

Analysis of Contextual Forms and Purposes of Song Texts in African Oral Performances

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Abstract

This article examines the nature of song texts in African oral performance contexts by studying selected songs from West African setting as paradigm. Indeed it has been argued that songs in the oral traditional setting are of limited relevance and almost meaningless. However, this research reinforces the unlimited function of songs in African cultural environment. The article, through the sociological approach, discusses why and how traditional songs are used in typical African settings to achieve desirable peace and sustainable development in the communities. The context explains the full participation of the audience who reacts by dancing and singing along with the singer by clapping and rejoicing as they form the part and parcel of the performance. One of the findings of this research is that the songs are acted out by the performer and the singer in physical actualisation based on certain intuitive knowledge. Song composition performs utilitarian purposes in their imaginative tendencies.

KEY WORDS: Songs, Performance, Africa, Masquerades, Audience, Chants, Context, Sociological.

The Oral Performance Tradition in Africa

Apart from the entertainment which African oral performance exhibits, there is the motif of historical, religion, and cultural values of songs. African oral songs are replete with folktales, epics, myths, legends, lullabies, machens, praises, epithetsetic. The selected West African communities of Mali, Gambia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Senegal among others have cultural values and messages that are transmitted orally from one generation to another in the oral traditions of Africa. Square Space (2010) submits that:

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Oral tradition messages passed down through speech, words or songs may take the forms of fables, histories, narrations, proverbs or sayings and songs and this explains the rich tradition throughout Africa of oral elements.

The oral literary devices in performance make it possible for African society to pass knowledge across generations without literacy in a Western mode. They enable people to develop essential abilities that could make them function as useful members of their communities. The songs teach or educate adults and children about the values of their society and develop their imaginative acumen. The singers also serve as advisors as they render their songs during performances. Oral performances in Africa according to Okpewho (1990) and Finnegan (1968) "involve the use context of activities made out of tradition creatively, realised and achieved through emotional reactions". Most importantly common among the scholars of oral literature such as Finnegan (1968) and Okpewho (1990) is the emphasis on the contextual value and essence of creativity of oral literary forms.

Types of songs

Songs are rhythmic words composed in lines according to the social needs of the community and the existing traditional form in the material culture, which include the religious inclination of a set of people. In these songs, historical and social experiences of the people are reinforced. In Africa, mythical and philosophical reflections are heard from songs in addition to other aesthetics components as aphorism, appellations incantations, rhetoric and wits.

Other issues to consider in the case of songs are the harmony of sounds, emphatic modes, the singer's mood, tone voice, shaking, suspended pause for purpose, nasality, resonances, yells, breathy, guttural, voice screams grunts, warning the rhythms, all depend largely on the types of songs as can be seen in the following sub-categories:

Invocation Songs: This involves the worshiping mode in the Yourba Ifa oracular poetry as equally applicable to modern religions such as Christianity and Islam. In this mode, the singer solicits the attention of the ancestors and request that the said ancestors come into their midst. References are made in these types of

song to the ancestral lineage as most of the utterances are in rhetorical form.

Praise Songs: Praise songs are for appraising communal heroes using their praises and epithets. The praise of the individual is linked to his legendary root and his/her status is accentuated in the song. This type of song is meant to encourage the lazy people to cultivate a habit of hard work with a view to contributing to society.

Chant Songs: In chant, the singer asks for mercies at the time of certain preceding rituals designed to express the symbol of the people's collective experience. The chants refer to the passage of life which reveals in a slow wailing tone, the journey motif to an unknown land of death. This moment is said in the song to be held up only by some adamant obstacles of evil.

Warning Songs: This type of song hammers the morality of the individual as a member of the community. Samples of the songs categorised under warning express the need for collective orderliness in the timeless vision ahead. Hence, we hear rendition such as; when a child plays with pepper, pepper hurts his eye. The choice of the word pepper and its repetition in the chores of this type of song indicates its domestic necessity. Pepper is synonymous to danger.

Prayer Songs: Songlike prayers are used to plead for mercy from the unknown cosmological and metaphysical forces according to communal beliefs. Seasonal references are made during prayer session. The prayer involves divinations and supplications meant to prevent communal set back in all preoccupation such as farming, trading as well as the social and political endeavours. Prayer songs involve requests for the sustenance of the land by the supernatural forces.

