

‘IN THE WORD WAS THE BEGINNING’: MODERN AFRICAN POETRY AND THE IMMORTALITY OF ORATURE

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Abstract

The primacy of the spoken word is undeniable; oral narratives, globally disseminated, established the foundation upon which written literature constructed its edifice, drawing its materials from the rich repository of oral tradition. This paper examines the truth value of this assertion within the context of modern African poetry, exploring how the transition of African poetry from the oral to the scribal tradition has not eclipsed the long shadow cast by the former. With 14 poetry collections drawn from the wealth of the Nigerian poetic oeuvre, including Osundare’s *The Word is an Egg*, Christopher Okigbo’s *Labyrinths*, Tanure Ojaide’s *The Fate of Vultures and Other Poems*, Joe Ushie’s *Yawns and Belches*, and Akinsete’s *Do not Preach to Me*, among others, the paper investigates such transported oral elements as myth, legend, proverb, folktale, history, and ritual in the selected poems. Analysis reveals that the utility of the oral forms survives the transmutation of African poetry from the oral to the scribal tradition, carrying with it the weight of African indigenous tradition. With this in mind, while the transmutation from oral to written form inevitably alters the experience and delivery of African poetry, the core literary values of creativity, artistry, and aesthetics are preserved in the written text, even as the immediacy of performance and audience interaction are relinquished.

Introduction

‘In the Beginning was not the Word / In the Word was the Beginning,’ says Niyi Osundare (10). The aforementioned lines from his poem, ‘In the Beginning’, may seem to subvert the much-projected belief in the primacy of speech, but they, in fact, rather reinforce the creative power of words, not emphatically those that are written but those which seek ‘anchorage on the human tongue’ (10). Many scholars like George Yule and James Hurford have expounded the idea that speech preceded writing, substantiating this idea in diverse ways, including the fact that humans naturally learn how to speak before writing because the vocal cords and capacity for speech production are deeply ingrained biological features and universal human traits found in all cultures across the globe. Writing systems, on the other hand, were developed much later. It is precisely for this reason that Ernest Emenyonu asserts that ‘Contemporary novel, poetry, or drama is the extension of ... oral literature. A major source of inspiration and a model for the modern ... writer is the ... traditional artist who is both a technician and visionary (20). Contentions have also been generated on

the literariness of orature, a term coined by the Ugandan linguist, Pio Zirimu, according to Ngugi wa Thiong'o. The polemics surrounding literary production are not novel as critics had long contested the inclusion of oral aesthetics in the corpus of literature.

The etymology of the word 'literature' is in itself an index of contradiction against all that literature represents today. For instance, it has been argued that literature must be written because the word 'literature' is rooted in the Latin word 'litera' meaning 'alphabet' (Jegede 7). For this reason, literary expressions that were expressed verbally were not considered literature since they did not engage alphabets. However, Ruth Finnegan argues that the association between literature and writing can hardly be said to have universal validity. Thus, an artistic expression must not be written before it is considered literature. After decades featuring a series of onslaughts concerning the primacy of speech over literacy, and scholarly expositions bent on expounding the utilitarian potential of the oral tradition, one would have thought that it would be generally agreed that what we have today as modern African poetry is an extension of oral aesthetics which have continued to be a source for written poetry. Nonetheless, this argument persists. And as Tanure Ojaide notes, 'Literary scholars of oral tradition and literature have for long debated the relationship between oral and written literature' (302). This debate does not negate Julia Udofia's claim that modern African poetry has absorbed rich sources of influences including orature.

