

ISSN: 2141-3827

CENTREPOINT JOURNAL

Humanities Edition



Volume 17

Number 2

December 2014

**A JOURNAL OF INTELLECTUAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL INTEREST**

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Aesthetics of Song in Olu Obafemi's *Illuminations: Songs, Dances, from the Belly of Time*

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Abstract

*Of the three genres of poetry, prose and drama, poetry is the most elitist, at least in a culture like Africa's where the literacy level is low. Oral tradition serves as source of material for African poets who use the written form. Performance, being a major component of oral literature, is thus a prominent feature of such poetry. Olu Obafemi's *Illuminations: Songs, Dances, From The Belly Of Time* borrows from the oral stock. This work attempts an analysis of the songs in the collection and assesses their relevance and relationship to the themes. The research is qualitative, permitting a sociological approach to the examination of the songs in the collection. Song is one of the features of the performance mode of oral poetry and could be discernible in written poetry which borrows from oral literature. The research reveals that through a transfer of oral tradition from his Okun heritage and the employment of other conventional techniques, Obafemi creates a robust atmosphere of performance for the minstrel/masquerade to deliver his society-cleansing message. The paper concluded that this will enhance performance which is a vital ingredient needed for the poet to condense the space between him and the millions of (illiterate) people whose cause he champions in the collection of poems.*

Keywords: Aesthetics, Song, Illuminations, Poetry, Performance

Introduction

African artists writing in English, who aim to use their art for the positive transformation of their societies through a conscientization of the people in order to reawaken their spirits for a collective action, are faced with some challenges. One of these is the best means through which their art can be accessed by the majority of the people, most of whom are not literate in English. The unfavourable economy and the poor reading habit make it difficult for the literate ones to afford the artistic product. The poet is thus alienated from the target audience. Yet poetry, "... (should be) a life-spring which gathers timbre the more throats it plucks... the more minds it stirs" (Osundare as cited in Bodunde 1999, p. 263) Ezeigbo (2000), citing the views of

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African writers Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe and that of Soviet critic G.V. Plekhanov, states that social justice as a means of maintaining peace and harmony in society is the writer's primary aim (p. 58). However, this does not presuppose that all poets sided with the victims of injustice. Writer and critic Femi Osofisan (2001) describes such artists as "patrons of exploitation, profiting on human misery." (p. 109).

The issue of the appropriate 'language' or aesthetic to use by African writers will no doubt remain a contentious issue for a long time. One solution that some African poets have found to this problem is the borrowing of themes and forms from their oral traditions. According to Bodunde (2001), this reflects the processes and movement of decolonisation (p. 2). Amuta (1989) sees the use of 'traditionalist aesthetics' to define the aesthetic value system for African literature as not only reactionary, diversionary, and a colonial attitude, but also a condemnation of African literature to "a state of perpetual underdevelopment" (p. 34). He accuses such critics of being unnecessarily romantic about the past. He therefore advocates a less romantic and fixated look at the past, stressing that ideological positions cannot be divorced from the uses to which oral tradition is put (p. 119). The success of the works of Nigerian poets like Niyi Osundare, Okinba Launko, Olu Obafemi, Odia Ofeimun, Ezenwa Ohaeto, Tanure Ojaide, Ogaga Ifowodo, Funso Aiyejina, etc show how oral aesthetics can be put to use for ideological purposes.

The gap between written poetry and oral art is eroded further as poets are beginning to perform their written poetry aloud since performance is one of the platforms for achieving the desired impact. Obafemi says that the incorporation of performance aesthetics in his collection of poems is borne out of the belief that without it, his effort at sensitising the people, in a country with an illiterate majority, would be meaningless (O. Obafemi, personal communication, January 31, 2010). Bodunde (2001) argues that the interest by artists in transferring forms from the oral stock may be attributed to the writers' recognition of the functions of verbal art which, citing William Bascom, A.H. Gayton, and Raum, he says include entertainment, education and disciplinary:

The act of correlating the artistic and social functions of existing oral genre with creative possibilities in written poetry for instance, makes sense because these forms have succeeded through the ages in conditioning certain valuable means of recognising and humanising the society (p. 36).

The use of oral tradition as aesthetics in written literature is one way of responding to Amuta's (1989) challenge of exploring "all avenues of cultural communication" to get to the greatest possible majority of the people (p. 114).