Topical or Political Songs: These involve songs of political movements such as the Mau Mau hymns (Finnegan 1968) and (Rhodes 1962). These type of songs are usually satirical as they attack a particular unruly class. They also reduce personalities to ordinary status. Topical songs serve as means to castigate individual's immoral characters as well to keep them in line with the codes and conducts of the society. Freedom songs such as those of South Africans fall under this category. Apart from being a political propaganda, political songs act as checks and balances for both the individual and the society at large.

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Theoretical Framework

The sociological theory is deployed for the analysis on song texts in African oral performances. is the archetypal approach. The societal reflection is evident in various songs that are used during performances as exemplified in selected West African communities taking into cognizance the recurrent themes, settings, character sketch of the individual based on communal This experiences. The approach reviews reoccurrences of settings, events, themes, character etc. that reflect in modern times, some kind of their types and the past following Maud Bodkin (1938) Archetypal patterns in poetry of imaginative psychology, the discussions here are based on the archetypal description of communal experiences. sociological approach is premised on the postulations of some scholars like Wolff J. (1981) that the nature of society can only be make clear through the exposition of certain social aspects such as the song text analysed in this essay. On the principles of Sociology, Spencer, H. (1844) explained the major emphasis of literary sociology. To him, it is how the community uses its social creation to rejuvenate its existence. Literary sociology is essentially the scientific study of man; the study of man, social institution; which seeks to answer the question of how society operates and the way it works through the various institutions. 1 (Fargion, 2010, p. 14) opines that

To deny the oral traditions and songs of culture prior to the existence of their written languages is to deny the African world of some of their earliest literature. of humankind. WWhether passed down through oral or written means, literature consists of all stories, songs and poetry. which every generation loves, inspires and possess on.

Furthermore, conscious scholars scholar's opinion is that the nursery rhymes as known today had their origin in oral traditions. They are composed based on native nuances before being transcribed. and uttered, most times, stories are relayed in form of a poem or a song. These traditional oral forms are therefore referred to as native media of communication for indicating time of danger,

disseminating news and information, promoting communal unity and making reports. Songs were also used for various purposes within the community

Perspectives of Songs and Performances in Selected African Societies

In Mali, the songs of the griots are based on the epic of Sundiata usually on performance each year as posited by Ely Rosenblum. This epic narrative praises king King Sundiata Kieta who is said to have freed the Mande People from the oppressive power of king King Sumangu Kante before he found the Mali Empire in about 1235. He ruled over 20 million subjects for three centuries. He therefore becomes a mythical character whose heroic figure is reverendrevered annually. A gourd wooden xylophone known as 'Balafon' is used to accompany the tone and rhythm of the songs, sang for this heroic ruler of Mali..

In Senegal, singers are often women who are referred to as the wordsmith of the society because of their power of composition of songs. Songs in Senegal have additional rapping methods used as social comments and satire against the political regimes that perpetuate public injustice. The conscious rap isare accompanied with a local musical instrumentare used to sustain the culture of the land.

In Nigeria, oral songs have varieties of styles and they are used for it is from rituals and ceremonies. Some serves asto protest songs especially among the Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Nupe, Tiv and other tribes. There are different types of songs; the social commentaries, nuptial and children songs, elegiac, occupational, religion, war, chants, abuse songs etc.

In Gambia, there are two kinds of griots. One plays the Kora musical instrument; an African harp held vertically between one's legs when played as an accompaniment to the song being suang. The kora music is enchanting and melodic. The other known griots play the Bolonbata. The players here are the Mandinkes. Bolonbata has a bent neck made of Keno wood and a small gourd. Only the Fulani's and the Madingo's use this second type of griot to accompany oral songs. The griots from different groups in Gambian used the songs to identify ethnic identifies and ritual contexts. Griot's music is capable of banning erring members from farming and similar activities amounting to public disgrace.

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In Sierra Leone, there is equally a strong tradition of performances involving music, dance and songs enacted for masquerade. Songs in cultural contexts can be observed in Sierra Leone as a form of ritual healing. In a way similar to Sierra Leoneans' experience, the Tumbuka people of Malawi use evocative and transformative power of songs to enhance their trance performance in an open arena as the community stage. In this medium of trance, they invoke the needful spirits of the land for cleansing, re-establishing and re-assuring. No wonder then that Jane Wolff (1979) concludes that:

Ideas and values are mediated by literary cultural conceptions of style, language, genre and aesthetic vocabulary. In reading cultural products, the need to understand their logic of construction and the particular aesthetic codes involved in the formations becomes clear.

