

# The Aesthetics of Oka Akoko Praise Poetry

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# ABSTRACT

Praise poetry as widely known is one of the artistic weapons for the propagation of African cultural values. This study was carried out with the aim of presenting, elaborately, the aesthetics of the Praise poetry (Oriki) of Oka Akoko in terms of its thematic preoccupation and stylistic features. The dialectal version of the praise songs were collected and recorded on tape for easy interpretation and analysis. The study focuses on the form and content of the poems in relation to their stylistic presentation. The analysis of the poems reveals that Oka dialect as a variation of Yoruba language has a sophisticated level of diction in the use of linguistic devices. The study has helped to further emphasize the aesthetics of Yoruba culture as well as a major function of praise poetry as a source of information about our cultural heritage.

Keywords: Praise Poetry, Oriki, Aesthetics, Oka Akoko

# INTRODUCTION

A very important art which Africans are now relegating to the background of their history is the art of praise poetry. Praise poetry as a branch of oral literature, has been a practice of Africans for as far back as one can remember. This is contrary to widely held belief, especially among the European anthropologists who studied African societies in the nineteenth and early twentieth century that poetry was a mark of an advanced culture and civilization and that Africans have not yet come to term with the evidence of their existence not to talk of indulging in the pursuit of poetic excellence.

The position of oral poetry in African oral traditional literature cannot be discountenanced. In fact, African languages are sufficiently developed to cope with the complex techniques of poetic expressions. As Ogungbesan & King (1975) assert, "Poetry is an important and, a living part of African culture going back into the distant past which has been propagated as a cultural practice from generations through the use of African native languages". In fact, it is incontestable to assert that poetry practice is among the basic human activities in the social life of Africans. Through memorization, poems are transmitted to next generation with minor alterations. Finnegan(1978) States that "the context that often spring to mind when oral literature is mentioned is of some remote village far off the beaten track with the indigenous people, non-literate and non-industrialized- engaging in performing some local song or piece of traditional verse." However, he posits that it does not only tell a story, but "hidden within poetry is cultural belief, cultural traits and reputation as well as the origin of the particular tribe."

# Praise Poetry and Oka Akoko

'Oriki' which is a term for praise poetry, eulogy or panegyric poetry is a cultural phenomenon among the Yoruba speakers of the West Africa. It is usually a poetic verse sung or recited to eulogize a person, a family, or tribe. According to Oloyede (2023), there are different categories of oriki such as 'Oriki ile'(family/lineage poetry), 'Oriki ilu' (town/community) or Oriki deities " (orisa). Adeleke (2001) citing Barber (1981) opines that 'oriki' are the principal means by which a living relationship with the past is reconstructed in the present." This is corroborated by Adeleke (2005) when he states that "oriki ably well serves the purpose of history." Abimbola (2012) and Babalola (2000) also observe that 'oriki'among the Yoruba people always bother on history, ancestral biographical sketches of a race, founders of various town and allusion to their rulers and nobles. In this case, their great deeds and characters are commemorated, recounted and relieved. Oriki are primarily meant to praise the referent(s) and also, inspire them to pursue loftier attainments usually more than that of their progenitors.



Historically, Ile- Ife is regarded as Yoruba centre of civilization and it is believed to be the origin of the Yorubas who occupy the Western region of Nigeria which includes states like Lagos, Ogun, Ekiti, Ondo, Osun and parts of Edo, Kogi and Kwara. No wonder, Oka people are eulogized as 'Omo Oka r'ufe.'

Oka Akoko is a town in Akoko South-West Local Government Area of Ondo State. It is situated on a plateau with tails off in extremely picturesque pattern of lofty hills. Oka covers an area of about thirty square kms. The name Oka is a contracted form of Okarufe meaning Oka-Ife. History has it that its people migrated from Ife Ijesha land and Ekiti land until they later settled where they are today. Some settled at the southern part of the hills while a group settled at the northern peripheries of the same hill. During inter-tribal wars in those days, history has it that while the surrounding towns and villages were run down by invading armies of the Nupes and Edos, Oka remained unconquerable partly due to the hills offering defense against the invading forces.

The majority of Oka people are farmers by profession. The men in particular engage in large scale cocoa farming and palm oil production. The social life of Oka is a vibrant one . There are several cultural festivals which are highly entertaining. Among them are Omomo, Ijesu (New Yam Festival), Udede etc.. They all are quite informative in the sense that they constitute avenues for exhibiting the culture of the people.

