

The Poetry of Igue Festival's Song-Text

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Abstract

This study attempts a poetic analysis of the Igue festival song text. Igue festival is one of the major cultural markers among the Edos, a strategic ethnic group in Nigeria. It is an annual event that ushers in a new year for every Edo-speaking person. It is characteristic of the famous "head washing" and the significant display of 'Ewere leaves". These are two important cultural practices are central to the royalty and overall development of the Edo kingdom. The study indicates that beyond the historical and cultural implications of the songs is an intricate and predominant interplay of poetry and other aesthetic resources. The songs were analysed based on the critical approach of literary stylistics. This approach was used to examine the literary forms and functions of the selected text within the framework of oral literature. Finally, it is discovered that the songs have creative potentials and artistic qualities which justify their appreciation as essentially literary masterpiece.

Key words: Poetry; Igue; Edo; Orality,; Festival; Songs

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BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Poetry, in this study, would be examined within the context of folklore- that is, as songs or recitations having no regular rhyme scheme and dealing with the verbal aspect of the Igue festival. This kind of poetry which some scholars refer to as "traditional oral poetry" (Emovon, 1981, p. 265) is transmitted primarily by word of mouth and learnt by imitation or example. Merriam (1964) expands the thematic and linguistic focus of this kind of poetry by saying that "not only do music and language of text tend to take special forms, one would expect that the language of text have a special significance" (p. 190). Okpewho (1985) in his own case advises that we must abandon the false impression that poetry necessarily has to do with words or the order in which they are arranged. According to him:

a group of measured lines which describes a situation is simply verses and may have very little that is poetic in it. On the other hand, it is possible for a combination of music and movement (dance) in a performance that has no word at all to be described as very poetic, due to the sheer force we feel while observing it (p. 7).

The essence of true poetry lies in its power to appeal strikingly to our appreciation, and to some degree, lift us up. There are two fundamental ways in which a poem can appeal to us. One is by touching us emotionally so that we feel either pain or pleasure; the other is by stirring our mind deeply so that we reflect on some aspects of life or some significant ideas. It is important to note that the Igue songs perform these two basic roles.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is based on literary stylistics from the perspective of oral literature. Literary stylistics is the critical approach which focuses on the "literariness" of texts. It examines the features that make the text a work of literature as opposed to history, journalism, travelogue,

and the essay. In order to achieve this, it looks at those aspects of the literary artist's imagination and creativity as demonstrated in his style. These aspects include the way in which he selects and uses figures of speech, and the way in which they help to realize the theme and subject matter of the literary work. This methodology is especially important to the study, because it will show precisely how the Igue songs can also be considered literary in the sense of being works of literature.

Stylistic analysis, and more specifically, literary analysis, assumes from the outset, that most critical evaluations of literary text tend to focus on the subject matter and themes of the literary texts. In achieving this end, they look at character, point of view, dialogue, setting, plot and other aspects of the texts to help them understand and explain what the text is saying. Literary stylistics, unlike most thematic critical approaches, does not focus on the what of the text, but on the How of the text; not on what the literary text is saying but on how it is being said. As has been demonstrated in Formalism and New Criticism, the How - the style - of a work of literature is not just essential for understanding the What - the subject matter- and theme - of the work of literature, but that, more importantly, it is fundamental to the very status of the literary text as a work of art. In other words, without an acknowledged literary style, a text simply cannot be recognised as a literary text in the first place. While situating Ngugi and Okara, for instance, within literary stylistic framework, scholars have observed that in *The Voice* as well as in Ngugi's works, "a corresponding literary stylistic pattern is noticed in these writers' valorization of the 'voice', essentially a female voice, as a complex symbol and an elaborate metaphor that always acts as ever-present guiding spirit (a kind of *dues-ex machina* "that encourages and propels the male protagonist to action" (Fashina, 2009, p. 77).

POETRY AND PERFORMANCE

Schechner (1988) has stressed that theatre and performance still have a lot to show of their original mysteries, dynamism as reflected in the structures, ceremonies, rhythms that are embellished in conventions and ritual forms. Therefore, in order to properly understand Igue songs and their contexts, we must locate them in actual performance, bearing in mind the ceremonial and ritualistic implications.. These songs are not written to be read but are chanted openly to an audience (whether limited or large) to appreciate with their eyes and their ears. The public performance of the Igue songs readily comes to mind. From the dawn to the dusk of this particular day, different kinds of songs are performed. For instance, the youths who return from the outskirts of the city with the ceremonial *Ewere leaves* move from one house to another. As they approach a house, they sing:

Ebe were o 'rre emwan na o
Ebe ewere o 'rre emwan na o...
Igue ne erha gue o 'rokhoro no o
Igue ne iye gue o 'rokhoro no e
Igue ne mo gue o 'rokhoro no e
Igue ne mo gue o 'rokhoro no e

The leaves of Ewere are here already
The leaves of Ewere are here already...
Igue that father celebrates is that of peace
Igue that mother celebrates is that of peace
Igue that the children celebrate is that of peace
Igue that the Binis celebrate is that of peace...