The idea that the foundation of modern African poetry is the oral tradition is saturated with very concrete proofs, including the sinusoidal wave of such formal features as repetition which has been transformed from an autochthone of orature to an allochthone in written literature. And even though Ojaide avers that 'There is a symbiotic relationship between the oral and the written in modern African poetry in which the poetic aim, vision, and practice have fused to produce a poetry that is distinctly oral though written' (303), the relationship between orality and literacy can be said to be commensal because, according to Walter Ong, 'Oral expression can exist and mostly has existed without any writing at all' but 'writing never without orality' (8). From Ong's point of view, the scribal tradition is indebted to the oral tradition as the latter can and has operated for many years without the knowledge of letters, but never vice-versa. To engage, holistically, in the quintessence of orality in the emergence and continual survival of modern African poetry, an understanding of these two traditions is a prerequisite. Quoting Carlos Nogueira, oral tradition 'Congregates knowledge, memories, values, and symbols ... with or without consignment in written testimonies, accomplished vocally and recognizable collectively and during consecutive generations in an anatomy built by the laws of traditionality (anonymity, persistence, variation)' (164). Thus, oral tradition is loaded with a community's knowledge interspaced in different forms, communally owned, and may or may not be written down (because it can survive through orality).

On the other hand, Friday Okon describes modern African poetry as a 'poetry of commitment: commitment to the political configuration of the African world with a

view to bringing about desired change' (95). This explication does not distinguish modern African poetry from oral aesthetics because the latter, according to Jegede, can be politically committed, especially when praise chanters 'implicitly or explicitly make derogatory allusions ... to a ruler's mistakes and shortcomings and criticises him' (35). Literacy then becomes the starting point of departure of the oral tradition from modern African poetry. The source of literature generally has been associated with orality. For Jasper Onuekwusi, although the word 'literature suggests a body of knowledge that is product of imaginative writing, essentially designed to be read, to regard oral literature or orature, ... as the beginning of all literary traditions has remained an unavoidable conclusion in all cultures (2). The elements of the oral tradition identifiable in modern African poetry are outlined by Emenyonu whose position parallels Onuekwusi in terms of 'folksongs, folktales, riddles, proverbs, prayers, including incantations, histories, legends, myths, drama, oratory and festivals' (20). The presence of the aforementioned elements in the scribal tradition cannot be denied, which means that orature is the xylem and phloem which supplies modern African poetry with content.

A similar view is held by Sikiru Ogundokun who affirms that 'through oral traditions, people are given information, ideas, opinions, feelings, and predictions are communicated. They are sources of inspiration for contemporary authors' (328). In the corpus of Nigerian poetry, the precedence of the oral to the written and their synergy are reiterated by Josephat Odey and Patrick Ogar who believe that the earliest roots of Nigerian poetry can be traced back to its oral traditions. Woven into the fabric of daily life, these poems were performed in various Nigerian languages during festivals, rites of passage, masquerade celebrations, dances, funerals, everyday speech, folktales, rituals, and acts of worship. This is not only true to Nigerian poetry but it is laced with the representative ability to cater for African poetry generally. The different contributions by scholars across climes on the relevance of oral tradition to the scribal tradition all point to the conclusion that modern African poetry emerged from and is sustained by oral aesthetics. Even so, Isidore Okpewho submits that modern African poets increasingly identified 'with the literary traditions of their people in terms both of content and technique', the reason being that for decades, African cultural aesthetics was 'misunderstood and misrepresented' (84).

Consequently, Nelson Fashina succinctly states that 'the application of European idea of literature to African literature was being hastily done with the view, perhaps, to disproving the then canonized intellectual error in European idea that pre-colonial Africa never had literature or its genres and aesthetic sensibility' (3). Richard Burton is one of the many critics who mistook his misunderstanding of oral aesthetics for a lack of artistry in oral tradition, convinced that the oral tradition was devoid of 'metre, no rhyme, nothing that interests or soothes the feelings or arrests the passions' (xii). The denigrating attitude of Burton towards African oral aesthetics was not emergent as critics before him had also projected such beliefs. Fashina's exposition

highlights the fact that the conventions of Western literary tradition were imposed on African verbal performances. By implication, what we have as modern African poetry is African poetic aesthetics transmogrified from the oral to the written form using Western standards of literature as guiding principles. Marshal McLuhan's position, 'The medium is the message' (3), can now be understood in light of the different forms taken by literary works at each phase of media transition.