Equally important, forms of oral tradition used to evaluate African literature would seem to be static and reliant on past achievements and relics (Amuta, 1999, p. 34) if oral literature is defined merely as those literary forms handed down from generation to generation, by word of mouth. Culture is dynamic. For the purpose of

this paper, we extend the definition of oral literature to include the verbal art that is introduced by the people in their response to the challenges encountered by a people in the course of living. When such verbal art become culturally accepted, they become institutionalised into the general orature of a people. This will thus admit, for instance, new proverbs, new myths, songs, slangs, etc into the verbal art of a people. The songs of popular Nigerian musicians like Fela Anikulapo-Kuti with his *I no be gentleman at all* for example, Bobby Benson's *If you marry taxi Driver*, Nicco Mbarga's *Sweet Mother*, Victor Nwaifo's *Jolomi*, Ebenezer Obey's *Omo Adama*, etc would thus be seen as a part of the oral corpus of the Nigerian verbal art.

Literature is an expressive activity, thus, performance is one of the vehicles through which it (written literature) can be realised. Finnegan (1976) states the oral aspect is not entirely lost even in a society that is dominated by the printed word (p. 19). Performance, which reduces the gap between the poet and his audience, is an integral part of oral art. According to Amuta (1989), "...the original creative force of poetry belongs to that spontaneity of relationship between the poet and his live audience" (p. 176). Poets who adapt oral forms in their works employ different performance aesthetics that sustain orality in the written texts. Discussing the pattern of oral transfer in the poetry of Osundare and Mapanje, Bodunde (2001) stresses that although the forms of oral forms are reconstructed to suit new social situations, 'the essence of their orality (rhythm and performance features) still survive' (p. 5). He cites as an example the performance mode in Ohaeto's 'The Voice of the Night Masquerade' which is realised through the use of aural and visual images (p. 77-8).

In his *Illuminations*, Obafemi employs various forms of oral literature such as proverbs, songs, and folktales from his Yoruba/ Okun heritage not only to comment on the socio-economic and political conditions of the Nigerian people but also to suggest that the collective effort of the people is what is needed as a way out. This may also be attributed to the influence of the Marxist ideology to which the poet subscribed in his early years as a literary artist. This paper intends to analyse Obafemi's presentation of songs in the collection *Illuminations: Songs, Dances, From The Belly Of Time*.

Singing is a feature of performance in oral literature. We feel justified in employing the word *music* in the title of this paper because singing, whether accompanied by sound instruments or not, is musical. Singing connotes celebration but in African oral tradition, songs are used not only for entertainment but to express several other emotions:

Traditional, oral Africa thrives on the song; every occasion has its lyrics, even trivial incidents provoke ballad. There are songs which mark the inexorable cycle of human existence – birth, puberty, marriage age, and death. There are songs for praising, songs for cursing, songs of abuse; songs which wax purple in the king's palace, ...the town crier talks in song, ... (Osundare as cited in Bodunde, 2001, p. 42)

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Avorgbedor (1990) avers that the song-mode is one of the artistic avenues present in all cultures through which the people's latent response energies are released (p. 208). Yerima (2003) underscores the importance of songs in ritual drama thus:

The song of the real action of the real *Elesin* by the people who own the original story which Soyinka used in his play, when sung, highlights the seriousness of the action, and shows the tragic placement of the act of the willed death within the Yoruba traditional society... A solemn and sacred tradition that composes and sings this song of death with a horse shoe shaped metal smelted rough instrument called *Aro*, the beaded calabash, *sekere Aje* and the talking drum called, *Dundun* about a traditional act where life and death are involved, must feel the tragic essence (p. 15).

These further justify this research as the study attempt to reveal the value of the songs in the collection of poems.

Analysis

In Obafemi's *Illuminations: Songs, Dances, From The Belly Of Time* (2009. Subsequent references to this edition are by page number only in parentheses.), the central figure is the bard singing / chanting his art/ message. The poems in the collection chronicle the socio-economic and political challenges being faced by the people with warnings and suggestions as to how these can be overcome. The poet sees his message as liberating, providing illumination for "...all those who suffer humiliation" in a land ruled by "Those who detest light /... Those who shun brightness" (p. 1). Obafemi borrows from his Yoruba / Okun oral tradition in this collection in various forms.