As the singing and dancing progress, the poet-singers distribute some *Ewere leaves* among the inhabitants who place them on their heads. This aspect of the performed poetry is followed by a song, not only of good wishes but also of love and unity

Ogbe ma vbe dia ru o Ise l'Ogbes evbo
Ogbe 'ma vbe dia ru o Ise l'Ogbes evbo
Ma 'ghi vb' ukpo O Ise l'Ogbe evbo

Next year, we shall celebrate, Chorus: Amen so shall it be.
Next year, we shall celebrate. Chorus: Amen so shall it be.

There shall be no year without celebration Chorus:
Amen so shall it be,

However, it is necessary to stress here that the poet (or poets as the case may be) can, at the scene of performance, deliberately change the details of a poem in order to satisfy his (their) desires. The Edo oral poet for instance (who having performed the above songs in a particular house and discovers that the inhabitants are not ready to reciprocate in cash or in kind) can decide to use his poetry as a weapon of attack on the ungenerous household. In order to launch this attack, the poet- singer has at least two possibilities. He may either change the tone of his voice to that of an elegiac one or sing:

Ima wu ere fi me
O mwen Ewere re
Ye oghe erha mwen te egbee
O mwen Ewere re
Ye oghe iye mwen gue egbee
O mwen Ewere re

I did not ask you to give me money
Owner of Ewere
Use my father's money to wrap yourself
Owner of Ewere
Use my mother's money to dress yourself
Owner of Ewere...

or, with a fast dramatic movement of the hands and feet, he may sing:

Kpoko ya kan Khere khere Emwin da omwan
Khare khare
Kpoko yak an Khare khere Emwin da omwan
Khare khere

The stingy one, little by little, should one be stingy
Little by little
The stingy one, little by little, should one be stingy
Little by little.

In other words, the poet can decide to vary, not only the poem, but also the ways the poems are performed. Olajubu (1981) explains this kind of poetic liberty when he says that:

The oral performance imposes on its text elements or variability inaccuracies and inconsistencies arising from a number of factors governing its performance. First the poet-singer... can deliberately alter the detail of poetry to suit his whims and caprices (p.72).

This validates the on-going scholarly discourse that the performance of oral poetry (in this case, Igue poetry-songs), is vital to the full realization of the poem itself. Apart from the fact that performance underscores the relationship between a “speech art” and “a doing art”, it also illuminates the major events which take place in a ritual ceremony (Finnegan, 1970, p. 265). These major events include songs, dances, impersonation of mythical being, and definite and prescribed series of manipulations.

POETRY AND THE AUDIENCE

While it is true that the Igue song-poem is being performed primarily for a ritual purpose, it is also necessary to discuss other functions of the performed poetry. These functions include the entertainment and the education of the members of the audience. In order to carry out these functions, the poet must, apart from other things, recognize and appreciate the contribution of the audience to the overall success of the poetic rendition. This explains the position of scholars that “an oral poem is not composed for but in performance” (Lord, 1980, p.13). Part of what Lord and others mean is that the kind of poetry achieves its forcefulness, not only at the hands of the poet himself, but also from the participants at various levels in the creative art taking place. This is where the audience comes in.

One of the functions of the audience in the creative art is that it takes a positive view of what the poet is doing. This role the audience performs, not only by making the poet feel that he is doing something worthwhile, but also by actually joining him at the scene of performance. The success of the poet singer, during the Igue festival for instance, is informed largely by the participation of the audience. The audience, apart from praising the dance group, joins them in singing songs and in making

dramatic movements. There are times when all those present are actually involved in the creative art. This situation happens, to cite an instance, during the sixth day of rituals. In the song below both the poet singer and the audience are involved.