Contextually, if there is no other way orature can exist without 'a performer who formulates it in words on a specific occasion' (Finnegan 2), then the transition from oral text to written text (medium) which requires no performer will affect the delivery of the content (message). That notwithstanding, modern African poetry retains a strong connection to the spoken word. Substantiating the claim that the oral tradition contributed to the emergence and sustenance of modern African poetry, Okpewho notes that when African writers started doing their translations, 'they saw it as their primary duty to dress African oral literature in a European language in such a way as to bring out the poetic quality, the charm, of the original' (84). It can be inferred from the above that the oral poetic forms were not just transferred from their oral forms to the written form in their raw state but were subjected to some kind of transfigurations, embellished with elements of European literary tradition. Within this context, African poetry is a child of two worlds. With relevant illustrations drawn from various modern African poems, the roles of such products of the oral tradition as 'folktales ... proverbs, prayers, including incantations, histories, legends, myths ... and festivals' (Onuekwusi 2), among others, in the development and sustenance of modern African poetry are examined in this essay.

The Immortality of Orality in Modern African Poetry

The dearth of inexplicable phenomena in the universe is contained by the presence of myths which interestingly answer questions that science could not answer in pre-literate societies using stories mostly about the origin of the world, those who run its affairs, how, and why. According to Willfried Feuser, 'In Africa, myth is considered the sacred apex of verbal expression' (146). This claim gathers more substance when pitched against Maria Leach and Jerome Fried's description of myth as a narrative from the remote past that explains:

...the cosmological and supernatural traditions of a people, their gods, heroes, cultural traits, religious beliefs, etc. The purpose of myth is to explain... why a certain animal has its characteristics ... why or how certain natural phenomena came to be ..., how and why rituals and ceremonies began and why they continue (778).

Thus, for Feuser, the oral tradition enabled Africans to explain certain phenomena that were beyond rationality, and it sits at the top echelon of verbal art. African myths are almost as diverse as the many cultures in Africa, from the Efik to the Zulu, Baganda,

Yoruba, and Igbo, among others. In Tanure Ojaide's poetry, the word 'Aridon' appears several times, a name, alongside Uhaghwa, is regarded as the god of memory in Urhoboland that poets, singers, and those in similar vocations must call upon for inspiration.

In 'Visiting Mathias at Lapo Village', the poet's persona asks: 'O Aridon, what metaphor to capture the other's pain?' (47) In his 'The Fate of Vultures', he says: 'O Aridon, bring back our wealth / from rogue-vaults; / memory god, my mentor' (11). Other Urhobo mythical gods referenced in Ojaide's poetry are Eni, the god of truth, and Ivwri, the god of restitution. In 'Meeting', the poet beseeches: 'Ivwri, let malefactors fail / destined hand, protect me' (15). In 'A Trip to a Traditional Library', Aridon is again invoked: 'O Aridon, memory lives long' (28). In 'No Hunger', the poet says: 'Aridon's favourite suffers no hunger / in the famine of songs' (16). The poet still invokes these gods which are native to Urhobo mythology. This shows that even in writing, oral mythical narratives are still in play. Christopher Okigbo's 'Heavensgate', according to Maik Nwosu, contains a 'mythic code that informs the invocation to Idoto [which] is rooted in Igbo cosmology' (77). In *Labyrinths*, Okigbo says that 'Idoto is the village stream of which I drank, in which I washed as a child' (xi). It seems that, for Okigbo, the stream has assumed the supernatural status of a mythical goddess. In his 'The Passage', seeks the presence of this water goddess, strongly evidenced in the opening lines of the poem: 'Before you, mother Idoto, / Naked I Stand, / Before your watery presence' (28).

