

# Re-constructing the Theory and Practice of Oral Performance in Africa

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## ***Abstract***

*For quite sometimes now, scholars have been exploring the contested theory of oral performance. As a dynamic and ever- evolving concept, it varies in scope, meaning and import, from one discipline to another, from one situation to another, and from one practitioner to another. While some conceptualize oral performance as the application of embodied skill and knowledge in the task of taking action in everyday society (Drewal, 1991), others argue that while the text is important, it is the context that gives the text life. More importantly, researchers have started to re-problematize the phenomenon of oral performance in view of current oral production and performance practices. For instance, while making a case for the survival of orality and performance, Finnegan (2005) posits that there is not just one relation between the 'performed oral' and the 'textual written', neither is there a clear distinction between them. She argues that writing can interact with oral performance in different ways. This paper, in stretching the limits of traditional paradigms and situating the contemporary Nigerian society within the discourse, explores such possibilities of interaction, and concludes that there is abundant life beyond the text.*

**Key words:** Oral performance; traditional paradigms; contested theory, Africa.

## **Introduction/ Background Information**

This paper presents fundamentally a definitional or conceptual approach to the study of performance. Beyond exploring the diverse perspectives from which many scholars have addressed the concepts, this paper attempts to place performance within the different genres of oral literature. Performance is a contested and problematic concept. In order words, a terrible air of disagreement surrounds its existence. To a large extent, it can be said to have no agreed upon definition. It varies in scope, meaning and import from one discipline to another, from one situation to another and from one practitioner to another.

Looking at the concept from the broad sense, Margaret Drewal defines performance as the praxis of every social life. In other words, performance embraces the activities carried out by human beings in the society. As convincing as this definition may be, it obviously fails to acknowledge the place of aesthetics and poetics characteristics of performance or what Solomon Iyasere refers to as creative performance (1980). However, as if conscious of the looseness of her definition, Margaret Drewal goes further to explain what the concept entails. According to her, performance involves the practical application of embodied skill and knowledge to the task of taking action in every day society. Part of what Drewal is saying is that performance, apart from creating a favourable atmosphere for the practical application of skill and talent, constitutes a vital aspect of culture. The striking relevance of the demonstration of the embodied craft becomes obvious in the situation of a poet/performer trained formally or informally in body technique to effect a particular performance.

### **The Concept and Nature of Oral Performance**

Oral performance is concisely defined as “patterned performative speech for an audience” (Ugoretz, 2000:3). Explaining the three key components of his definition – patterned, performative, and audience, 'patterned' means the continuity of the text of the performance around a pre-structured framework. 'Performative' shows that the speech used in the performance rides on metacommunicative markers that situate it in a different contextual framework. 'Audience' is an integral element, without which an oral performance cannot exist. The audience can either be an active or passive participant in oral performance.

Oral Performance provides opportunity for people not only to reflect on their current conditions but also to define themselves and their social world and either reinforce or resist or subvert prevailing social order. Oral performance in African society is expected to perform the functions of “inspiration, enlightenment, historical documentation, awakening of patriotism and, generally, the perpetuation of the heroic spirit” (Azuonye, 1994:137-138). In doing this, the oral performer uses four channels as identified by Finnegan (1992). These channels are: Acoustic (verbal, musical features, other acoustic elements – coughs, pauses, sobs, clapping and clicking fingers), Visual and Materials, Kinesic and Proxemic, and the Senses. The performance of Udje, which G.G. Darah describes as a “classic of dance and poetry against which is measured most of the dance and poetic forms that

have flourished among the Urhobo of Delta state” (504), clearly illustrates the reflective and critical quality of the concept. Although the entertainment of an immediate audience is the primary objective of the musical practice, the dramatic procedure in every performance, like G.G. Darah points out, is dictated by the factor of inter community rivalry which informs most of Urhobo song poetry practice. Udje provides, not only a means of relaxation, of relieving pent up emotions, but also an avenue for discouraging certain excesses in the society.

### **Theorizing Oral Performance**

Oral performance exists in the context of orality. Orality is a practice, an experience that is carried out and an event that is participatory. Several factors influenced the production of a circuit of communication by orality, especially its place in specific social contexts (Auslander, 2008). According to Gunner (2007):

[...] orality need to be seen in the African context as the means by which societies of varying complexity regulated themselves, organized their present and their pasts, made formal spaces for philosophical reflections, pronounced on power, questioned and in some cases contested power, and generally paid homage to “the word”, language, as the means by which humanity was made and constantly refashioned (67).