Poet: Omo okpia e wu vbe owa na

Chorus: Ise

Poet: Omo okhuo e wu vbe owa na

Chorus: Ise

Poet: Ighi Igho Amien vbe owa na

Chorus: Ise

Poet: Ise O Ise O

Chorus: Ise O Ise O

Poet: No male child will die in this house

Chorus: Amen

Poet: No female child will die in this house

Chorus: Amen

Poet: Plenty of money will be found in this house

Chorus: Amen

Poet: Amen Amen

Chorus: Amen Amen

This kind of post-audience involvement is what scholars explain as a total involvement, in which case “the oral poetry takes the form of a joint choral singing or praying, but more often it is a matter of one person taking the lead and the rest of the group joining in response or refrain” (Finnegan, 1970, p.126). This is exactly what obtains on one of the days of rituals in the Igue festival. Here the head of the family, with a plate of kola nuts and coconuts on his left hand and a rooster on his right hand, prays:

Igue has started already

As a yearly festival demands

The Oba has done his own

And our turn has come

Ancestors and gods: this is coconut

A very white rooster, some kola nuts

And a bottle of wine

To wash you and implore you

To ward off death from us

That we may live long

May all misfortunes be cursed

For wife, children and husbands here:

As we celebrate the festival this year

May we live to celebrate another one

As I have said it, so shall it be

To each of the above poetic prayer the rest of the family responds by saying “Amen”.

Perhaps the greatest function of the audience is that it expands or curtails the text. In other words, the audience does have an effect on the form and delivery of a poem. There are some instances where the audience prolongs the performance of the poet-singer, either by correcting the poet where he misses the rhythm of his text, or by actually

joining in the rendition of the songs. There are other cases however, where songs, being sung, are stopped abruptly because of the reaction of the audience. In this case, the audience curtails the text.

STRUCTURE OF THE SONGS

Most of the Igue festival songs are brief. They are short, and more often than not, the lines are not framed in full sentences. In other words, they are not governed by a regular line pattern i.e. the end of the lines do not always rhyme and do not have regular length; and even along the lines, there is no established order or regularity in the metre. However, such irregularity of lines remains a common feature of poetry (song) in quite a few African languages. In spite of the shortness and irregularity of Igue songs, they still carry meanings. Meanings intended for the listeners are easily conveyed through the short sentences. The two short songs (below), carry meanings that are very relevant to the subject matter of the Igue festival. The Ubi song reminds me of the disgraceful exit of Ubi from, and the triumphant entry of Ewere into, the Oba's palace:

Ubi rie
Azen, Ubi rie
Oso, Ubi rie
Evil go
Witch, Evil go
Wizard, Evil go

The second song still centres on Ewere - the re-enactment of the coming of Ewere into the palace of the Oba. Here it goes:

Ebe Ewere O
O rre emwen na O
Ebe Ewere O
O rre emwan na O
The leaves of Ewere
Chorus: Are here already
The leaves of Ewere
Chorus: Are here already

In the second song, we have the audience forming part of the chorus. There are times when an individual leads the song while the audience acts as the chorus. But there are some songs where the audience acts both as the lead singer and the chorus.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The themes of the Igue festival songs are varied. Each of these songs has its own distinct focus even though all the thematic interests of the songs are related in one way or the other to the historical event that is re-enacted in the festival. There are songs whose theme deals with praise. The praise songs are fundamentally for the ancestors. They are worshipped for their continued guidance and protection of the individual and collective lives of the

people. In most cases, these songs recount the heroic deeds of one supernatural deity or the other. It is important to note that these praise songs are usually rendered side by side with sacrifices, at the shrine of the ancestors. In the song below, Omon'Oba, the man who is generally believed to be the traditional leader of the Edo people is praised. The celebrants lift up a goat which is about to be slaughtered, and begin to sing and dance:

Omo ne omwen aro
E omwen aro
Omo ne omwen aro
E omwe aro
Oba has eyes

Yes, he has eyes
Oba has eyes
Yes, he has eyes...

Apart from the ancestors, generous hosts or occupants of houses visited by the public dance groups (with Ewere leaves), are praised and thanked for the love and kindness they demonstrate for the poet-singers. One of such songs is as follows:

O ru rre na O
O fi rre na O
Emwin n'omo gha ru ne
Uwa kpomwen O
Oghodan e ghi kpomwen ese
Uwa kpomwen O...

He has done something
He has given us something
So shall his children do for him
Let us thank him
Ingratitude does not appreciate things
Let us thank him...

