

‘Tradition Dies Hard’: The Case of *Oriki* in Yoruba Popular Folksongs¹

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Abstract

African popular culture parades forms which convey the consciousness of the enabling societies. Apart from their aesthetic qualities, they also evince socio-historical relevance. The significance of the orature forms lies in the verbal structure of indigenous African societies. Among the Yoruba, *oriki* occupies a strategic place that is expressed in intertextuality, the relevance of which is mostly dramatised in poetic renditions of praise-singing. Either at the level of the individual or community, the qualities of *oriki* is deployed to enhance the value of its subject. The significance of this study lies in its contemporary approach to *oriki*'s usage. This paper is a study of the deployment of *oriki* as a resource in Yoruba popular culture. Using excerpts from musicians such as Sunny Ade, Ebenezer Obey, Shina Peters and Kollington Ayinla as textual references, the paper closely analyses *oriki*'s intrinsic qualities and how they are used in engaging personal, social and political issues. In demonstrating the contemporary significance of *oriki*, the paper affirms the continued importance of African orature forms with a view to discovering its relevance to all spheres of human undertakings.

Introduction

Oriki is the most popular of Yoruba poetic forms. Every Yoruba poet therefore strives to know the oriki of important people in his locality as well as lineage oriki because every person, common or noble has his own body of utterances by which he can be addressed. (Olatunji, 1984:97)

Oriki is a popular Yoruba *orature* form. As a matter of fact, earliest research in African oral

literature acknowledges this sub-genre. Such scholars as Finnegan (1969) and Barber (1991) regard *oriki* and its variants as essential oral forms which cut across most African cultures. Though generally regarded as praise poetry, *oriki* is however beyond elements of praise. As well demonstrated by Akinyemi (1997), though praise is a major component and distinguishing feature of Yoruba *oriki*, it is also a major descriptive form which captures all the essence

of its subject. Arising from the above, therefore, it is apt to say that *oriki* is a major art form that possesses elements of both praise and description in abundance.

Using the above contention as a launching pad, this paper takes a fresh look at Yoruba *oriki* situating it as a form that engenders intertextuality in Yoruba folklore. By this, one refers to how elements of *oriki* feature in virtually all the verbal art forms of the Yoruba people. Hence, from the perspective of intertextuality, *oriki's* descriptive and praise elements are well sited in furthering socio-economic and political ends. In appreciating *oriki* therefore, the location of its aesthetic configuration within the context of production, i.e. Yoruba society is germane. Since, in most African societies, art exists to perform a specific function, (Ojaide, 1996), *oriki's* agency within Yoruba society becomes understandable. The point is that, the place of art in Yoruba socio-cultural construct lends credence to the agency of *oriki* as an art form with enduring qualities across generations.

For the present study, the appropriation of *oriki* and its inherent elements of praise and description by contemporary Yoruba popular artists shall be explored. This is in tandem with the fact that, as a performance driven art which is essentially oral, *oriki* as an aspect of Yoruba poetry, relies heavily on the knowledge and mastery of its subject by the performer. In effect, what determines the dexterity and most often, the commercial success of the oral artist lies in the ability to capture the innate qualities of the *oriki's* subject. Though this is complemented by such factors as linguistic profundity, since, "the relationship between language and music is also crucial, and if music in its totality functions as a form of human

communication then a linguistic approach to the study of ethnomusicology is of paramount importance" (Adedeji, 2010: 28) what really matters in the exploitation of *oriki* in popular performances is the exactitude of the description of the subject matter. This aligns with Karin Barber's well informed view that: *Oriki* are essentially autonomous nuggets of text, and performances of *oriki* are therefore often highly disjunctive, fluid, and fragmented. *Oriki* are pervasive, rendered in many different performance modes – chanted, recited, sung – and on many different occasions, from solemn ceremonials to jocular conversation. They are also deeply treasured by their owners. People feel an emotional attachment to their *oriki* so strong that they may be moved to tears by a recitation; it is held that babies are soothed by their *oriki*, masquerades empowered, men and women enhanced so that they fill out and become what they have it in them to be. There is a sense in which *oriki* are felt to be inherent in the subject, animating it and speaking from within

In this connection, Yoruba poetry is part and parcel of different performances by different categories of people. Okpewho (1990) in a comprehensive study of the audience – performer relationship in oral performance affirms this constitutive value of *oriki* in diverse performances. For illustration, *Ijala or Irewoje* (Hunters chant/dirges) are the exclusive preserve of the hunters' lineage; *Iyere Ifa* belongs to adherents of *Ifa* oracle, *Ekun Iyawo* (Epithalium/bridal songs) are passed from generations among the women folk. To appreciate *oriki* (Yoruba praise or descriptive poetry) in the literary, is to be conversant with one or more of these other poetic forms. The point is that *oriki* features in all other forms of

Yoruba poetry. This makes it a sub-genre with intertextual cross-appeal. Elements of praise or description always feature in all poetic forms of the Yoruba people.