The assertion by Wolff (1991) suggests that cultural products are not derived out of the traditional context. The contextual use of song text for various purposes earlier discussed is made clearer through the following analytical discourse.

Analysis of song texts in West African Cultural Settings

In the cultural milieu of West African, songs and music are integral parts of activities that have made such cultures a diverse one. The various groups of people in West Africa, each with its own tradition and established ways of existence, reflects their ethnic identities through the use of the artistic displays thereby making history comes alive. African songs are woven into the fabrics of daily lives.

Heroic praise Songs in Ghana

The Akan people of people, the Ashanti, Fanti, Akim, Akwapim and the Asen have various forms of praise songs. One of the distinct styles of Akan oral poetry is the poems recited by the masters of ceremonies to their chiefs. These poems are rendered to remind the clan about their enemies in the remote past with whom the chief's predecessor had fought and won, hence securing the land. The performer

while singing covers his mouth halfway with his left hand and points a sword with his right hand to the chief in front of whom he and advances further to give this address thus:

He is one who hates to see an enemy return victorious
 He delivers old and young from the ravages of war
 He is one of whom armies of enemies get tired of
 He is bulletproof: when you fire at him you waste your
 ammunition He is so powerful as to be able to bring the
 divinations of priests to naught
 He catches priests and snatches their bells from them
 He cannot to be challenged. If anyone dares him, he
 loses his head He cannot be caught and decapitated at the
 battle front He is like the tough trees, as well as the old,
 wet half dead tree neither Neither of which can be cut

Between the lines of the poem, drums and horns are used to accompany the words especially where emphases are laid. Among the Akan communities, musical instruments are made from this type of poetry and it is used only for the chieftains seen as synonymous to elephant. The example of another heroic praise in Ghana is that of Amaniampong of Mamong Ashanti. Amanianpong's night is rendered in a form of dialogue that took place between a father and a son. Here the dialogue goes:

He is the one!

O father wake up.

What is it my child?

It is the Toucans crying. (1)

Really!

You are a good boy to mistake the horns of

Amaniampong for the crying of Toucans. (2)

Don't be too quick to shoot at a great man.

Before you can fire, he snatches your powder.

He says: Help! Help!

He says: Akosua, Adwoa!

Quick get me my torch.

What is it she asks?

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He replies, is it not what happened the other day that
has happened once more?
Again? This child is really a child!
When I was a mighty one, I could not overthrow him
Thethe mighty one could not overthrow him
Thethe entangling one could not overthrow him
Aku that eats the snails of small children.

(From Poems collected by (Kwabena Nketia, (1958, p. 27) from "Akan Poetry"; *Black Orpheus* 3, pp-27)

Wolof Kasak Songs as Traditional Poetry in Contemporary Senegal

The contextual frame in which Wolof *kasak* songs of Senegal are performed is well documented. The ethical values of values they convey and the artistic quality embedded within this poetic genre is enviable. This traditional poetic culture is being revived vis-à-vis the realities of modern time's songs. *Kasak* is a poetic genre performed by Wolof and other Senegalese ethnic groups in the framework of circumcision initiation (Tandia 1999; Faye 2006). *Kasak* songs contribute to the exploration and preservation of poetic forms in Senegal. In spite of the current modernisation, *Kasak* remains much attached to old Wolof oral traditions of Senegal marked by a genre called "panegyric" that is pervasive among traditional communities (Guèye 2010). Other genres, no less important, encompass heroic poetry—songs related to some traditional activity, to the household life, to rituals and entertainment events. In each ethnic community, occasions, styles of delivery, and themes are however different. Okpewho (1990) highlights the complex task of classifying the ethnic genres based on Western analytic categories, for many reasons. First, a vast number of genres are not easy to classify, and second, some of these genres overlap in many regards particularly the performance style and structure. The high degree of inter-textual genres renders the classificatory task even more challenging (Ben-Amos 1976). However the contextual use of the poetic genres disambiguates it from wrong interpretations. The panegyric poetry as mentioned by Ruth Finnegan (1968) is dominant across the continent. She provides evidence based on data from South and West Africa by citing examples of a relatively recent history of powerful empires like the Zulu in South Africa and the Mande in West Africa alongside

other numerous kingdoms. Finnegan points out three major patronage systems regarding praise poetry: court patronage, religious patronage and freelance or less specialised groups. The court patronage system comprises a group of highly trained professional poets in the service of an emperor or king. Their song text is sung formally and informally in collective social gatherings.