# Statement of the Problem

Undoubtedly, copious research works exist on praise poetry in Nigeria. For instance, Imomotimi (2023) focuses on the emergence of praise poetry recitation among the Ijo people of the Nigerian Niger-Delta region in which he states that until the contemporary period, unlike most towns in Nigeria, Ijo had no such poetic form until it was influenced by the Yoruba bard. The duo of Oladipo (2005) and Adeniji-Neil (2014) explore a common ground in the aspects of Yoruba 'oriki'. The latter conducted an overview of the 'oriki' in which he opines that the influence of the Yoruba culture extends beyond Nigeria to the Caribbean, the USA, Brazil, South-America etc. He concludes that from praise songs and folklore, people learn the values they need to live and organize their lives. Oladipo on his part focuses on 'oriki idile' (lineage praise poetry) among the Yorubas.

Others such as Anthony and Olajide(2012) and Lyons and Barber (1992) also worked on Nigerian oral poetry. Despite these, the praise poetry of Oka has not received much attention. Hence, this paper intends to fill this gap by exploring the aesthetic features of that are inherent in the 'oriki' of the town.

# **Objectives of the Study**

The aim of this study is to examine the form and content of traditional praise poetry in Oka Akoko and, to showcase the high aesthetic values of African oral literature as exhibited in the study samples. It is further intended to corroborate the fact that African oral literature is not mere story telling but a viable source of information about the cultural heritage of the people.

# METHODOLOGY

The data samples were collected from Oka Akoko. Investigation carried out shows that there are no professional praise singers in the town. Rather, there are freelance chanters who are always at hand whenever any occasion demands their expertise. The dialectical version of the praise poems were collected and recorded on tape through interview for easy interpretation and analysis. The poems were then translated directly in order to provide clear communicative clues for the reader to infer their intended meaning and to also ensure that they retain their aesthetic value. The data comprise two samples which are the general praise poem or "Oriki" of Oka people and, the royal praise poem of the paramount ruler. The qualitative research approach was adopted for the analysis of the data.

# DATA ANALYSIS

# The Thematic Pre-Occupation

# a. Physical Attributes

The 'oriki' is usually used to define its subject, usually by maximizing those attributes which the Yoruba society



considered to be good qualities and, playing down as much as possible the not so flattering ones. Omoabugan (1997) citing Olatunji (1984) states that:

The physical description of the subject may be given, and to human

subjects are attributed, in boastful, almost extravagant praise, many

qualities which include military might, courage, diplomacy,

royalty, magical power and skill in one's profession. For human subjects

are also reserved, admonitory comments, and history, ancestral or lineage tracing.

The physical appearance of an Oka man is described below:

Offspring of the giants Ajakaye that makes the dwarf trembles (A15)

History has it that Ajakaye, who was one of the forefathers of the lineage used to be a huge man who was a fearful sight to behold. An average Oka man or woman is said to be:

The offspring of Oketempe who grew the pubic hair at a very early stage in life (A17)

This is saying that Oka people mature very early and wise up the turmoil of life.

### **b. Military Might and Prowess**

Generally, the Yoruba history is not complete without reference to war. Oka people lay stress on personal or communal achievements especially in war. In their praise poems, the military prowess, great deeds and character of earlier heroes in inter-tribal and inter-communal wars are extolled. This is portrayed and symbolized in many ways. For instance, praise names like Balogun, Ologun, Afariogun, Ologunagba, Ologunwa, Akogun, Ajaguna etc. are household names in Oka and each has the nominal 'ogun'(war) embedded in it. More So, the people are described as brave and thus praised:

We, the offspring of him who sees war and does not run (A3)

We are the offspring of him sees conspiracy and burst into laughter (A4)

We, the offspring of him who goes before a war. Ekiti comes, the latecomer (A5)

We, the offspring of him who is always war conscious (A21)

Offspring of him who appears at war from four different parts. Beere, the wizard of war. (A22)

Summarily, an average Oka person is regarded as a lover of battle.

#### c. Professional Distinction

The subjects of 'oriki' are often praised for their skillfulness and distinction in their profession (Olatunji,1984). The Oka people are noted for their outstanding distinction in what is regarded as their major occupation-farming. Their skillful competence is extolled thus:

Offspring of him who uses yam tuber to stir the fire (A11)

Offspring of him who tills the ground from the bottom of the Orido to the top (A13)

Offspring of him who uses black hands to eat (A10)

Offspring of him who uses goat to snatch the wife of a Hare killer (A12)



The Orido is a very popular hill around which some people of Oka-odo quarter in Oka have their farms. The rocky state of place notwithstanding, the people are not discouraged. Due to this distinction, it is assumed that they can acquire whatever they desire including 'snatching' the wives of less competent or lazy men.