Oriki as Praise

The Yoruba, like any human society, believe not only in celebrating humanistic achievements or landmarks, they also attach great importance to human innate tendencies for praise-singing. At the religious level, Yorubas believe that to curry favour from a deity, there is a compelling imperative to praise or flatter, in a bid to sway the subject to one's advantage. Thus, *oriki* as a praise form of art becomes pertinently foregrounded. A mother praises her ward:

*Oko mi, akanbi
Ora oba mode
Omo tagbata
Omo korowa
Omo ilekoleru*

My husband, Akanbi
The man from oba mode
Offspring of Tagbata
Offspring of Korowo

The woman often praises the husband:

*Okoo mi, olowo ori mi
Okunrin ogun
E e ji re bi?
Okunrin to fin n gbadura fokunrin.*

My husband, my owner
Valorous man
Did u wake well?
A man who is a prayer point for others

In the two examples above, both the husband and child of the woman are lauded and are certainly sure to be favourably disposed to the woman. In another way, the man may

say of his wife in reply:

*O se aya mi
Mo jii re
Aya rere, aya atata
O ku owo mi
Erin – o joko – o naa
A fiwa tutu te oko lorun*

Thank you, my dear wife
I woke well
A good wife, a dear wife
Thanks for being there for me
Her consistent smiles do not allow
The husband to assault her
The one that uses good character to placate the husband

The point been made is that even from the homestead, *oriki* becomes a tool for interpersonal appreciation and a tonic for peaceful co-existence amongst family members. Of course, interactive discourse is also a natural consequence. The way and manner *oriki* praises can be located in the structure of the Yoruba society. Since there are classes and there is a strong hegemonic presence, there arises a pertinent need to laud, celebrate and indeed praise valorous achievements. As a matter of fact, the popular Yoruba saying that '*ori wu*' (the head has swelled up), is the response of an individual when praised and celebrated. Babalola (1961), Olatunji (1984), and Akinyemi (1991) have variously examined historical examples in this regard. However, with civilisation, this trend continues and infact *oriki* transited to a viable tool for popular musicians in contemporary Yoruba society.

Here is an example by Shina Peters, a notable popular folk (juju) musician:

*Mi o mo oun won pe o se o
Ologundudu,
Mi o mo oun won pe o se*

Abiola

O gunyan lele, O gbe fo – ree – re

Ore re o jeun to fi lo

O ro ka dede, o gbe fo – ree – re

Ore re o jeun to fi lo

O be ore, be ore, ore o da e lohun

Mi o mo oun won pe o se

I don't know what they say your offence is
Ologundudu

I don't know what they say your offence is
Abiola

You pounded yam, you gave your friend

Your friend didn't eat till he left

You prepared yam flour

Your friend didn't eat

You pleaded, your friend didn't eat

I don't know what they say your offence is

In the above excerpt, the popular musician uses an opportunity to praise late politician, Chief M.K.O Abiola, to wonder why the man (Abiola) was let down, in his presidential bid, consequent upon the annulment of the June 12 1993, presidential elections in Nigeria. An account of the social gathering where the musician Shina Peters rendered this *Oriki* for Abiola, revealed emotional outburst by all present. In essence, the element of praise in *oriki* has continued to endear it to generations among the Yoruba people even in modern times.