In Charles Akinsete's 'God and Ancestors', the poet acknowledges God, first, and then his ancestors, referencing mythical characters in the Yoruba cosmology such as Ifa, Ogun, and Olorunyomi. These characters 'innocently shape' the poet's 'vision of literary progression' (12), and so he acknowledges them in lines like 'I know my God, / I know my ancestors too', 'I pay homage, my ancestor', 'but I remember my ancestors too' (13). He goes on to say that his ancestors 'opened wide' his 'somber eyes' to 'joyous rhomb of African narratives / If there is a god of fiction / He resides in you / You are the rite of passage' (14). Thus, the poet is inspired by his ancestors who inject him with poetic mastery in his attempts to emboss revolutionary ethos in his poetry collection. This belief in and reverence of the dead/ancestors are transported from the oral tradition, also noticed in Osundare's 'What Mother Said' where the persona reveres the river goddess, Yeye Osun. In the poem, Osundare is held with so much pride by his mother because before he was born, his predecessors died before they could grow into adulthood. It was at this point that Osundare's mother ran to Yeye Osun, the river goddess, for help. The river goddess did assure her that the next child would be legendary and thus, would not tread the path of infant mortality: '*Water will be his herb / Water his all-round cure / Whenever fever comes with its shivering / fire / Invoke my water and rout the foe...*' (99 [emphasis is original]). So, since Osundare is already a blessed child of Yeye Osun meant to find solace from water, 'How can the fetid waters of another land / Take...(him) away from her vigilant hands?' (99).

Folktales are common and popular oral narratives that have found their way into the written repository of modern African poetry. To Onuekwusi, 'Of all the genres of oral literature, it [folktale] is the one that most adequately fulfils the entertainment and educational function in oral literature. It does not have the restriction which forms and usage impose on proverbs, riddles, myths, and legends' (84). In Akinsete's 'You must Become the Tortoise', the poet's persona recommends that readers be like the tortoise 'In harrowing winds of our restless Republic / In trembling times of debauched democracy / For it is only the Tortoise / Who has thrown King Elephant flat on his back' (84). These lines are inspired by the oratorical arsenal of the Yoruba where the tortoise is known for 'pranking' (Akinsete 43), an attribute the tortoise shares in other Nigerian tribes. Although the thematic focus of the poem does not revolve around the tortoise but on the socio-political reality of present-day Africa, the poet uses the tale of the tortoise and the elephant to convey his message, one that charges the citizens to be clever like the tortoise to survive in an acclaimed democracy that does not practise the tenets of democracy.

The poet is a Yoruba, and it is typical for a trickster in Yoruba folktale to break 'laws that are unjust and arbitrary in favour of domination of weaker members of the society' (Adegbite and Adegbite 259). In telling readers to assume the form of a tortoise, the quintessential trickster in Yoruba folktale, Akinsete tells the oppressed to be united in their fight against the oppressive political system structured for retrogression. In 'Once upon a Time', Akinsete says that in preliterate Africa: 'Our children were truly children / Clinging to sturdy ancestral legs, / Relishing primeval limb of maternal calm' where 'Thematic tales were told of pranking tortoise' (43). In his view, these tales were more didactic than the films obtainable in a technologised Africa. Noticing the evolution which has swept the innocence of children from the comfort of their mothers which they enjoyed and the footprints of their fathers which they followed, Akinsete recollects the age of paradise on earth before the advent of 'linguistic calumny of *cindarella*' and the 'gothic show of *beauty and the beast*' (43). The persona recounts that there was a time when 'Tales of our ancestral beginnings / were told with relishing relief / were told with unrepentant esteem' (43).

