral forms; in this case, the poetic aesthetic contents of work chants and songs.

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