Another interesting way *oriki* praises can be seen is in the religious circumstances. Besides, major Yoruba deities like *Ifa* (god of divination), *Sango* (god of thunder), *Ogun* (god of iron) etc., all have, as Akinyemi (1997:184) observed, *oriki* as the basis of the religious chant used in the worship of the *orisa* in Yoruba communities. Interestingly, *oriki* has proved a dynamic and responsive oral form, in modern day religions of Islam and Christianity. Jesus Christ in contemporary Pentecostal setting

enjoys the following:

Jesu Kristi

Olorun Alagbara

Obiri – biti, Aji pojo iku da

Oba mimo

Oba awon Oba

Oba ti n je emi ni mase beru

Oba to ju Oba lo

Alade Ogo

Jesus Christ

Powerful God

The Mystery One that changes death date

Holy King

King of kings

The King that allays fears

The King above kings

The one that wears crown of Glory

This is already a tradition in Pentecostal gatherings, where resident choirs, orchestras and modern-day gospel musicians, praise Jesus Christ amidst deafening roars and religious ecstasy. Interesting enough, the seeming and obvious 'gospelisation of Islam' is already a reality in the milieu. This has resulted in establishment of groups like NAFSAT and QUARREB, to mention but a few.

At the very fabric of the society, the praise component of *oriki* continues to drive individuals, and propel ambition. To illustrate, when popular musicians are patronised by emerging forces and potential office seekers in the society, what follows is an album in their honour, eulogising their essence and exaggeratingly celebrating their supposed landmarks. The point to note is that *oriki* as a praise poetic form has graduated to be a crystallising factor that enables a society to produce self-made individuals, desirous of praise, in the long run.

Oriki as Description

We agree with the contention of Olatunji (1984:68) that naming is a significant factor in *oriki*. This is because a name assigned to an individual transcends identity but extends to other pedants as the situation warrants. *Oriki* makes use of semantic extension in describing the subject. Our observation reveals that in contemporary times, a name is oftentimes the easiest take-off point to describe and celebrate an individual.

Again to a popular musician, this time, Ebenezer Obey:

*Jinadu, t'enikan ba wo sokoto
To ba wo kijipa
Agbada nla loda
O ju won lo, o i segbe won
Jinadu,
Iri e ri gun, lese n tagun
Jinadu baba won
O ti goke odo, kafara o to ja*

Jinadu if someone wears trouser
Or wears expensive wool
You have a big flowing 'agbada'
You are not their mate
Jinadu
It's the way you see the vulture
That you are pointing a spear
Jinadu, their father
You have succeeded already

There are two points to note in the above. The original subject has become synonymous with this description as contained in the song, while any subject can have his name substituted. The name 'Jinadu' thus becomes a symbol of descriptive *oriki* for anyone found worthy (or unworthy) of such praises. As the Yoruba say of "oruko" (name):

*Oruko omo lo n ro omo
Omo ajanaku kii yara*

*Omo ti eya ba bi
Eya lo maa jo*

A child's name follows him
The offspring of elephant
Does not become a dwarf
The offspring of a 'fast being'
Grows up to be swift

Therefore, when an individual bears a name that is associated with history, social circumstance and even physical features, the *oriki* describes his person, his life, his nature and his achievements. Sunny Ade sings:

*Iran Akin, lo ti n duro de ogun
Oju Akin, eyin akin kiki ogun ni
Iwaju Akin, eyin Akin, kiki oogun
Ibi to ba le laa n bomo okunrin*

The generation of warriors wait for war
They combat war on all fronts
They have charms in abundance
A man is always found in tough places.

The subject of this descriptive *oriki* may be someone that bears 'Akin' as name or someone Sunny Ade considers as being valiant. In the excerpt, it is worthwhile to appreciate that there is a deliberate pun on the semantics of the word 'Akin' to refer to both a name and an act or attribute. The same is also found in the word-play of *Ogun* (war) and *oogun* (charm). In effect, the descriptive *Oriki* becomes useful in appreciating the subject. In another song, Sunny Ade describes late M.K.O Abiola's in-laws, while rendering the *oriki* of his late Simbiat Abiola:

*Abiola
Ka laya to buru
Iyen ko pe, ko pa ni
Tabi ko ma pa ni
Ko dabi eni layaa – re
Ti o lanaa – ire
Taya ba buru, o buru latile won wa*

Iyawo to niwa, o fi se obi re han
Kori je n laya ire, ki n si lanaa – re
Ki n ma fota seyawo
Nile ana osika
Ori mi, mama je temi o gbe
Eda mi, mama je temi o gbe laye

Abiola,
Having a bad wife
Does not make or unmake her killer
Unlike someone with a good wife
Without good in-laws
If a wife is bad, she is bad from her house
A wife with good character,
Attests to her parents' efforts
May my essence give me a good wife
And good in-laws
May I not have an enemy as wife
From wicked in-laws
My essence, may my own not be irredeemable
My essence, may my own in this world not be
beyond redemption

It is evident that the in-laws are described as good people who are responsible for the emulative character of Simbiat Abiola. The *oriki* here also reverberates with didacticism and the tone, evidently moralising. This confirms Akinyemi's assertion (ibid) that *oriki* evokes in people feelings of well-being, pride, as well as confidence for the present, and courage for the future.

