

Oral Poetry: Exposition of Selected Yoruba Lullabies

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Abstract

The beauty of poetry is fully achieved when presented in the oral form. However, many poets nowadays seem to be engrossed in the written form only, giving little or no credence to the oral form –whose absence arguably invalidates poetic aesthetics as meter, tone, rhyme and rhythm, just to mention a few. Hence, this study captures selected lullabies in their oral art form through audio recording before transcribing and translating them to the written form in this paper. This study basically describes some Yoruba lullabies as a form of oral poetry and how they function in the Yoruba sociocultural structure. It adopts both quantitative and qualitative methods by using two field agents as active participants who interviewed and collected six lullabies from two aged Yoruba women (in Ibadan, Oyo state and Ikire, Osun state) as a representation of the Yoruba society; and consulting conceptual materials from books in libraries and on the cyberspace. Using the functionalist theory as hermeneutics, it assesses the contribution of lullabies to the maintenance of the Yoruba culture and social structure as it is today. This study aims to add to the existing knowledge in the lore of oral poetry in general, and translation of selected Yoruba lullabies precisely.

Keywords: Orature, oral poetry, lullaby, Translation, Yoruba

1. Introduction

This study basically describes socio-cultural significances of selected Yoruba lullabies as they are today in their oral poetic form, using the functionalist praxis. It is pertinent to describe some key concepts as “orature”, oral poetry, lullaby and translation that serve as background to this study. The term “Orature” is an uncommonly used term that was coined by the Ugandan linguist Pio Zirimu to replace the widely used oxymoronic term “Oral Literature” or other common terms as Verbal Art, Unwritten Literature, Non-Written Literature, Folklore, Traditional Literature etc. However, this study subscribes to the use of the term “Orature” because it posits the term is less ambiguous compared to other terms. According to Zirimu, “orature is a term generally applied to spoken literary tradition such as folktales, folklore, musical theatre, proverbs, riddles, live history, epic poem and historical recitation”. For Zirimu, it refers to any art form that is passed orally or presented by word of mouth.

Another renowned scholar, Ruth Finnegan also describes orature by choosing the term “Oral literature” which “is by definition dependent on a performer who formulates it in words on a specific occasion –there is no other way in which it can be realized as a literary product”. Finnegan (1970a) further makes the distinction between “the actual creation of a written literary form and its further transmission.” She asserts that oral literature differs because there is much more intimate nexus in the transmission. She argues that the written literature has an independent and tangible existence in a single copy that other written copies may be treated as secondary. But the case of oral literature is different because the questions about the channels of actual communication are of utmost importance and the oral art form cannot easily be argued to possess any continued or independent existence without its oral realization and direct performance by a singer or speaker (Finnegan, 1970a).

Oral poetry is a genre of Orature that deals with poetry that is composed (often communally owned as against individual authorship found in written poetry) and transmitted through the words of mouth without the aid of writing. Oral poetry in Africa, Nigeria and in the Yoruba society to be specific, are often songs that delineate the whole range of human activities and experiences – in forms of praise and merriment, amusement and entertainment, love and loss; works songs and protest songs, just to mention a few. Subcategories of oral poetry are, but not limited to lullabies, panegyrics, elegies, odes, proverbs, riddles, and work songs.

A lullaby is a cradlesong or a soothing poem that is sung to make children calm or soothe them to sleep. The purpose of lullaby varies. Lullaby in the Yoruba society is not only used to calm or lull babies to sleep but may also serve as a supplication and a medium to transmit cultural norms and tradition. Similarly, Finnegan in one of her essays “Topical and Political Songs” (1970b), buttresses that:

Songs can be used to report and comment on current affairs, for political pressure, for propaganda and how to reflect and mould public opinion. This political and topical function can be an aspect of many of the types of poetry already discussed –work songs, lyric, praise poetry, even at times something as simple as a lullaby (Finnegan, 1970b).