Other features of the Igue festival songs include the abuse. This is sharply contrasted with the feature of praise. Stingy landlords are often insulted for refusing to give out money to the poet-singers, even when they have sung and danced for their entertainment. These abusive protest songs are satirical and full of ironical statements. One of such, apart from the one earlier reflected in the text is:

Oga ghi re Owa O
Baa emwin ikobo vbe ekpinni
Mama ghi re owa O
Baa emwin ikobo vbe ekpinni
Brother ghi re owa o
Sister ghi re owa o
Baa emwin ikobo vbe ekpinni

Master is not at home
Because of kobo and half-penny
Mother is not at home
Because of kobo and half-penny

Brother is not at home
Because of kobo and half-penny
Sister is not at home
Because of kobo and half-penny

Even though this song of abuse is sung by the groups to express their sentiments to the ungenerous inhabitants of the houses they visit, it is also sung when the owners of the houses they visit, refuse to come out of their rooms. Such refusals are not only taken as insults on the part of the dance groups, but are also seen as a deliberate attempt to avoid giving out money to them.

Some songs have the theme of appeal. During the Igue festival, the Edo people are often moved to make an appeal or a plea. Such appeals are frequently addressed to the Almighty God, subordinate gods, ancestors and protective spirits. The addresses are usually in songs, prayers and recitations. Apart from making pleas to supernatural forces, appeals are also addressed to priests, elders or parents. This second mode of appeal is usually made by youths who have either disobeyed their parents, or are seeking one favour or the other from them. These two kinds of appeal are represented below. The first poetic appeal is directed to the ancestors and gods:

Enikao: ma muen ivin re
Okporhu no fuafo, e vbee
Kevbe ogo a yon
Na yak hue rue
Nu gha gie ma wuu
Nu g' ma to

Ancestors and gods: this is coconut
A very white rooster, some kolanut
And a bottle of wine
To wash you and implore you
To ward off death from us
That we may live long

The second appeal is made by a girl to her parents. She emotionally implores them to live so that she can play her role as a daughter:

Ena ehi mwen
To me ga
Chorus: E - - a - - ena ehi mwen O
Erha mwen
To me ga
Chorus: E - - a - - ana ehi mwen O
Iye mwen
To me ga
Chorus: E - - s - - ena ehi mwen O

Owner of my spirit
Live long that I may serve you
Chorus: Please, please owner of my spirit
My father live long that I may serve you
Chorus: Please, please owner of my spirit

My mother live long that I may serve you
Please, please owner of my spirit.

There are songs which centre on the themes of love and unity. The Igue festival is a phenomenon which affords the Edo people the opportunity to pray on matters of common interest. This sense of belonging is demonstrated in the choruses of the songs or recitations. For instance:

Ogbee ma vbe dia ru O
Ise L' ogbee evbo
Ogbe 'ma vbe dia ru O
Ise L' ogbee evbo

Next year we shall celebrate together
Chorus: Amen so shall it be, O people
Next year we shall celebrate together
Chorus: Amen so shall it be O people
There shall be no year without celebration
Chorus: Amen so shall it be, O people

LANGUAGE AND STYLE

The Igue festival songs are composed orally. They are responses to some events which call for song. The Igue festival songs can be classified under two modes namely the song mode and recitation mode. The song mode has been described already. The recitation mode operates significantly on the fifth day of rituals. The ritual-poet recites chants to invoke the spirit of the ancestor and other super-natural beings.

The language of the ritual poet-singer, which is mainly of chants, incantation and "spiced" songs has a strong poetic quality manifested in the economy of words. And as it has been argued by scholars, "since ritual poetry is geared towards the continuity of a tradition, it can therefore, be said to have a well defined structure" (Akpabot, 1981, p.88). The oral poet in Igue festival, in recognition of the need for continuity of a tradition begins with this prescribed form of opening

Igue vbe suen
Zev be emwin neru n ukpo
Omon ru Oghie ne
Ona vbe se egbe ima...

Igue has started already
As a yearly festival demands
The Oba has done his own
And our turn has come

The "choice of words and the further choice of the ways of arguing word" (Millet et al, 1950, p.55), are relevant to the analysis of the songs for the Igue festival. These two choices which can be said to be the meeting point of language, diction and style also help to check what has been styled the unchronological plot of the oral

tradition (Biakolo, 1991). The Igue songs are essentially short. They are made up of brief sentence which are not developed. Even though most of the words in the songs are simple and relevant to the everyday context or situation, there is also the conventional use of language. There are some words or expressions that are used only during the Igue festival. And because of the metaphoric content of these expressions, their interpretation and translation are always tasking. However, since they are situated within a given context, their meanings can be suggested.