The persona depicts the pride that accompanied telling the stories of our ancestors because they were legendary, adding another layer to the discourse in his conviction that the village square was filled with intelligent minds who never treated others with contempt; devoid of dull thoughts. The persona reveals that 'The land birthed farmers and artisans, / There were few politicians, / There was less politicking' (43). The message communicated in the above lines is that contrary to the good that politicians are supposed to fetch the people, the more politicians in the country, the more corrupt the system becomes. On the other hand, communities thrived with more farmers and artisans in preliterate Africa. Indeed, 'Once upon a time, / In our dance of seasonal bliss / There was a time!' (43). It is noteworthy that the very title of the poem, 'Once upon a Time', is a direct import from orature which usually allows for the

inclusivity of the audience in a call-response mode. John Afolabi notes that it is the 'characteristic participatory role of the audience that makes oral performance an organic artistic enterprise' (22), and that the majority of oral performances deliberately make provision for the role of the audience. This is at first imbued in the starting lines of every telltale session: 'Story story', and members of the audience will respond with 'story'; or 'Once upon a time', which members will respond to with 'Time time', thereby facilitating an active relationship between a performer and members of the audience.

Proverbs have been imported into modern African poetry and it is a significant oratorical tool that not only adds aesthetic flavour to speech or a text but also contains traditional words of wisdom which add layers of depth to literary texts. In the words of Wolfgang Mieder, a proverb is 'a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed, and memorable form and which is handed down from generation to generation' (29). Ebi Yeibo, *The Forbidden Tongue* is replete with proverbs that are traceable to the Ijaw, including the following: 'No Iguana wins an aquatic battle with the crocodile' (46), emphasising the advantage of being within one's territorial bounds; 'Muddy waters do nothing to the eyes of an alligator' (62), stressing the significance of adaptation to one's habitat; 'He who shakes a coconut shakes himself' (48), a parallel to the English idiom that 'What goes around, comes around'; 'No elephant hides in open grassland' (69), stressing the worth of acting accordingly; 'The cock belongs to a single soul yet its cadenced crow stirs the neighborhood' (71), underscoring the African sense of communality where a child is raised by the community; 'When the hippopotamus targets the canoe it is the man' (29), highlighting the truth that sometimes, things are not really as they appear.

In Joseph Ushie's 'Message to My Congressman', the poet employs proverbs to amplify the aesthetic, artistic, and semantic value of his poetry. The persona says that 'A child of the crocodile does not get lost in the river' (29); 'When the baboon taunts in the open / it is because it has a fortress of a forest behind it' (29). The context in which the persona uses these proverbs suggests that the persona is not supposed to suffer because he has his brother and congressman at the helm of power. However, it is quite pathetic that in the African political sphere, and even in the poem, a person suffers even when his friends and comrades control the affairs of the state. Ikechukwu, in *Omeile*, also loads his poetry with proverbs: 'When the sound of the tusk is heard the elephant remembers the voice of the lone brother lost' (8) — certain situations bring back memories and remind us of what we have lost; 'Remember it is the leaf that sweets a goat that kills it' (14) — a subtle reminder that all that glitters is not gold; 'Omeile, the hen that feed should not lose its side gaze' (14) — caution must be taken irrespective of what is done; 'The stream never consumes a man it does not see his leg' (65) — people avoid problems by not doing the things that can bring problems. These proverbs undoubtedly express traditional wisdom and perform the same functions that they do in traditional societies.

Despite the fact that rituals are substantially evinced in dramatic literature, it is not nonexistent in modern African poetry. And although Frits Staal argues that rituals have 'no symbolic meanings' (3) and it is 'without function, aim or goal' (9) but done solely for its sake, 'Durkheim conjectured that ... ritual was a symbolic assertion of man's dependence on his society' (cited in John Beattie 66). In Chris Egharevba's *Songs of the Newbreed*, a connection between the culture of Ancient Benin in terms of rituals and the poetry collection is substantial. In indigenous belief systems, ancestors are considered to remain part of the community even after death, prompting the offerings made to them in the form of sacrifices. According to studies on the culture of Benin Kingdom, religious practices governed most activities of the people, practices involving divination, ancestor worship, and spirit possession. With the belief that the dead still interfere with the affairs of the living, the poet's personae consult Queen Iden to seek the vision that compelled her to sacrifice herself for the restoration of the monarchy, carrying with them '...a pigeon and coconut / With *orhue* and kolanut' (5). *Orhue* means native chalk, and according to Paul Basu and Glory Chika-Kanu on its use in Benin, it is noted that 'Chalk around the eyes signifies an ability to see beyond the visible world and into the world of the spirit'.