Similarly, Uwemedimo (2009) describes, “like other forms of poetry, Nigerian lullabies stand up to the staked for poetry as contributive in value to health and the growth of literature and language”. According to T.S. Eliot also cited by Thompson

and then Uwemedimo, “the poetry of a people takes its life from the people’s speech and in turn gives life to it”. This submission has largely been given support by the sample of lullabies presented in this study.

Translation, as a concept, defies a precise definition. There is a common perception that translation is an inferior copy of the original which is often considered as superior. There is however an uncommon line of thought that gives prominence to translation as a kind of reincarnation of the original. The famous deconstructionist, Jacques Derrida espouses this line of thought by suggesting that translation becomes the original effectively (Bassnett, & Lefevere, 1998, Hermans, 2013). This paper therefore aligns with this assumption that the reader accesses the original through translation. In other words, the translation can transform to the reader’s original. The layman’s description of translation can be putting or repeating what is in one language into another language. It is the act of transmitting meaning from one language to another. In the words of George Steiner in *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, “All acts of communication are acts of translation.” This foregrounds the notion that translation works in an interwoven way in speech, movement, interpretation etc. According to Schulte (2012), there is seldom a daily activity without some form of translation. Schulte (2012) extends the description by positing that verbal, visual, and musical interpretations must be regarded as acts of translation. This paper has therefore translated some Yoruba lullabies into English in order to expand the reader’s ability to explore through oral poetry the thoughts and culture of the Yoruba society. Translation is no doubt relevant for any civilization and allows the reader to enjoy the transformation of the strange into the familiar.

This study observes little credence has been given to describing lullaby when compared to other oral poetry forms as proverbs, elegies, panegyrics etc. in the Yoruba society. This statement of the research problem can be reinstated in Finnegan’s undiluted words in one of her essays, “Children’s Songs and Rhymes” (Finnegan, 1970b). She observes that “Little systematic interest has been taken in children’s verse in Africa”. Therefore, to foreground the data presentation and analysis of the object of enquiry, this study briefly describes its methodology, theoretical frame, geographical cum historical descriptions of the Yoruba in Southwestern Nigeria. The study also reveals the problems encountered during the field work and provides possible recommendations to guide prospective researchers interested in this or similar research.

1.1 *Geographical Description of South Western Nigeria*

South West Nigeria encompasses six states: Oyo, Osun, Ogun, Ondo, Ekiti, and Lagos. It is mainly a Yoruba inhabited area, with different dialects within each state.

The South-West Nigeria is endowed with a wide range of natural sights such as the springs in Osun State, the historic city of Ibadan, the mountain caves of Ogun State, the beaches in Lagos, just to highlight a few. Its climatic conditions changes between the two distinct seasons in Nigeria; the rainy and the dry season. The rainy season usually falls from March to November, while the dry season is usually from November to February. The dry season comes with Harmattan dust, cold and dry winds while the rainy season brings wet lands (Destination Nigeria Navigation, 2021).

1.2 *Brief Historical Description of the Yoruba*

Yoruba is one of the three major ethnicities in Nigeria that dominate the Southwestern region. However, it is pertinent to note that not only that many Yoruba people can be found scattered all over the 36 states of Nigeria, many Yorubas can also be found as natives of other countries as Benin, Togo, Sierra Leone as well as communities in Brazil and Cuba (Sadovsky, 1999).

On one hand, most Yoruba men are skilled farmers of yams, corn and millet as staples, plantains, peanuts, beans, and peas as subsidiary crops, while cocoa as a major cash crop. Some of them are traders or craftsmen. On the other hand, most Yoruba women control much of the complex market system –Yoruba women’s status depends more on their own position in the market place than on their husbands’ status (Sadovsky, 1999).

The Yoruba people have traditionally been known to be among the productive craftsmen of Africa. The people engage in such occupations as weaving of thick fabric (*Aso Ofi*), ivory and wood carving, blacksmithing, leatherworking, and glassmaking etc. Their women are notable in cotton spinning, basketry and dyeing.