The griots (singers) constitute the custodians of songs for the whole community. In many West African societies, there are the religious patronages where there exists a group of singers and spokespersons of certain religious families. The song renders texts during religious ceremonies freelance poets also exist. The freelance poets are semi professionals who move from one social ceremony to another, begging by means of their own songs. Sometimes they sing against deviant public leaders or those who fail to reward them at appropriate occasions (Finnegan 1968). Kasak songs among the Wolof are succinctly aligned further. The story lines are designed deliberate use to reinforce ethical values of womanhood, are often "resistance" strategies against the patriarchal system and men's chauvinism (Guèye 2010:166). The efficacy of such criticisms is difficult to gauge, although they reach men who are often within earshot. The following Kasak excerpt illustrates this point:

Yanul sa ndaali	Carry the canary on your head,
Gàddu sa gob bi	Pick up your hoe home,
Aw sa yoonu tool	And take the path to your field.
Genn góor loy sèggam	Lonely man why are you so sad?
Yaa jaay sa doom ju jigéen	You who have sold your daughter!

The performer directly addresses the father of the bride, accusing him of selling his daughter. They ironically summon him alone to his field without his daughter's help. And although he is not present at the performance, the father of the marrying girl may hear the allusive words leveled at his person. Composed of the marrying females, and of older women, the audience is "active-receptive," engaged in the performance, often challenging and molesting the male solo performer/singer accompanied by choruses. She uses of songs to or invite audience to dance in the middle of the circle. Most of the songs are accompanied by musical instrument, such as reversed bowl in a basin of water, calabashes, or

drums. The musical instrument whereby the women

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drums. The music accompanying these songs delights both public and singer. The musical instruments contribute to the scene organisation of the performance, whereby the words arrangements are foregrounding.

1. Hausa Oral songs as Cultural Reflexives in Nigeria
2. The word reflexive is from the word reflex and a cultural reflexive is the automatic spontaneous production of immediate response to cultural issues. Cultural reflexive refers to the presentation of images that are equal to selfhood. The Hausa Oral song reflex cultural issues, this is why they are referred to as cultural reflexive. Examples can be seen in

Taje, Ta Dawo By Dawo by Laura M. Kamiski

(Incubation)

Taje ta Dawolokacin da na ke

kankanin yarinya

baban na ya ba ni

babban laka tukunya

Dakunkuntar makogwaro

Wanan tukunya dumi dagarana

Aka cika ta da

Bushasten ciyawa

Da kuma qwai

Na agwagwa

Baba ya nuna mini

Yadda za a mirgine

Tukunya da laushi

Kowace safiya da dare

Ina juya qwai

Sa'an nan wata rana

Kananin agwagwa

Ta fito daga

Makogwaron tukunya

Da'yan'uwanta suka bi ta

Daya bayan daya

Kalmomi suka
Qwai na waka

Ina boye su
A cikin zuciya
A cikin duhu suka dumi
Sannu da hankali

Kuma ina yin rawa
Rawan juya zuciya
Rawan juya kalmomi
Rawan juya kwai

Hankali, Halima
Kar ki fashe suba

Kuma ina juya
Kuma ina juya
Kuma ina juya

Kowace safiya
Da dare
Ina juya qwai

Sai sun kyankyasar kwan
Da kuma tafiya daga

Makogwaron na
Daya bayan daya

Ga ta
Ga ta nan

(English Translation by Halima Ayuba) www.nationaltranslationmonth.org/hausa/

Incubation

When I was a small girl
My father gave me
A large clay pot
With a narrow throat

It was warm from the sun
It was filled with dry grass

This son
meant to warr

It held the eggs of a duck

And he showed me

How to roll it softly

Each morning and night to make the eggs turn

And then one day

A small duck

Came out of its throat

And her mother's other children followed her

One behind the other

Words are the eggs of poems

And I hide them in my heart

And in that dark

They warm

And I dance

And yes, I dance

The dance of turning heart

The dance of turning words

The dance of turning eggs

Careful, careful

Careful not to shatter

And I'm turning

And I'm turning

And I'm turning

Each morning and night

I'm turning the eggs

Until they hatch

And come out of my throat

One behind the other

This song is deduced inferred from Hausa children games and plays. It is meant to warn the child against waywardness. It is a warning satire yet meant