To see Iden who is now a spirit, the poet's personae need *orhue* to peer into the spirit world and tender their request to her. Spirit invocation is a significant activity prominent in the domain of the oral tradition, making it normal for personae to carry '...a dog / Our left holds a tortoise / We come to seek your spirit' (27), ritual items that will be used for invocation. The ritual also features in Okigbo's 'Lustra' where the poet's persona engages in ritual cleansing with sacrificial items. He presents 'a new laid egg', 'a white hen at midterm', and 'vegetable offering with five fingers of chalk' (37), some of the items which are used by the Igbos for ritual practice. This is not detached from Chinwe Nwoye's list of items used by the Igbos for rituals, including 'goat, sheep, ram, chicken, yam, palm wine, kola-nut, alligator pepper, white chalk (*nzu*)...' (125). In Okigbo's poem, the protagonist fulfils the conditions for the ritual cleansing by offering the sacrificial items and effecting worship in the 'palm grove' (37). In Okigbo's 'Siren Limits', the offers such sacrificial items as 'bamboo towers', 'yesterupwine', and 'a tiger mask and nude spear ...' (42) to the 'Queen of damp half-light' (42). In his introduction to *Labyrinths*, Okigbo explains that the 'long-drums are, on the other hand, the spirit of the ancestors, the dead'. And in 'Lustra', the persona offers rituals amid 'thundering drums and cannons'.

Legends are not exempted from among the elements of oral tradition that have helped in sustaining modern African poetry, what Jegede describes as a narrative about 'someone who is well known for certain attributes that he possesses. He could be someone who had played a significant role of [sic] the historical dimensions in his lifetime, or he may be alive and playing an important role in human life' (64). Jegede's description of a legend tallies with the content of Egharevba's *Songs of the Newbreed* which is heavily laced with legends of the Ancient Benin Kingdom. 'The First Song',

which is the second part of the collection, is tagged 'The Song of Iden'. The poem begins with an affirmative statement: '.... I will not die again / for a throne / that turns my people / into victims of aids...' (8). The mind does not need prodding to understand that there was a first death, that of Queen Iden, the legend/martyr whose sacrifice shaped the Benin Kingdom. She is known to have volunteered herself as a sacrificial lamb for the welfare of her husband and that of the entire kingdom. Her husband, Oba Ewuape, ascended the throne in very turbulent times. According to Osadolor, the lyase, and other chiefs revolted against him, and in support of the action of the chiefs, the people abandoned the king by their refusal to pay tribute and render services in the palace. His palace was deserted, except for Queen Iden: 'The oracle divined that for peace to be restored to Benin Kingdom, a human sacrifice was needed' (Osadolor 148).

Nevertheless, so much has changed between the time Iden sacrificed her life and when the newbreed composed another song, so much that Iden confirms she will not die again for such a throne which does not care much about the subjects. Times have changed, and the dynasty she once saved with her life has become a tyrannical one, though not operating in a monarchical system of government. Those who now wield power do not maintain the good course of leadership but have 'deferred dreams', becoming harbingers of nightmares. It is this tyranny that compelled people to flee the palace of Ewuakpe because the people resolved not to be slaves 'For the comfort / Of decree moulders' (9). Thus, the legend of Iden, popular in the oral tradition of the Ancient Benin Kingdom, is used by Egharevba to demonstrate the degeneration which has now become a key characteristic of his society.