The Yoruba people are disputably never a single political unit despite they have shared a common language and culture for centuries. There is the historical belief that the Yoruba people migrated from the East to their present region in the West of the lower Niger River, more than a millennium ago (Britannica, 2022). Their lands were widely regarded to be among the most developed African towns of precolonial times. They established many kingdoms of various sizes, and each of them was centralized in a capital town and administered by a monarch known as the *Oba* in Yoruba parlance. The towns became highly crowded and eventually evolved into such modern day cities as Oyo, Ibadan, Lagos, Ile-Ife, Ilesha, Ilorin, Ijebu-Ode, Ikere-Ekiti, and others.

Oyo grew, in the 17th century, into the largest Yoruba kingdom with Ile-Ife serving as a town for potent religious relevance and the origin of creation of the earth, according to the Yoruba myth. As it is today, many Yoruba people are either Christians or Muslims, although some remain animists with aspects of the traditional religion still in practice. The Yoruba language has

extensively developed in both oral and written forms/genres. Kinds of Yoruba oral poetry include lullabies, panegyrics, proverbs, epics, threnodies, work songs etc.

1.3 Methodology

This research has combined both the quantitative and qualitative approaches in gathering its data in order to generate an in-depth analysis. In its quantitative approach, six Yoruba lullabies have been collected as samples to describe the lullabies of the Yoruba society. The six lullabies have been collected from two aged Yoruba women as respondents –Mrs Esther Seun (51 years old) and Mrs Funke Sanusi (65 years old) from Ikire Osun State, and Ibadan Oyo State respectively. Through phone calls, the researcher has sorted the services of two fieldworkers –Ibrahim Nureni and Afeez Ajetunmobi who interviewed the two respondents, using a research template provided by the researcher.

In its qualitative approach, the researcher has widely borrowed concepts in literary discourses and consulted books and academic papers in libraries and on the internet. And, all works used are duly acknowledged as in-text citation and in references.

1.4 Hermeneutical Frame: Functionalism

Functionalism, as a set of theoretical principles emanated from anthropology in the early twentieth century. Bronishaw Malinowski, and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown are influential figures that contributed to the rise of functionalism. Functionalist theory is thus a counter criticism to the perceived demerits of the evolutionist and diffusionist schools of thought of the nineteenth century as well as the historicism of the early twentieth (Goldschmidt 1996, 510). According to Porth Eric et al., “two versions of functionalism developed between 1910 and 1930: Malinowski’s biological (or psychological) functionalism and structural-functionalism, the approach advanced by Radcliffe-Brown”.

Functionalist approach is presented as a novel paradigm and opposition to what was perceived to be outdated ideologies. The approach attempts to separate its principles from those of the evolutionists and the diffusionists that are common in American and British cultural studies at the turn from nineteenth to twentieth century (Lesser 1985, Langness 1987, Porth et al, 2009). According to Porth et. al., “there was a shift in focus from the speculatively historical or diachronic study of customs and cultural traits as ‘survivals’ to the ahistorical, synchronic study of the social institutions within bounded functioning societies” (Porth et al., 2009).

Functionalists postulate their theoretical leanings and methodologies as a way to extend sociocultural inquiry beyond the circumscriptions of the evolutionist assumption of social history. The evolutionists posit cultural behaviors as residual artifacts of cultural history. They further assert that an examined cultural fact is seen in terms of what it stands for in reference to what has formerly been the case, and not seen in term of what it is at the time of examination (Lesser, 1985, Porth, et al., 2009). From the functionalist stand point, such earlier approaches as the evolutionist and the diffusionist give primacy to speculative assumptions over the discovery facts. Functionalists assume that the motive force of events is in their manifestations in the present. Hence, if events are to be comprehended, it is their present functioning that should be examined and recorded (Lesser, 1985).