Oriki describes a person's personal traits or physical features, in detail. As Babalola (1961) has compiled, there are various *oriki* of people of diverse classes therefore for every individual, there is likely to be an *oriki* that describes him in totality, taking into account physical, structural and even the natural construct or mien of the person. In contemporary times, name labels which are part of personal *oriki*'s usually reveal individual traits. Such include:

Akuruyejo – short
Aguntasoolo – giant

Ibadiaran – beautiful lady
Abolounjeku – glutton
Abifereselenu – tooth-gapped person
Abiwatutu – calm and cool
Eeyan jeje – gentleperson
Okunrin meta – valorous person

These descriptions are essentially direct assessment of the individuals concerned. *Oriki* employs descriptive metaphors in going about this. It is not surprising that in their compositions, popular Yoruba musicians especially in Fuji and Juju, employ *oriki* extensively, capitalising on their associated epithets. It is likely that the subject of the *oriki* is generally appreciated from many sides: An example from Akinyemi (1993):

Adeyemi atanda
A gbo sa ma sa
A gbo ya – ya ma ya
Ti n ba wo su u
Bi eru to ko gbon
Ogbon n be ninu
Bi omo Babalawo

Adeyemi Atanda
The one who is indifferent to alarm
The one who is indifferent to stampede
His calm looks may be misinterpreted as folly
Whereas he is as wise as a diviner's child

Oriki has also proved a worthy tool of satire and social reformation. Contemporary social and political developments have been subjects of folk musicians' approach to praising individuals involved in identifiable scenarios. The point is, an opportunity to praise an individual is utilised for subtle social lampoon. Kollington Ayinla, a Yoruba fuji folk musician provides an example:

Idije to ye ko waye
Nilu Najiria
Ti o waye ri
Nilu Najiria

Boolu Agbaye
Nigeria 1995
A gbale a gbata
A tun nawo a nara
Igba ti won mi ade
Enugu ni won lo desi
Eni to ye ki won ba
Ti won o b anile
Ni won se n kigbe kolera
O ya o, omo Nigeria
O ya, omo Nigeria
Ki lo de
Ni bo la ti n bo
Nibo la n lo
A teni a taso
Iyawo o wa
A gbale a gbata
Iyawo o wa

The aborted competition
 In Nigeria
 That we never hosted
 In Nigeria
 World foot fiesta
 Nigeria 95
 We cleaned everywhere
 We spent millions
 When the inspectors came
 They arrived Enugu
 The person they expected to see
 That was not available
 Was why they shouted cholera
 Beloved Nigerians
 Beloved Nigerians
 What's happening
 Where are we coming from
 Where are we going
 We laid mats,
 We laid cloths
 The bride did not come

The above excerpt has social and political significance. It reveals a particular historic moment in Nigeria. The interpretation the musician gives to the denial of hosting rights to Nigeria for 1995 by FIFA, lies in the injustice the government of the day perpetrated against

a personality regarded as pillar of sports then. It is apparent that the individual's uniqueness is thus foregrounded. The fact is that late chief M.K.O. Abiola is here accorded an indispensable status. This is a relevant example of *oriki's* intricate potential as tool for political and social critique and re-awakening.

The personality mirrored above is both of historic and social relevance. The subject is a former monarch and the *oriki* above sums up his character trait. Akinyemi's (1991) study on the use of *oriki* in traditional Oyo society clearly shows that, apart from having a group designated in the royal court for this purpose, *oriki* serves multifarious ends and is key to understanding hegemonic structures in the society. This is further chorused by Jegede (2008) who clearly shows the significance of *oriki* in court poetry performance. In her words: In court poetry performance, the institution of monarchy and its history are veritable source materials which both male and female poets use. They chronicle and analyse social, political, family and gender history among others and in the process recreate the past in order to warn or comment on events of the future (283).