Therefore, theorizing oral performance is an attempt to:

... mirror and defines the ethnoaesthetic standards... [and] provides valuable parameters for the critical analysis of the features of the oral texts both in relation to their analysis of the features of the oral texts both in relation to their ethnohistorical significance and for the comparative understanding of some cross-cultural features of the genre to which they belong (Azuonye, 1994:137). Emphasis mine

Theorizing oral performance gives frame and focus to what is being observed. The theory serves as discerning, deciphering, and sense making tools (Auslander, 2008). Performance theory and practice gives understanding of “such oral traditions as personal, family, and folk narratives, and complex genres... which involves oral narratives, songs and synchronized persuasive movement” (Fine, 2003:46). Reconstructing the theory and practice of oral performance becomes necessary as a result of the various disciplines that influenced its early studies. It becomes more

necessary as “native African scholars began to undertake researches into the oral traditions of their own people” (Okpewho, 1992:12). This foregrounds the notion that performances are not “amorphous or open-ended, they have diachronic structure, a beginning, a sequence of overlapping but isolable phases and an end.” (Turner, 1987:11)

It is therefore pertinent to do a literary criticism of most texts, situating the subject matter of their discourse within the seven (7) constitutive elements of the stylistic model identified by Ngaro (1982):

1. Content and form in a literary text.
2. A text at the phonological level of language use.
3. A text at the lexical level of language.
4. A text at the grammatical (syntactic) level of language use.
5. A work of art in terms of the paralinguistic affective devices employed by the writer.
6. A text at the level of tenor of discourse, and,
7. A literary text at the graphological level of language use.

Literary criticism, according to Northrop Frye, has to do with “the structure of literature and the cultural phenomena that form the social environment of literature” (1971:25). Criticism is an act/art of passing value judgment on the aesthetic qualities and social relevance of the work in the contexts of culture, language and other extra-linguistic factors. Hence, African literature (Nigeria literature in this discourse) is 'art for life sake' as against the Western idea of 'art for art sake'. To this end, intrinsic theories like Formalism, New Criticism and Structuralism cannot capture the essence of African (Nigerian) oral literature.

### **Oral Performance in Contemporary Nigerian Society**

Exploiting the character of orality, Irele (2007) posits:

Many oral cultures have developed various strategies within the complex framework of their semiotic systems... In African context, one might mention the constant recourse to surrogates (drum language) and to other non-linguistic symbolic schemes, which... give spatial resonance to human speech as well as... extend the expressive potential of language (76).

When dealing with oral performance in a contemporary society. There is every possibility of the loss of certain aesthetic features like voice, body

language, as well as social interaction. The only thing we can do is to recreate a performance-centred text and discuss the features of the performance that cannot be captured by the print media.

Nevertheless, not all conversation will pass as oral literature, even when the medium of expression is oral. There are certain intrinsic elements expected of every oral literary text. To this end, John Stark (2011:44) postulates the following criteria for classification of a text as oral literature:

1. It has to be composed orally.
2. It has to be composed for the purpose of oral public presentation.
3. It has to be repeatable (at least in its essential elements).
4. It has to be performed publicly on multiple occasions.

These will guide against any erroneous consideration of 'just' any text as having the quality or qualifying as an oral literary text. This also informed our choice of texts in this study.

It is worthy of note that every ethnic group in Nigeria has rich oral literature. According to Eyoh

Each ethnic group in Nigeria has rich oralpoetry heritage comprising such forms as musical instruments, dance songs, names and naming systems, greetings and oratory, folk songs, work and occupational songs, praise songs, proverbs, symbols and symbolism, divination poetry andmyths. Strikingly, these forms enjoy ample similarities in function, subject matter, shapes, origin, the worldview they project, the values they emphasize, the vices they condemn, the philosophies they propagate, and the manners in which they are performed. These similarities strongly suggest common origin of the various ethnic groups in Nigeria and need to be apprehended and appropriated for national unity, national integration and national development (86).

An Urhobo performed poem 'the woes of independence' in Okpewho's *The Heritage of African Poetry* is relevant in this wise. With a dramatic flashback, the poem reflects on the state of the nation:

News came from Benin blacks would govern themselves...  
The first few years were very pleasant. No one ever thought  
regret would follow. After independence, price of palm produce  
would soar' said a slogan'

Should one defecate in the home for fear of tax?

The so-called liberation is now a curse...

Apart from placing performance strictly within a socio-cultural and political framework, the concept can be addressed from a purely technical perspective. In this sense performance can be seen as a body of artistic techniques used for a specific purpose. Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs (1990) seem to embrace the technical essence of the concept. According to them, performance involves the enactment of poetic function as well as the dramatisation of competence in communication. The presence and the artistic use of what Abu Abarry refers to as “the creative process” are central to performance. In other words, the success of a performer, among others, depends on his ability not only to study the environment, the immediate scene of action, but, and perhaps more especially, to use resources like music, dance, facial expression, voice modulation, body movement and direct speech. In this sense the performer is seen mainly as a creative person.