Implied in the Preface and from the title, the poet sees his art as a song to be performed with instrumental music:

Bring out the drums the flutes , Agidibgo, the castanet, and of course, honey – coated voice of the singer and the nimble feet of the dancer. These are the essential implements for engaging with *Illuminations*...
(vi)

Obafemi borrows the function of the song in oral tradition to illuminate "a society about options available to it, especially a society like ours... that ensures suffering of the majority" (O. Obafemi, personal communication, January 31, 2010). The oral poet not only entertains but sets out to explore some perceived ills in the society through various techniques like, satire, praise songs, calls to the glorious past, direct abuse, admonition, etc. Obafemi uses the songs in various forms in the collection. While some serve as commentaries to the message in the poem to which it is attached, others are employed as metaphors signifying the conflict between the rulers and the ruled. Others contain lessons reinforcing what is being discussed in the poem itself, yet another which is a reminder of the positive attributes of the personality being praised, further serves as background music as the poem is being performed.

Obafemi ingeniously adapts other songs from the oral corpus of the Yorùba to probe the present circumstance and elicit some form of reaction from the intended audience.

The song that precedes 'Homage to Ajon' (p. 4) is celebratory and invocatory in nature. Ajon is the source of inspiration for Obafemi, as a literary artist. It was Ajon's trust and commitment that founded the Kiri dynasty of Okun land and her husband pledged to honour and commemorate her with a festival (Ododo, 2003, p. 324-43). She is said to have been a woman of exquisite beauty and so the song praises this attribute of hers. Beyond this however are the elements of courage, commitment and the 'revolutionary vigour' implied in her action of founding a dynasty. As Obafemi says "whoever is incarnating Ajon at any point is somebody who must wear that physiognomy of gallantry and valour" (Ododo, 2003, p. 326). Obafemi therefore borrows the Ajon motif as he engages the powers-that-be in his collection of poems. This is a stance that is necessitated by the dangers that have faced (literary) artists and other activists in other professions in Nigeria whenever they challenge(d) those in power. For example the late military dictator Sani Abacha had the writer Ken Saro Wiwa hanged after being tried on a widely-believed trumped up charge of murder; Dele Giwa the journalist is believed to have been killed by the Babangida administration to forestall investigations which were believed would have been injurious to the administration; another journalist Bagauda Kaltho died in mysterious circumstances believed to have been engineered by the Sani Abacha administration while Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka was forced into exile to save himself from being killed by supposed agents of the same Sani Abacha. The persona, in invoking Ajon, believes that he needs these attributes of hers in the task he has assigned himself: to chastise those in power by detailing some of the activities that are inimical to the development of the nation and to suggest solutions to the suffering masses on the way out of the 'darkness' imposed on them by their leaders. A tone of courage is discernible in the poet's insistence on the use of 'mere' words to "shatter mountains" and confront "the horrendous wind":

But armed with the witty wiles of your witty words
I shall shatter mountainous myths built on Dunes;

I will say to the horrendous wind of devalued naira backed by false
creeds and deceitful choruses in their place (p. 5)

This courage may be traceable to the Yoruba belief in the force and might of incantations which are magical words that can do the bidding of the one reciting them. Note again that in paying homage to Ajon, the poet asks that her spirit invades and overtakes his own body and spirit so he can succeed at his task. This courageous tone of rebellion at the forces of oppression is sustained in 'The Mermaid Betrays' (p. 72). This poem is introduced by the Yoruba folksong of the mermaid, 'On ko r'idi Omi o'. The poet /persona warns the oppressor class that: "We shall plummet your beginning/ In derisory doxologies of your mere end/ After a life-long regime of boasts, gloats and more boasts (p. 72).

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This will happen when the "Mermaid that dines in the river deeps /...belches up/ The ignoble secrets of the River". The leaders are metaphorically referred to as "Big Rivers" while the Mermaid symbolises the leaders' insatiable lust for material things which lives in their bellies. In this case they will be betrayed by their own greed. The song here serves as a warning of the impending action of the people. The folkloric nature of the song (which is actually a wise saying in the form of a song), imbues the threat it contains with a tone of an ominous certainty that it is just a matter of time before the corrupt leadership is put to shame unless they "Open up then,/ When the sun's eye is lit up/ In the bright skies,/ The secret story of your reign,/ And back it up with freedom/ Right of access to the occult of your coded power, That the Mermaid/ May find no tale to relish." (p. 73)

In 'Theme of a Wrestler' (p. 105), the persona seeks further courage in the traditional song of the wrestler. He is aware that the task embarked upon can be dangerous as the oppressive ruling class will not relinquish its ill-gotten position and influence easily. It therefore sees anybody who tries to mobilise, sensitise the people and reawaken them as a threat. History has shown that such people are either killed, or forced into exile. Employing the song as a metaphor, Obafemi sees this potential conflict as a duel between him and the leaders:

No matter
The boulder thickness of my rival's muscles
The bristling anger of his biceps and triceps;
My back shall not kiss the earth.
Ayin m'e tit e 'le ri o.