for self-development. This is why there is a reflection of childhood language and innocent performance mode with words well chosen to express the process of the child's cultural inculcation likened to the chicken's incubation period. The rhythms of the lines make the children enjoy the dance game that goes along with the song with an open performance among age groups. The choruses are meant for enhancing socialisation and promoting unity. With these games plays and dances, the children's mental stimulus is enhanced through this social communication medium. The repetition of words, sounds, rhymes and rhythms is for emphasis that reinforces the importance of each of the words uttered in the songs.

(i) Yoruba Poetic Forms as Social Commentary (Orin Ewi ni Yoruba)

Every setting has its own social set up. In this social set up, there are social commentaries on every activity in the different sections of the society. The Yoruba community not is left out in this regard. This is the reason why certain poetic forms are used as the media for social commentaries within this social setup and it is refer to as 'Orin Ewi ni Yoruba'. It goes thus

Toju Iwa Re Ore Mi

Toju iwa re ore mi	[Maintain your character my friend]
Ola a maa n la nile eni	[Honor can leave from the house of a person]
Ewa a si maa tan lara eniyan	[Beauty can leave from the body of a person]
Sugbon iwa ni i ba ni de saare	[However it's people's characters follow them to the grave]
Eefin niwa riru ni i ru	[Character is like smoke, eventually it will rise [to the surface]]
Eniyan gb'okeere niyi	[Aa person lives off in the distance in honorr]
Sugbon sunmo ni la fi n mo se eni	[But with closeness we learn of a person's actions]
Iwa ko ni fo n iwa sile.	[Character will not leave its owner alone]
Iwa omo l'o nsomo l'oruko	[Itit is a child's character that gives the child a name]

Omo dara o ku

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Ese dara oku b

Be niyan dara

Opadannu ohu

Iwa rere leso e

Suru baba iwa

J. F. Odunjo,
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Omo dara o ku iwa	[Even if the child seems fine, there is still a need for character]
Ara dara o ku aso	[Even if the body looks fine, there is still a need for clothing]
Ese dara oku bata	[Even if the feet work fine, there is still a need for shoes]
Be niyan dara tikoni'wa	[If a person seems fine but doesn't have character]
Opadannu ohun ribiribi	[He/She is missing something very valuable indeed]
Iwa rere leso eniyan	[Good character is a person's bodyguard]
Suru baba iwa. iwa baba awure	[Patience is the progenitor of character, Character is the progenitor of blessings]
	Progenitor of blessings

J. F. Odunjo, *Alawiye Ede Yoruba* (Yoruba Language Elementary Learners' book)

The above song is an example of a topical poetry which is meant for satirizingsatirising individual members of the community who is acting contrary to the norms of society. (Such as people are referred to as enemies of the community). They are warned through proverbial sayings that the give the cause and effect of action. They do this admonition by citing historical occurrences as evidence of such person's impending doom. They also sing about the reward of good behaviour as reinforced in the last few lines of the songs to emphasis their point of view. 'Orin Ewi,' the Yoruba poetic song which is different from 'Yoruba Oriki', i.e. praise poetry is another type of song text.

Conclusion

This examines song texts in African oral performance at their contextual levels using West African societies as case studies. The types of songs in oral tradition are enumerated by highlighting the song types and their aesthetic

components such as aphorism, appellations, praises, epic, folktales. The work has applied the archetypal theory to each of the selected West African setting. From the analysis and discussions, we have been able to observe that each and every African setting has its own cultural reflections reconstituted in songs texts. From song texts of a set of people, one can get a glimpse of the historical, social, cultural, religion and political roots of such people. This research work has attempted to disambiguate the various issues raising concerns on the validity of oral traditions in contemporary social systems. The archetypal method applied indicates the replica of the primordial patterns of the songs, heroic praises, rhythms, images, metaphors and cultural symbols in modern times. The context of the use of an oral element authenticates its relevance especially as regards African in the sphere of archetypal themes, settings and characteristic patterns of daily practices and annual performances. Song texts for religious, topical, political, praises, invocations, chants are used for ritual purposes that are meant to promote peace, stability and sustainable development.

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