Similarly, the knowledge of traditional medicine is a theme of praise as in the followings:

Offspring of Agbedelaya, Agbedelaya, who has thousand divinities in his backyard (A14)

Offspring of him who makes concoction for the barren (A16)

The matter is now left in the hand of her the one that does not want to conceive (A17)

# d. Wealth

The Oka people are also praised for their wealth or the wealth for which their lineage is known for, particularly in the area of agriculture. Examples:

Offspring of the owner of kolanut trees that bear bountiful fruit (A7)

We, the offspring of him who has abundance and gives out plenty (A27)

...and dishes out yams to the fowls (A10)

### **Stylistic Devices**

The essence of every literary composition is the beauty of language, which is shown in the careful selection of words...and the way they are selected and used contribute to aesthetics in literature (Owolabi, 2014). The use of figurative language usually marks out a literary piece from another type of discourse such as in other field such as history, sociology, science etc. Yoruba oral literature generally makes use of figurative language and, the praise poetry of Oka Akoko is not an exemption. Poetic devices are used effectively to convey mythological meaning. The poetic style emerges when one considers the language and forms of expression in detail.

#### e. Metaphor

As a Literary device, metaphor is used to draw comparisons of two unrelated or unlike things to show their similarities. It can be used to create vivid imagery exaggeration of a characteristic or an action. It is a prominent stylistic device employed in the poems. As Finnegan (1990) opines, the language of praise is metaphorical. For instance, in the following lines, there is a direct comparison between the Olubaka, the Paramount ruler and the wind:

'The mighty wind that shakes the mighty trees along the way to Ogbe (8)

The big 'jalapa' that climbs the Iroko tree and bears plenty seeds (6)

The Oba is referred to as 'a mighty mind' to show the extent of his power and authority over his jurisdiction. 'Ogbe' is a sacred jungle in Oka and is said to be full of very mighty and formidable-looking trees. Here, the Oba is considered more terrifying than these mighty trees which bow to his authority

# f. Hyperbole

Hyperbole is another poetic device employed. This device is used in literary works by a writer or speaker to intentionally to exaggerate and overstate for the purpose of emphasis or dramatic effects. It usually amplifies a statement to evoke emotion. According to Afolayan (1989)," the description of, the attribution to people or thing values or qualities far beyond the state of things as we know it, is much used in Yoruba oral poetry". Likewise, an average Oka man is described as:

Offspring of him who tills the ground from the bottom of the 'orido' to the top (A13).



There is a vivid use of imagination in the sense that it is clearly impossible to cultivate on a rock. The 'Orido' is a mountain. Nevertheless, the usage is meant to swell the pride of the people in their ancestral lineage. The following lines also show some imaginative exaggeration:

... the owner of the forest of thousand demons... (A1)

The offspring of Agbedelaya. Agbedelaya who has thousands divinities in his backyard (A11)

Offspring of him who divines and Sango strikes in his backyard (A12)

'Forest of thousand demons', 'thousand divinities' are mere exaggerations for rhetorical purpose. Although, the claim about Sango (the Yoruba god of thunder) is most unlikely happens, it nevertheless shows the competence and honesty of the addressee.

### g. Simile

Another figurative device that is employed is simile which is an overt comparison that describes an object as being similar to another which is more vivid.

Oka, the offspring of Ayingbe, the masquerade with smooth skin like the yellow yam (A6)

The King turns his back, he looks like a newly born baby (B5)

'Ayingbe' is a masquerade with supple skin due to a special ointment which he uses during his outings. Likewise, the royal father of Oka is described as being like a new born.

### h. Cumulative Parallelism

Parallelism is a form of identical repetition of other parts of a line or having a part added to it thereby resulting to progress in the expression of the idea or action that is introduced It is a literary style in which coordinate ideas are arranged in phrases, phrases or sentences that balance one element with another of equal importance. This is a very common feature in praise poetry that serves to emphasize the qualities of the object of praise. Examples:

Offspring of the giant Ajakaye that makes the dwarf trembles (A18)

Ajakaye who has no fear (A19)

The singular idea being enlarged above is that of 'bravery' of referent

Offspring of Okrufe, the owner of the forest of thousand demons which a stranger must not enter (A1)

The stranger that enters becomes a spirit (A2)

The King holds the tail of the leopard and dances the dance of scorn (B3)

The king holds the tail of leopard and dances the dance of challenge (B4)

#### i. Repetition

This is the act of repeating a word or a group of word to lay emphasis on the theme or the idea being expressed. The use of repetition, the essentials or at times what appears to be the essentials are emphasized as in the following:

We the offspring of the owner of the highest mountain (A22)

We the offspring of the owner of the highest mountain (A23)

We the offspring of him that bids one welcome from one's father's farm (A27)



The repetition of the highest mountain draws attention to the fact that Oka is a geographical entity that is surrounded by hills. Also, the repetition of 'omo' (the offspring of) is a preponderance of kingship that link the subjects of the 'oriki' to their relations and fore bearers, although, it cannot always be taken to mean 'son of' or 'born of'.