For instance:
 Gua a wen yen
 Awenyen a wen yen
 Gua a wenyen

The above song simply translated means that good things abound especially now that the Igue festival has commenced.

Repetition

The most common stylistic feature of Igue songs is repetition. This stylistic tool, generally speaking, pervades most of the stylistic and structural tendencies found in oral literature. Repetition can be seen from different angles, depending on the context, the kind and the degree, among others. The diverse possibilities include partial, total, incremental, phrasal and full repetition. Bamgbala (1988) describes full repetition as that which involves “the repetition of a sentence structure as well as of all the lexical items occurring in it” (p. 46). Full repetition is used to achieve climatic and rhythmic purposes. But more importantly, they are employed for emphasis. Here, the poet-singer stresses the idea he wants to explain in the song. In this circumstance, as some scholars have pointed out, “there is no suspense. The audience is introduced to the idea which is repeated again and again” (Kunene, 1971, p. 88). Below are examples of songs with full repetition.

Ise L' Ogbe evbo
 Ise L' Ogbe evbo

Amen so shall it be
 Amen so shall it be

and this second song:

Ubi rie
 Ubi rie
 Ubi rie

Evil go
 Evil go
 Evil go

While the first song emphasizes the blessings of the Igue festival, the second one stresses the need to ward off evil from the community.

Ideophones

This is a form of repetition which is used for stylistic (rather than structural) effect. In ideophones, ideas are conveyed through sound. This sound-communication contributes immensely to the overall success of the poetic rendition. This is because the poet-singer can, through sound, not only create a sense of vividness in his song or recitation, but also attracts attention to the psychology of his art. The sound in the song below is made both by vocal manipulations and the clapping of hands.

Kpoko ya akan
 Khere khere
 Emwin da omwen
 Khere khere
 Kpoko ya akan
 Khere khere
 Emwin da omwen
 Khere khere

The stingy one
 Little by little
 Should one be stingy
 Little by little
 The stingy one
 Little by little
 Should one be stingy
 Little by little

The vocal manipulations and the clapping of hands bring out clearly the idea in the sound, “kpoko ya akan” which forms the chorus in the song.

Parallelism

Parallelism is a device in which a part or a whole statement is balanced against the other. Ideas are repeated without the use of the actual word that was first employed. Parallelism is further divided broadly into two namely: cross parallelism and semantic parallelism. In the case of cross parallelism, the same ideas are repeated in a parallel structure as a way of emphasizing something. With semantic parallelism, there is a change in the context and words. However, the basic pattern remains the same. In this song (below) which expresses good wishes, cross parallelism is used. The idea, repeated in a parallel structure is on the mode of making appeal during the Igue festival such as:

Da aeroplane ne omose re o
 Aeroplane ne okhua u de re o
 De emwin ogbon re o

Buy a fine aero plane
 A big aero plane you should buy
 Buy something new

Tonality

Tonality is a stylistic feature also common in Igue festival

songs. By varying the tones in the songs, the poet is able to emphasize his ideas and affect a strong element of musicality at the scene of performance. For instance, in the praise song (below), the ever-seeing quality of the Oba is explicitly portrayed with the use of tonal assonance:

Òmon n' o mwèén aro
È omwèén áró
Òmon n' o mwèén aro
É omwèén áró

Oba has eyes
Yes he has eyes
Oba has eyes
Yes he has eyes

Note that there are no intonational marks in the English version of this song.

Personification

This is a stylistic device in which an inanimate or abstract object is described as having human attributes. The device which is common in Oral Literature is used prominently in the Igue festival. In a bid to re-enact an historical event, certain objects are given human qualities. In the song below, Ewere leaf is described in human terms. It is referred to as a human being who is coming from a place—for instance, from a journey.

Ewere de e
Kie na Ewere
Ewere de e
Kie ne Ewere
Ewere iho mwan
Kie ne Ewere
Ewere is coming
Open for Ewere
Ewere is coming
Open for Ewere
Ewere, my mate
Open for Ewere

The above song can also be used to illustrate the presence of symbolism in Igue festival songs. In this sense, the Ewere leaf can be appreciated within the context of symbolic representation, of not only Ewere herself, but indeed, of purity, obedience and love.

CONCLUSION

While it is true that the famous Igue festival songs of the Edo people of Nigeria have cultural, moral and historical significance, the study has also been able to locate the vital place of literary stylistics and poetic tradition in the overall realization of the song-text. It is therefore not out of place to conclude, from the research findings, that the songs have creative materials and artistic qualities which justify their appreciation as essentially literary masterpiece.

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