Even if a performer has a ready text before him, part of his creative responsibilities would be for him to alter the text either as a positive response to the demand of the audience or as a reaction to the context of operation. This flexible phenomenon in performance consolidates Albert Lord's famous statement that “an oral poem is not composed for but in performance”. Therefore, the performer who is able to use the appropriate resources at his disposal to carry along his audience can be said to have competently communicated. In other words to be a competent communicator,

Roger Abrahams (1977) has defined performance as that that has to do with “highlighted involvement in which separable items of the enactment are introduced as the means through which the special relationship between participants in the enactment is established, displayed, celebrated” Ime Ikiddeh's definition of performance as an active phenomenon which has to do with “the transfer of ideas from the inner mind to the outside”, (11) is relevant, not only because of its expressive quality but also because of its recognition of the important role that images play in performance. Images can simply be defined as felt actions evoked in the imagination of audience by means of verbal or non verbal element arranged and presented by the performer. This brings us closely back to the performer's stock of resources. An image to Ropo Sekoni is a “unit of anthropomorphic behaviour... performing of an act that is comprehensible within the framework of human experience.” (34).

J. P. Clark's *Ozidi Saga*, the fight story and epic drama provides a near

flawless illustration of not just the importance of audience and accompanist in performance, but of the essence of performance itself. In other words, Ozidi Saga illuminates convincingly the fact that it is at the scene of performance that a text is fully realised or, as Niyi Osundare puts it, “derives life blood”(12). It is true of course, that there are situations in which composition and performance may be seen initially as two distinct efforts, but when an oral piece is actually performed, like Okpewho strongly argues, there are frequently a few departures from what the performer may have borne in mind or perhaps committed to memory. Therefore, there is usually a connection between transmission and the very existence of an oral text. This is why the definition of oral literature makes its realisation as a literary product to be dependant on performance.

The performer, who begins very well his dramatic narration, receives an open commendation from his audience. For instance, the scene in which Oreame chants a spell on Ogueren and he is transfixed to the spot:

Ogueren remained there anchored  
(Laughter)  
His eyes rolled  
(Laughter)  
And rolled  
(p.124)

Laughter in this context symbolises commendation. With this, the narrator/performer is encouraged.

The above buttresses Nkem Okoh (2008) postulation on the importance of oral literature:

[...] oral literature has enormous didactic dimensions which can be channeled to the benefit of our society. In addition to being an art, oral literature constitutes a pleasurable mode of learning. In other words, there are other possibilities beyond this element of enjoyment (236).

Apart from giving the performer the necessary motivation, the audience can also lengthen or shorten a text. In the example below, the spectator advances the text by making the performer to expand the detail of the fight with Ofe:

Indeed if you saw Oreame she was like a young woman

Spectator: Quite transformed was she

Spectator: She had turned into a young girl

Her bosom hung between standing and falling (181)  
As the performer- narrator continues to drag on the tale, the tired audience forces him to quickly conclude or shorten the story:  
With the sound of each blow:  
Spectator 1: why not rest  
The blows...  
Spectator II: leave off where he hasn't killed  
(367)

The performer, having got the signal from the audience, hurries to conclude.

The audience can also move a step further to put “the line straight” either by correcting the performer right on the stage or by indirectly referring to the lapses in the performance. Some scholars have argued that the essence of performance is attributable to the evaluation and contributive quality of the audience. According to Solomon Iyasere (1980) “no story telling session (is) complete without a form of evaluation”. (20). Ozidi Saga obviously consolidates the fact that full actualisation of the poem takes place at the scene of performance. No wonder Ruth Finnegan (1970) says that:

Oral literature is by definition dependent upon the performer...  
There is no other way it can be realised as a literary product.

At this juncture, it is important to situate performance like Mowang Ganyi advises, within the context of occasion. Citing the example of a song about a particular girl who procured abortion, Ganyi is of the strong opinion that such song provides the performer-singer the opportunity to comment on the moral consequences of such action depending on the occasion. In such a case, Ganyi argues, the words of the song can never be the same in any two performances.

In other words, there is a profound sense in which one can say that the occasion monitors and conditions the form and content of that performance. For instance, in a burial ceremony or an elegiac poetry, the performer is expected to sorrowfully present his message. In a relatively low voice, he illuminates the essence of the loss to him. Although there may be some overlapping- the presence of the panegyric quality in an elegiac setting, the fact remains that a predominantly elegiac poem differs both in style and body from the praise song.



The performer of a panegyric poem is likely to entertain and accommodate elements like praise names, flashback to great historical moments, use of hyperbolic expressions and negation aimed at presenting positive message. S. A. Babalola's book, *The content and form of Yoruba Ijala* (1968) is one of the invaluable references to the discourse. At an aged person's burial, an Ijala poet, Samuel Abiona from Ogbomoso, figuratively describes not only the dignified manner in which the man died, but also the type of loss that his passing away means to the community:

The chameleon is dead; he has died a royal natural death  
The cat is dead; he has put an end to his mewling  
When the Gabon viper is dead, its young ones inherit his poison...  
Death doesn't let us bid our friends good bye...  
Death renders us controllable for our inferiors  
It mixes the pigeons with the domestic fowl (238).