Before the poem ends, the first person pronoun (singular) becomes plural: "Our backs shall not rub on the earth...} 5 times". This seems to suggest that it is not a task that is being undertaken by one person, but by the generality of the suffering masses.

Yet another poem that contains a Yoruba folk song is 'Sky Plea to Mother' (p. 90). This song is from the popular tale of the dog that, rather than kill his mother for food as prescribed by all the other animals during a period of famine, took his mother to heaven where she would send down food to him whenever he sang the pre arranged song. With 'Mother' being a metaphor for God, the Sustainer of all, the poem seems to allude to God as a solution to the problems being faced by the majority (off-spring) as catalogued in the collection. Only the masses however have this access to the bounties of God as the lowering of this 'rope of plenty' is contingent upon the wish of the 'off-spring'. This seems to imply that the suffering masses have a power that they can use to overcome the wealthy minority. Thus in order to prevent the leadership from benefitting from such divine sustenance, the song urges: 'Yeye - Jakun! (Mother, / Coil your ropes / Traitors are on the prowl.)' The oppressive forces are the tortoise of the folk tale that ends up with a cracked back. The reason the leadership is not deserving of such grace from the Supreme Being is implied in this line which gloats thus: "Let those who sow the wind/ Reap the whirlpool." This recalls the 'horrendous wind' imagery which the poet had used

in 'Homage to Ajon'. Obafemi uses the song to show the people that the power to change their situation for the better is in their own hands. The recited portion of the poem 'Sky Plea to Mother' therefore serves as a commentary to the song therein.

In 'Dele Giwa Lives on, Still' (p. 14), the song in the poem serves as a morale booster for the suffering majority. In death, Dele Giwa has been adopted by Nigerian activists who believe that he died in the cause of fighting the autocratic military dictatorship then in power. The persona says that his death cast a shadow of sadness on the celebration for Wole Soyinka's Nobel Prize for literature. The song however consoles by likening the indestructibility of the world and life of the people, and by extension the struggle for equality, to the "criss-cross spidal webs/ of the living palm...".

(You wake up and find it,
Like the labyrinthine lines of the palm
Life will not collapse
In our time)
So,
In vain you bury Dele Giwa

So, just as the lines of the palm cannot be erased, the struggle for an egalitarian society cannot be stifled by such killings as Dele Giwa's. The reference to the lines on the palm also suggests that such struggles are destined or are inevitable in any society where those in authority oppress the followers. Thus as *Iwere meji* says of Dele Giwa's death in the poem:

It is the opening line
Of a book of hope
The rising voices of warring rights
It is the battle-line freshly drawn

In the folksong in 'Mother with Feet of Paddle' (p. 56), Obafemi contrasts the qualities of the character in the song with that of the leaders and comes to a damning conclusion. The mother who rocks and lures her child to sleep is a metaphor of a caring and protective leader; these are qualities which the leadership under x-ray in the collection lack as they are referred to as 'ravaging and rampaging mothers / ... (who) Ruin their Duck-lets from the front'. The people are referred to as 'orphaned chicks (who) become victims/ Of the ravaging kites in contrast with the Duck in the folktale who shields her ducklings from "...black kites foraging in the sky / Ready to pounce on stray-ducks". The poem calls for action that will lead to a rejection of any claim to any rights in the land by such a leadership. This is done through the imagery of the child who points to himself as his own father i.e. rejecting one's father by claiming that s/he is her/his own father. The poet sees this as an anathema and in recalling a line from the song prays: "*Iye l'Omo aba'Lupo lehin!* Make us mothers/ With cuddling paddles on their feet" (p. 56).