This study is thus framed by A.R Radcliffe-Brown’s focus on social structure that submits that a “society is a system of relationships maintaining itself through cybernetic feedback, while institutions are orderly sets of relationships whose function is to maintain the society as a system”. According to Porth, et al. (2009), one of the major tenets of functionalism which this study has adopted as hermeneutical frame, is the attempt to analyze societies as they work in a single point of time, or as they work over a relatively short period of time.

Other leading proponents of functionalism include E.E Evans-Pritchard, Sir Raymond Firth, Sir Edmund Leach, Meyer Fortes, Lucy Mair, Robert K Merton, Talcoff Parsons, and Audrey Richards.

2. Exposition of Selected Yoruba Lullabies

Six Yoruba lullabies are taken as samples to describe the characteristics of oral poetry as well as its sociocultural functions as it is in the cosmology of the Yoruba people of Nigeria. These features are largely around the fact that they are sung by mothers/babysitters using their natural words of mouth and that they are all communally owned in the Yoruba society. The first two lullabies were sung and collected from Mrs Esther Seun, a 51-year old Yoruba woman from Ikire, Osun State; while the other four lullabies were sung and collected from another Yoruba woman, Mrs Funke Sanusi who is 65 years old. The following six lullabies or cradlesongs are usually sung or performed by mothers or babysitters in the Yoruba society.

Lullaby 1

Transcription in Yoruba Language	Translation in English <i>Language</i>
<i>Ta lo nan o?</i>	<i>Who beat it?</i>

<i>Omo eye</i>	<i>A young bird</i>
<i>Le'ko m'o</i>	<i>Pelt stone at it</i>
<i>K'o salo</i>	<i>Let it runaway</i>

This is a common lullaby usually sung by babysitters in the Yoruba society. It functions to soothe a crying baby to calmness. Mrs Esther Seun reveals that during the performance, the singer makes an imaginary point as if there were a bird around to attract the baby's attention to seeing the imaginary "young bird" that has come to disturb its peace. The song thus encourages the baby to throw a stone and chase away the imaginary young bird that has come to disturb its peace. This is a way of soothing a crying baby to be calm. The baby is often goggled or dangled up and down by the babysitter while performing this cradlesong which often soothe the baby to stop crying.

Lullaby 2:

Transcription in Yoruba Language	Translation in English Language
<i>Olorun ma gba emi mi</i>	<i>Owner of Heaven, don't take my life</i>
<i>Ni 'jo iyawo re</i>	<i>On your wedding day</i>
<i>Olorun ma gba emi mi</i>	<i>Owner of heaven, don't take my life</i>
<i>Ki nle se Iya omo</i>	<i>So I can witness as spouse's mother</i>
<i>Awon olowo ma wa</i>	<i>The rich will come</i>
<i>Awon olola ma wa</i>	<i>The eminent will come</i>
<i>Awon olosi si ma gbe'le won</i>	<i>The paupers will remain in their house</i>

The above lullaby functions as a supplication usually sung by a mother in a Yoruba society. The lullaby is an apostrophe to "Owner of Heaven", *Olorun* in the Yoruba parlance that means God. The poet-persona prays to God as she anticipates her baby's wedding. Through this oral poetry, the mother is able to project into her child's glorious future where wealthy and prominent personalities only attend her "baby's" nuptial ceremony. The exclusion of the poor in the invitation list, in the last line of the above poem, suggests the orison that the baby would also grow to be as wealthy and prominent as his numerous associates who would attend its wedding.

Again, lullaby, like many other sub-genres of oral poetry, is used to promote cultural identity and pass societal norms to posterity. This is delineated in the following Yoruba lullaby.