Histories are also a part of the oral tradition that modern African poetry relies on for its continual survival. Again, Egharevba uses the history culled from Ancient Benin during its preliterate years. In fact, the whole poetry collection thrives on the relics of oral tradition, from folksongs to myths, rituals, legends, and history, among others. Alan Boisragon explains that during the British invasion of the Benin Kingdom, 'Benin warriors made a determined stand' (181). It was the likes of Ologbosere, one of the two prominent Front Commanders of the Benin army, who, after learning of the city's siege and the Oba's escape, relocated 'to his war camp at Eko Ologbosere where he continued warring with the British troops over two years in order to avenge the capture and deportation of his father-in-law, the Oba' (Jacob Egharevba 32). As revealed subsequently, the newbreed in Egharevba's *Songs of the Newbreed* are the sons and daughters of General Asoro, the warrior who is known for the famous statement, 'no other person dare pass this road except the Oba', deceased while fighting off the British. With this historical reference, the poet infers that fighting societal problems demands radical actions even if the cost is one's life.

Osadolor reveals that on February 18, 1897, the British troops entered Benin City through the Ologbo and Sakponba routes and battled with Benin warriors who fought tremendously (223). In the process, Captain Byrne was hit badly and died later of his

wounds; Dr R. Fyfe was killed, and 'also several marines' (Boisragon 181). But the fierce fighting spirit which characterised the oldbreed seems to have waned, and the poet's persona is awestruck by the seeming lethargy of the newbreed in fighting the tyranny which the rulers have introduced. He wonders: 'What destroyed that love / For the land / That led to the killing / Of the whiteman that came...?' (8) As seen in the brave acts of Ologbosere and Asoro, the people opposed all forms of cruelty, not only from imperialism but also from domestic totalitarianism. This is observed when the 'people sacked the palace /...moved from Ihama /To Ogbe hills (8), for the people deserved better than to stoop so low in the palace. The people in the king's palace realised it was better to dwell in the serenity of the hills than in the chains of opulence. It is this love in unity, bravery, and grit to face all forms of subjugation that the persona wonders where it went.

The poet introduces other models worthy of emulation by the newbreed in the subsequent lines of the poem, including 'Emotan', 'Asoro and Ologbosere', '...Idia and Emotan / That rose against nightmares / And cursed tyranny (8). In Kate Ezra's account, Queen Idia organised her regiment of the Benin army which was based at Uselu and was the first installed *lyoba* (Queen Mother), playing a very significant role in the rise and reign of her son, Oba Esigie, and has a reputation in Benin history as the only woman who went to war. This was in support of the war effort of her son, Oba Esigie. Emotan, on the other hand, was a trader who is credited to have founded the first crèche in Benin as her hut was a popular make-shift nursery for the children of families patronising the market. According to reports, her hut also served as a solace and hideout for Prince Ogun whom she showed immense kindness while he was fighting to gain back power from his brother, Oba Uwaifiokun. Osadolor narrates that 'after the death of their father, Oba Orobiru, civil war erupted in Benin when Uwaifiokun deceived the Uzama and usurped the throne' (79). This history is reflected in Egharevba's poetry when the persona says Emotan's kind gesture '...protected the heir / From the sword / Of Uwaifiokun' (31).

The subjects referred to in the poem are made explicit when the poet's personae say that it was 'You (Emotan) [who] damned Uwaifiokun / Whose intrigue / Robbed Ogun of his throne' (32). The repetition of the names of these historical figures by the poet means that as children of these patriotic heroes and heroines, the newbreed should take their cues from them and revolt against the inhumanity imposed by contemporary leaders. With the introduction of female characters into the poetry collection, Egharevba implies that in the struggle to reverse the plagues that have been brought by the socio-political despair of contemporary society, no gender is exempted — both men and women have a part to play in the quest to solve societal problems. The focus of most scholars when investigating the relics of the oral tradition in the scribal tradition is mostly on the content (myth, legend, proverbs, folksongs) and little on the form. This is not surprising because as the Western literary tradition is foisted on modern African poetry, the modal transition from orality to literacy is bound to affect

form more than content. That notwithstanding, Okpewho identifies two formal elements or techniques in the oral tradition which has been transferred to modern African poetry: 'the repetitive structure and diction of the original' (85). Jegede avows that repetition is a prominent device in oral aesthetics and that poets deploy more traditional folk literary techniques in their poetry. In 'A Call at Dusk', Ezenwa Ohaeto adopts this technique:

Call the ancient spirit
 Call the past, the present
 Call the future,
 Call the spirit
 [...]