# j. Allusion

Allusion is a literary device that refers to a brief and indirect reference to something from a different story outside the text- usually to person, place, event or thing. It often refers to historical events or people, other works of Literature, mythology etc. Finnegan (1970) has described praise poetry as "a vehicle for recording history". Besides its primary function of expressing praise, it is a viable means of documenting and propagating history of outstanding events in the lives of the people. The information which are usually expressed by these include great deeds and characters of earlier heroes. Oftentimes, there is allusion to historical antecedents in which stories and facts are drawn from historical archives. The most significant ones in the samples are allusion to warfare, traditional medical practice, great farmers etc.

Offspring of him who appears at war from different paths. Beere, the wizard of war (A26)

'Beere', according to history was a great warrior who equally possessed the magical power to appear and vanish from the battle field at will.

Offspring of Agbedelaya. Agbedelaya who has a thousand divinities in his backyard (A14)

Offspring of him who divines and Sango strikes in confirmation (A14)

Agbedelaya was said to be a great and renowned herbalist

There is also an allusion to:

... the giant Ajakaye that makes the dwarf trembles (A18)

Ajakaye who has no fear (A19)

Ajakaye was a powerful and fearless man who instilled fear into the heart of people. The ascendants find it a thing of pride to associate with somebody of such caliber. The enviable qualities of the ancestors are considered a source of inspiration to them. In general, to the people of Oka, the use of allusion serves a historical recorder and also encourages one's patriotism and sense of belonging to the community at large.

In addition, through the employment of allusion, the qualities and actions of people are sometimes presented in a vivid and precise manner. Most often through comparison to animals to connote bravery, fierceness or agility as the case may be. Example:

... offspring of the tiger (B11)

# k. Alternative Praise Names

The use of alternative praise name features prominently in the praise poems. According to Olatunji (1984), "when the 'oriki' of a person is being performed, he is referred to by all the names that he bears". Often, the physical description of the subjects and many qualities including military provess, royalty, magical power, professional skill are recognized. For instance, the Olubaka of Oka is called 'Afufu'(a mighty wind), 'Ebisha'(spirit), 'Jalapa'(cow itch). Also, an average Oka man is addressed as 'Oloke' (mountain owner) etc.

# CONCLUSION

This research work has examined the thematic preoccupation and stylistic features of the praise poetry of Oka Akoko. The study has helped to prove further that African languages are sufficiently developed enough to cope with the complex techniques of poetic expression. In essence, the complex feature which the praise poetry of



Oka exhibits for high aesthetic values combines to show that praise poetry is a source of information about our cultural heritage. It debunks the erroneous notion that oral literature is a mere story telling. Like other forms of literature, praise poetry is a veritable tool for the propagation of one's cultural heritage which is expressed through the rich resources that are embedded in language. Most importantly, it is an effective way of propagating the message of core cultural values which include hard work, honesty, faithfulness, loyalty, honour, dignity, diligence etc from one generation to another.

It is hoped that more studies of this nature will not only help to create more awareness for the younger generations on the depth and beauty of the Yoruba oral traditions, but also, greatly help to inculcate in them those standards and principles that were traditionally transmitted to them by their ancestors.