Lullaby 3:

Transcription in Yoruba Language	Translation in English Language
<i>Omo mi ni gilasi mi</i>	<i>My child is my mirror</i>
<i>Omo mi ni gilasi mi</i>	<i>My child is my mirror</i>
<i>Omo mi ni gilasi ti mo nfi w'aju</i>	<i>My child is the mirror I use to see face</i>
<i>Omo mi ni gilasi ti mo nfi riran o</i>	<i>My child is the glasses I use in seeing</i>
<i>K'aiye ma gba gilasi mi</i>	<i>Let not the evil of the world take my mirror</i>
<i>K'aiye ma gba gilasi mi lowo mi</i>	<i>Let not the evil of the world take my mirror from my hand</i>
<i>Unibasiti dara</i>	<i>University is good</i>
<i>Nibit'awon omo mi wa</i> } 2x	<i>There; my children are</i> } 2x
<i>Ibe l'omo mi yio lo</i>	<i>That's the place my child will go</i>
<i>Ori gbe omo mi de be-o</i>	<i>Fate guides my child to the place</i>

Similarly, the functions of aforementioned lullaby in the Yoruba society align to what Okot P'Bitek confirms in the Acoli cradlesongs of Northern Uganda thus:

The lullaby...from a most important introduction to the cultural and moral education of the Acoli child. As he participates in these enjoyable activities, he learns to express himself... in the poetry. He develops his sense of rhythm as he keeps time with the rest...[of the] music

and poetry of the adults. The child is plunged into the core of poetry which is the song that arises from tensions of human reactions (p'Bitek, 1974, 2).

In the same vein as P'Bitek has described above, the child in the Yoruba society is plunged into the art of poetry from birth as they listen to the rhythm, metre and rhyme embedded in the lullabies like "My Child is my mirror". The anaphora "My Child is my mirror" does not only increase the musical qualities of the poem but also used to emphasize the continuity of one generation to another generation. The second verse thus offers the hope that the child will acquire cultural and moral education at the university when he becomes an adult to continue to frontier civilization.

Lullaby 4:

Transcription in Yoruba Language	Translation in English Language
<i>Kahidi konkolo</i>	<i>Little Kahidi</i>
<i>Ile re la njo lo</i>	<i>It's your house we're dancing to</i>
<i>Odo re la njo bo</i>	<i>It's your place we're dancing from</i>
<i>O ko'le kan si okan ile, ile nla</i>	<i>You built a house over there: A big house</i>
<i>O ra moto, o r aero, ero sansan</i>	<i>You bought a car; bought machine: strong machine</i>
<i>Ko ma si oun ti 'oni ra, Kahidi</i>	<i>There's nothing you'll not buy, Kahidi</i>
<i>O to, oko mi o, o to /2x</i>	<i>Be calm, my husband, be calm/2x</i>
<i>Ti nwon nba bu iya re</i>	<i>If they insult your mother</i>
<i>Ma dahun, ma je ki won gbo</i>	<i>Don't respond; don't let them hear</i>
<i>Ti nwon nba bu iya baba re</i>	<i>If they insult your father's mother</i>
<i>Ma dahun, ma je ki won gbo</i>	<i>Don't respond; don't let them hear</i>

This lullaby is sung antiphonally, which is typical of most African songs that incorporate responsive singing. This song is usually performed by two or more babysitters as the singing is split into two parts to create a harmony. Like most oral art forms are improvised without a fixed plot, the persona "Kahidi" in the above lullaby can be substituted with the baby's name. That is, if the baby to whom the lullaby is addressed is named Jamiu for instance, then it would be sung as "Little Jamiu" instead of "Little Kahidi". This change may slightly affect the rhythm of the first line but not the song in its entirety.