Call
 Call, call
 Call out the masquerade (14).

Within this repetitive structure which, in itself, is a technique from the oral tradition, is the traditional belief in what Fashina tags 'the timeless, eternal, cosmological four-dimension space of the living (present) the dead/ancestors (past), the unborn (future) and the interlocking cosmic space between history and cryptic future' (3-4). The poet's persona calls on the spirits of these four dimensions, a practice culled from the oral tradition.

In Akinsete's 'Songs of the Tortoise', the poet directly transports the repetitive structure and diction of the Yoruba oral tradition into his poetry: '*Os'okoYanibo/ Os'aleYanibo/ Ose Ijapatiro ko / Os'okoYanibo, pum!*' (40) The poet leaves these Yoruba words in their unadulterated form, emphasising a palpable connection between modern African poetry and the oral tradition. Oral thought proceeds, Ong confirms, 'in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions or antitheses, in alliterations and assonances, in epithetic and other formulaary expressions, in standard thematic settings (the assembly, the meal, the duel, the hero's "helper," and so on), in proverbs ... or other mnemonic form' (34). Repetition occurs at the levels of sounds and words in Ibawari Ikiriko's 'Remembering Saro-Wiwa': 'Let's not forget / that Saro-Wiwa' repeat at the word level while 'was a writer / a writer / a writer' and 'was a righter / a righter / a righter' (39) repeat at the phonological level, demonstrating the simultaneous roles played by the subject addressed. In Nnimmo Bassey's 'We Thought It was Oil but It was Blood', the lines 'We thought it was oil / But it was blood' (130) are repeated 4 times in quick succession; and in his 'When the Earth Bleeds', the lines '*The oil only flows / When the earth bleeds*' (16) are successively repeated 4 times. These repeated words and lines are not solely for musical effects but also draw the reader's attention to the message embedded in them. By repeating the words, the persona stresses the expropriation and ecocide of the biosphere in his attempts to agitate for a serene

environment that does not pose threats and danger to its inhabitants because of certain anthropogenic activities. \

Conclusion

Against the stereotypical perception by some Western critics that African oral literature lacks artistry and moral inclinations, this essay shows how much oral forms transposed into the scribal tradition peddle and promote a sense of morality in readers. Each aspect of the oral tradition, however entertaining, has something tangible beyond the beauty of its form. Thus, some aspects are meant to rebuke, praise, and caution its consumers depending on its content/context. Elements of oral aesthetics are retold, reinterpreted, and adapted to address contemporary issues as made concrete in Egharevba's poetry, where the historical narratives, rituals, and legends of the Ancient Benin Kingdom are incorporated in the poems to spur the readers into action by way of contesting or revolting the leaders who are bent on amassing wealth for themselves at the detriment of the masses. In Akinsete's poetry, myths and folktales are used to address the overtly corrupt African society, advising the masses to be as crafty as the tortoise in their dealings with leaders. In Ushie's and Yeibo's poetry, proverbs are used to remind the narcissistic politicians of the philosophy of *Ubuntu* which is central to the sense of communality governing African communities before the advent of literacy. From the illustrations evinced in the various poems examined, Julia Udofia's belief that 'oral form existed before the written text and exerted, and continues to exert influence on the written text' (347) becomes a fact. This paper concludes that while the transmutation from oral to written form inevitably alters the experience and delivery of African poetry, the core literary values of creativity, artistry, and aesthetics are preserved in the written text, even as the immediacy of performance and audience interaction are relinquished.

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