In the praise poem, "salute to my Ogun", the Ijala poet-performer, apart from artistically talking about the character and the achievement, traces the lineage of the subject matter. With a characteristic high pitch; he says:

Now I will chant a salute to my Ogun  
O belligerent one, you are not cruel  
He who smartly accoutres himself and goes to the fight...  
Don't play with me. You were playing with a snake dog  
The male dog was beheaded...You are gentle, the Ejemu  
Foremost Chief of Iworan

Aside from the above, Ijala poetry can be employed as a tool for making social commentaries. According to Ajuwon (1981), the Yoruba Ijala oral poetry can be used to condemn the amassment of wealth but commend the attainment of personal merit in the service of the society. "This honour is attainable through the principles and practice of industry, humility, integrity and hero-ism which Ijala oral poetry teaches." (Eyoh, 84)

The areas that provide common source ethnic oral poetry in Nigeria are divination and myths. These two areas often foreground the notion common origin of the various ethnic groups. There are myths that with archetypal status common among various ethnic groups. For example, the myth of creation, even when they are different in content, they are similar in subject matter as they explain common enigma that cut across ethnic boundaries. Another good example is the 'myth of Abiku', which is common among the Igbo, Yoruba, Ijaw, Ibibio and other ethnic groups in Nigeria. Divination, according to Eyor (2011:89) "is known by various names in the various ethnic groups: *afa* in Igbo; *dubain* Hausa; *eba* in Nupe; *epha* in Urhobo, *ifa*

in Yoruba, *ihain Bini*; (*ikwo/iko/akam/uwa*) *Ibibio*, etc.”

An excerpt from the Yoruba Ifa Corpus of *Ogbè Ògúndá*, (line 6-11) reads:

*Ebiti èbákè ní n yèdí pèé*

*A diá fún Orísékú omo Ògún*

*A diá fún Orílémérè omo Ìja*

*A diá fún Afūwàpé tin somo bibí inú Òrúnmìlà*

*Nijó won ñ tòrun wáyé*

*Afūwàpé ní kan ní n be leyín tin sebo* It is a snare which strikes suddenly

*Ifá divination was performed for Orísékú the son of Ògún;*

*Ifá divination was also performed for Orílémérè the son of Ìja*

*Ifá divination was also performed for Afūwàpé the son of Òrúnmìlà*

*On the day they were coming from heaven to earth*

*Afūwàpé was the only one who stayed back offering sacrifice*

The Ifa Corpus above hinges on predestination of human being; that choices are being made by individual at creation. The full verse of this Ifa corpus dwells on the essence of live and the place of sacrifice. It has a narration attached to it about three friends with same beginning but one was outstanding above others. To this, Soyinka posits that:

Man exists in Africa in a comprehensive world of myth, history and mores; in such a total context, the African world, like any other world, is unique. It possesses, in common with other cultures, the virtues of complementarity; to ignore this simple route to a common humanity and pursue the alternative route of negation, is an attempt to perpetuate the external subjugation of the black continent (xii).

The short excerpt above is laden with a lot of psychodynamics of orality. Some obvious oral stylistic strategies employed in the verse above are piling/liking and repetition. The repetition is not only employed to enhance memory but also for rhythms. More also, all the names mentioned in this corpus has metaphoric undertones. According to Ruth Finegan (1970), “metaphorical names, elaborate greeting forms, serious conversation...and rhetoric (oratory) play an indispensable part in oral literature in Africa as they add figurative intensity to poetry” (470).

## **Conclusion**

It is not out of place to submit that within the context of the varied arguments

on oral performance, the possibilities of its theories and practices are still elastic. For instance, like some scholars have also articulated, the areas of convergence between the 'performed oral' and the 'textual written' are quite numerous. This implies that oral is not a substitute for written but a supplement, as they both work in tandem. The conventional paradigms must therefore, give way to evolving ones. And as we have attempted to argue in this paper, situating the contemporary Nigerian example, a lot of creativity and live interactions exist outside the text. And they are worth investigating. According to Eyoh (90):

...oral literature owes its life/existence to performance; outside performance there is no oral text to talk about. To pursue this argument may be tantamount to excluding human memory from the literary enterprise, written or oral. The truth is that while oral art comes alive in performance, it resides in the individual and collective memory of the artist and the audience and can be re-enacted as/when the need arises. That is why it is possible to write about oral texts.

Therefore, we should rethink performance along the three crisscrossing lines of activity and analysis identified by Conquergood (2002) – as a work of imagination, as a pragmatics of inquiry, and as a tactics of intervention.

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