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# APPENDIX A

#### Oka

1. Omo OKarufe, onigbo irumole y'ajojimawo



- 2. Ajoji y'oba wogbo irunmale, a d'eni ebora
- 3. Awa ome arougun masa, arote ma beru
- 4. Awa ome arogun berin no keere
- 5. Awa ome asiwaju ogun, Ekiti bo, asupayin
- 6. Oka ome Ayingbe abara lolo
- 7. Ome olobikan ye e so rugudugudu,
- 8. ome olobikan ye e so rugudugudu
- 9. Ome oje le reo, ome arara gbude
- 10. Awa ome d' mowo dudu jehun, akosu t'aparo ore
- 11. Ome a f'eputu p'o pako ina
- 12. Ome a ru ideegbe gbaya n;owo apetu
- 13. Ome akale m'orido gun
- 14. Omo Agbedelaya, Agbedelaya, akogba irunmole n'odin bo
- 15. Ome a debo un Sango laso
- 16. Ome asogungun hun robibi
- 17. E maa bi e d'owo orun e
- 18. Ome Ajakaye yee ba kukute aru
- 19. Ajakaye oniberu
- 20. Awa ome Oketempe atale funromu
- 21. We, the offspring of Ayingbe
- 22. Awa ome oloke igegelige,
- 23. awa ome oloke igegelige
- 24. Ome eni o mi ba no ne oko
- 25. Ome ologun a tin n'wasa
- 26. Ome arona merin jari ogun, Beere, aje ogun
- 27. Awa ome a mu 'hun kekere tani ore
- 28. Awa ome oloke kan ye e keni kaabo oko baba eni
- 1. Offspring of Okarufe, the owner of the forest of thousand demons which a stranger must not enter
- 2. The stranger that enters becomes a spirit
- 3. We, the Offspring of him who sees war and does not flee
- 4. We, the Offspring of him who sees conspiracy and burst into laughter
- 5. We the Offspring of him who goes before a war, Ekiti come, the latecomers
- 6. Oka, the Offspring of Ayingbe, the masquerade with smooth skin like the yellow yam
- 7. Offspring of the owner of the plantain trees that bear bountiful fruits
- 8. Offspring of the owner of the plantain trees that bear bountiful fruits
- 9. Offspring of the owner of the house of money
- 10. Offspring of him who eat with black hands and dish out yams to the bush fowls
- 11. We, the offspring of him who uses yam to stir the fire
- 12. Offspring of him who uses goat to snatch the wife of a hare killer
- 13. Offspring of him who till the ground from the bottom of the Orido to the top
- 14. We the offsprings of Agbedelaya, Agbedelaya, who has thousand divinities in his backyard
- 15. Offspring of him who divines and Sango strikes in confirmation
- 16. Offspring of him who make concoction for the barren
- 17. The matter is no left in the hands of he who does not want to conceive
- 18. Offspring of the giant Ajakaye that makes the dwarf tremble
- 19. Ajakaye who has no fear
- 20. We the offspring of Oketempe who grew the pubic hair at a very early stage in life
- 21. We, the offspring of Ayingbe
- 22. We, the offspring of the owner of the highest mountain
- 23. We, the offspring of the owner of the highest mountain
- 24. Offspring of him that must not be met on one's way to the farm
- 25. Offspring of him who is always war conscious
- 26. Offspring of him that appears at war from four different parts. Beere, the wizard of war



27. Offspring of him who has abundance and gives out plenty

28. We, the offspring of the owner of the highest mountain that bids one welcome from one's father's farm.

# **APPENDIX B**

### **Royal Praise Poem**

- 1. Kabiyesi, alate, igbakedin orisa
- 2. K'ade pe lori, ki bat ape n'ese
- 3. Oba run ekun bi ne o dudo ose
- 4. Oba ruru ekun bi ne o dudu 'ija
- 5. Oba puwadu da ni, e o wa dome titon
- 6. Ome oni jalapa lila yee gori igi iroko. O so wadawada
- 7. Oba Alade ori, Eledingba ileke n'orun
- 8. Ome alafufu lila, yee tori igi tete n'one ogbe
- 9. Okinmi kinmi okunrin
- 10. K'oba gbo, e e to o
- 11. Ome owa, omo ekun
- 12. Ebisha oke, Ebisha eredudu, Ebisha eredude
- 13. Ome elemure ajalogbe. Kare o Ebisha oke.
- 1. Kabiyesi, the Commander, next to the Gods
- 2. May the crown stay long on your head, may the shoes stay long on your feet
- 3. The King holds the tail of the leopard and dances the dance of scorn
- 4. The king holds the tail of leopard and dances the dance of challenge
- 5. The King turns his back, he looks like a newly born baby
- 6. The big 'jalapa' that climbs the Iroko tree and bears plenty seed
- 7. The crown King. He that has four hundred beads around his neck
- 8. The mighty wind that shakes the mighty trees along the way to Ogbe
- 9. A giant of a man
- 10. May the king lives long, may he lasts for us
- 11. Offspring of Owa, offspring of the tiger
- 12. Ebisha to whom gaiety is brought but who is not approached with fight
- 13. Offspring of Ajalogbe. Kudos to you, the Ebisha of the highest order.