In other poems, Obafemi borrows from contemporary popular music like High-life and Afro beat in his task of creating awareness on current issues. In 'A

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Song for Ogunde and Awolowo' (p. 23), Obafemi employs Ogunde's song as an ode to Ogunde. The song was originally meant to praise Awolowo, the premier of the then Western region. In the poem, Obafemi equates the pioneering efforts of Awolowo as premier with that of Ogunde who was (stage and film) dramatist. The poet sees them both as pace setters in their different fields. For instance, he recalls how the arrival of the Purity spirit (i.e. Awolowo) brought sanity "To the murky waters of ward-wreckers". The poet uses the poem to comment not only on the dearth of visionary (political) leaders, but also that of a viable literary tradition pioneered by artists like Ogunde. Ogunde is known to have used his art to mediate in social issues. The poet laments that with the death of Awo and Ogunde, 'Darkness is the only testimony of our becoming' and seeks the return of Ogunde:

...(the) dying apron
Of departed Stage
Chased into hideous dark
By the glittering coins of Nollywood
The reigning voice form Tube. (p. 25)

He compares Ogunde to Awolowo and hopes for his return to "Let darkness slide out". No doubt what the poet implies by 'Ogunde's return' is not what seems to be the norm now which is the crass commercialisation of VHS productions masquerading as films whose themes are of no political relevance to the people but rather artists dedicating their works for a better society.

In 'Ode to Fela' (p. 18), Obafemi adapts Fele Anokulapo-Kuti's song. The refrain "Water no get Enemy" in this poem is an allusion to one of the lines in the late musician's song. Obafemi turns the line around and using the rhetorical question mode, suggests that in the face of the calamities suffered by the people during floods, water should indeed be seen as an enemy.

The song in the poem 'The Song *Temopinini* Left Behind' (p. 95) evokes the evils of colonialism. Unlike the others discussed above which are folksongs and contemporary but popular songs, Obafemi says that this song is a personal composition of his grandmother's (O. Obafemi, personal communication, January 31, 2010). The poem which the song introduces echoes the lamentation in the song and moans: "*Grandma lost her tongue and her name / In the waters of Baptism*" as with the advent of colonialism and Christianity, his grandmother was forced to take not only a new religion but a new name which had no relevance to her. This is however not the only loss. According to the poet, his grandmother was in charge of delivery of new-born babies and of circumcision in his and other surrounding villages. Thus:

Its good-bye to well-cut navels
Its goodnight to clean-cut legs- within- the legs
Its long time to corn- brew-
Burukutu and Pito-
That you brewed to delightful taste (p. 96)

The poem thus laments cultural colonialism of the African. In spite of some attempt by some at going back to some of the indigenous cultural practices as "Many have thrown off the ropes / Tied around their necks", the poet laments that "...there are new losses" such as the rejection of "Animist appellations to their names".

However, the song also contains a tone of defiance through a rhetorical question implying a rejection of what the Baptism by the Whiteman stands for and by extension, a rejection of colonialism:

*Oyibo
Pa m'Ede da l'Omi
Ami je lSera
Ka bi eje Isara lara mi?
Whiteman
Changed my tongue at Baptism
And named me Sarah
I ask you;
Which part of my human anatomy
Looks like Sarah? (p. 95)*

In this song, the Grandmother rejects the new name given her. Obafemi seizes on this defiant tone and seeing hope and inspiration in it, declares it a legacy for the lost generations to rediscover themselves: "Go down the corridor of memories/ And pick Grandma's song (p. 97).

The poem ends with a translation of the song in English as a form of emphasis implying a rejection of the attempt by the colonialists to erode the traditional life and value system of the people.

In another poem, Obafemi uses song to pay tribute to a fellow artist, Wale Ogunyemi. 'Glow, Bonfire Glow' (p. 30) is a song which the poet says is sung around a huge bonfire in the month of December when the harmattan is biting (O. Obafemi, personal communication, January 31, 2010). The line "*Oju fen mo re mako a no ra*" which the poet translates as '*its time to close the lids of the eye / For Dawn is here*' (p. 30) is significant as the 'closing of the eyes' could be said to refer to death i.e. Ogunyemi's. Ironically, while the eyes are closing their lids, the bonfire is being urged to glow. This refers to Ogunyemi's works which Obafemi incorporates within the body of the poem as a tribute to him:

*Narrator of Kiriji War,
You saw into the day after...
Armed with The Scheme
Shakespeare waits eagerly to embrace you
Obaluaye, the leprous King
Has cleansed you(r) path (p.32)*

Ogunyemi's works thus live on (glow) even after his death.

The praise song (*Oriki*) in 'You Are the Poem of my Life' (p. 104) which the poet dedicates to his wife chronicles their lives together. It is a love poem being sung

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the language who share similar challenges identified in the poems to find the poems relevant (especially in a performance), musical notations should be provided by the poet.

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