Lullaby 5:

Transcription in Yoruba Language	Translation in English Language
<i>Kilo eja ni 'm'ara fun omo mi je</i>	<i>Kilo of fish, I'll buy for my child to eat</i>
<i>Kilo eyin ni 'm'ara fun omo mi je</i>	<i>Kilo of egg, I'll buy for my child to eat</i>
<i>A se banki l'emi npa'wo si</i>	<i>So it is a bank that I'm saving to</i>
<i>Ojo ale ni emi o ko o</i>	<i>At night time, I will make my withdrawal</i>

Beyond incorporating the child into the art of poetry, the above song is used to pass sociocultural education in the society. The aforementioned lullaby can be described to fall into the category of songs that inculcate the value of responsible parenting as it urges parents to invest in their children by taking good care of them. The metaphor that the child is a bank peps parents to take care of their children if they desire a rewarding future for themselves "at night time" – which is a natural imagery that symbolizes old age.

Lullaby 6:

Transcription in Yoruba Language	Translation in English Language
<i>Alasake wajo, wajo, wajo</i>	<i>Alasake, come dance, come dance, come dance</i>
<i>Alasake wajo, omo ologe</i>	<i>Alasake, come dance, elegant child</i>
<i>Alasake, omo oba</i>	<i>Alasake, child of a King</i>
<i>Ma ma da'ran nigboro</i>	<i>Don't get into trouble in town</i>
<i>Ko ma f'se gbe 'mimi</i>	<i>So your feet wont pack irritant</i>

Alasake wajo, wajo, wajo

Alasake, come dance, come dance, come dance

Alasake wajo, omo ologé

Alasake, come dance, elegant child

Like the fourth lullaby, the opening name of the persona “Alasake” in this lullaby may be improvised with the name of the baby to whom the song is rendered. Introducing the child to the art of oral poetry, the repetition “wajo” provides rhythm to the hearing of the child and a child could learn to easily speak the language by picking such foot in the metrical language. The song invites the baby to a celebration and eulogizes it as a vital element in the society, “child of a King”. However, it also cautions the child against developing vices that may bring disgrace to his glorious heritage.

3. Problems Encountered During Research and Recommendation

The first challenge encountered in the beginning of the fieldwork is limited time as the researcher is engaged with coursework and attending classes. The researcher was able to surmount this challenge by hiring two agents to represent him in the field by dictating his research template to them.

The two fieldworkers encountered different challenges during the fieldwork. One was sent out of a homestead because he did not take permission from the respondent’s husband before attempting to interview the woman with his recorder. Although he eventually got another Yoruba woman who attended to his questions unhindered, it is highly recommended that a fieldworker pays homage to or seek permission from the men who serve as heads of their families before proceeding to interview their women. The other fieldworker was arrested by some government officials in Ibadan for flouting the Covid-19 safety guideline of wearing facemask on a day slated to interview the aged respondent. The fieldworker was eventually released after a long delay and was able to conduct his interview with the woman after apologizing for being late and explaining his ordeal.

4. Conclusion

This study has basically described the sociocultural functions of selected Yoruba lullabies. It shows beyond the function of lulling babies to sleep, calmness or quietness, some lullabies can be used to pass sociocultural education to posterity as children are incorporated into the art of oral poetry in the Yoruba society. The study also foregrounds its data collected, presented and analyzed by briefly defining some key concepts as Orature, oral poetry, lullaby and translation in its background. It further foregrounds the object of inquiry by briefly describing functionalism as its hermeneutical frame; the geographical cum historical description of Yoruba societies in Southwestern Nigeria. The study has also revealed the methodologies used in its collection of data and described some of the problem encountered during the fieldwork as a possible guide for prospective fieldworkers in such terrain.

Though this study is circumscribed to describing the Yoruba lullaby as a subgenre of oral poetry, it is highly recommended that the data collected and documented be preserved for posterity sake. Thus, this study recommends further researches on the exposition of Yoruba lullabies as it provides inexhaustible concrete materials to studies in Orature, Anthropology, Cultural Studies and the Humanities as a whole. Also, fieldwork data collected in their oral forms, as it is done in this study, may be transmitted through the broadcast media or through the university campus radio so that people can benefit in mass number. All in all, this study espouses the essentiality of translation of literatures for exploration and civilization.

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