The above clearly gives an insight into how *oriki*, which is the main ingredient of court poetry performance, is strategic in the hegemonic continuum. As a recent example, the character traits of Nigeria's former President Olusegun Obasanjo regular feature in his *oriki*. Apart from pointing to his ancestral lineage of *Owu*, such *oriki* excerpts also link Obasanjo's mien and even conduct in office as emblematic of an *Owu* indigene. Obasanjo's foray in the military is often seen as a direct corollary of his *Owu* ancestry, given the fact that the *Owu*, a Yoruba sub-group, are known in Yoruba history to be warriors and tough characters. It

is often said of Obasanjo:

Aremu Okikiolahan
Omo Olowu Oduru
Ajifewesere
Okunrin meta
Okunrin ogun
Ara oru Ki i ranro
Awii- menu kuro
Ni towu

Aremu, Okikiolahan
Descendant of Owu Oduru
One who has vast knowledge of herbs
Valorous man
Man of war
The Owu man does not avenge
But complains repeatedly

The above character traits in Nigeria's former President owe their aptness to *Oriki's* descriptive power in isolating and sometimes marrying the subject's regular conducts with elements represented in his/her *oriki*, either in lineage *oriki* or personal cognomen. The point from this is that *oriki* is a descriptive vehicle that provides the needed mirror of a person's real character portraiture. This informs why in its performance, a sense of ego, most times elevated, is elicited in the subject.

Oriki: Beyond Praise and Description

As shown in the preceding paragraphs, the importance of *oriki* is certainly beyond aesthetic or cultural underpinnings. *Oriki* has assumed a wider dimension in its contemporary usage. For *oriki* to perform its role further, it is imperative that excursion into its many hidden treasures be undertaken. As a poser, this discourse already sights a direct ancestry between *oriki* and modern day political sycophancy and praise singing. Actually, Barber (1981) notices the value of *oriki* in the existential continuum

which propels human beings towards ambition and self-drive. In other words, the pulse of socio-economic transitions and shifts can be adequately measured in close studies of personal and communal *oriki* corpuses.

The above clearly supports the treatise of this paper that *oriki* deserves closer studies beyond foregrounding its elements of praise and description. This paper has looked at *oriki* and has seen the need to see beyond it. This is an agreement with Abimbola's (2012) view that there is more to *oriki* than mere praise singing. It is gratifying to note that *oriki* has cross-social appeal since everyone has his or her own *oriki*. It is an important poetic form to appreciate, encourage and reward hard-work, industry and service. As a matter of fact, we have been able to connect popular culture to their profound use of *oriki*. It is the opinion of this study that *oriki* has made a mark in the past, in the present and is certainly an art for the future. In Yoruba past and contemporary life, *oriki* is a storehouse of metaphor, history and cultural aesthetics. This is in total agreement with Opefeyitimi's (1997: 133) contention that:

Bi a ba mo oruka asiri ojo
Laisi ponpo ori
Lai si kumo eyin
Are tete ni won su lo sajule orun

If we know the snakes cognomen
Without hitting it on the head
Or clubbing its backbones
Their demise is fast as one wished

The paper has demonstrated that, in analysing issues or engaging social phenomena, popular Yoruba artists in the contemporary age deploy *oriki* as a viable path for navigating the challenges being addressed. This is often in

realisation of the captivating power of *oriki* in description and praise. As such, these features engender a robust mechanism in assisting the modern oral performer across various media to remain relevant and of course, stay in business and earn a living. This implies that, oral art forms can be appropriated by modern performers and subjected to multifarious interpretations. Such an example can be found in Niyi Osundare as discussed by Sogunle (2014). It can therefore be concluded that, the value of traditional or indigenous popular art forms is not limited to their aesthetic constructions. They form part of the social transition and manifest the dynamics of a society. This is what Yoruba popular artists studied in this paper have clearly instantiated, confirming the recent submissions of Omojola (2012) on the fact that, popular Yoruba music can serve as adequate sites for exploiting cultural resources especially in relation to the concept of syncretism or hybridity. In effect, *oriki*'s agency is a strategic alliance of text, context and textuality of cultural affirmation within the purview of Yoruba popular music.

Endnote

1. This is a revised version of an earlier paper titled 'Tradition Dies Hard': The Example of Yoruba Oriki. *WS 2*(1) 2008 Jan. www.wandering-scholars.org.uk pp 1-10.

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