

Symbols and Meaning in Tiv Oral Poetry: Amee Yôngo in Performance

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Abstract

Oral poetry is part of the great heritages of imaginative verbal creative songs of pre-literate societies, which have evolved and passed on from generation to generation. The oral poetry form is used for either the symbolic or realistic representation of human behaviour, thought and beliefs as experienced and shaped by the society and culture that produces it. The oral poetry form therefore constitutes authentic expression of the creative intelligence and world view of the traditional African societies as it provides an invaluable insight into the cultural life, beliefs, customs, values and aspirations of a people. It also represents the strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures and the general perceptions of life and living as viewed by a community. The intention of this paper is to look at the Tiv oral poetry with particular attention on symbols and their meanings as employed by the Tiv oral poet in performance. Therefore, two songs, taken from a tape-recorded live performance of a Tiv oral poet, Mr. Amee Yôngo, are transcribed, translated and analysed for this study.

Keywords: *Symbols, Meaning, Oral Poetry, Amee Yongo, Performance.*

Introduction

Symbols, as an aspect of semiotics, deal with signs. They (symbols) are supposed to arrive at the roots of meaning embedded in signs whether the

signs are verbal or no verbal. Therefore a symbol, like all signs, is seen to be something that suggests a presence or existence, fact, condition or quality, which is immediately evident and is used to convey meaning. Symbols are never universal, however, a white flag for instance, means peace in Nigeria, a yellow flag in other countries means betrayal; red means blood, danger, war. In China, red represent goodluck but in South Africa it is the colour of mourning (Online). Symbols communicate because they are agreed amongst people. All these things (symbols) are completely flexible and are created by man just as words are also symbols. For example, in Africa, specifically in Agatu society barrenness is a tragedy.

The major manifestation of signs in the symbolic mood occurs in language as verbal expression. According to Roland Barthes;

There would be no literature if words have only dictionary meaning. Words therefore assume different meanings in different contexts of use. The plurality of verbal structures is what we look for and at when we study symbols and their meanings (412-415).

Barthes (1970) also sees language as being synonymous with any structural organization. He sees forms of expressions as signs whose meanings depend on conventions or relations and systems rather than features, that is, language as social behaviour. This is what semiotics-and by extension symbols shares as linkages with language.

Also culture, in all its aspects, is a language, says Barthes. It is a language because it is a form of expression (in dance, music, dressing etc.) and culture consists of signs which are structured and organized like those of language itself. Oral poetry, as a cultural artifact, draws its symbols and images from the culture and or language that produces it.

Eagleton puts it that;

Therefore, the symbol as sign, is to be seen, not as a fixed unit, but as an active component of speech, modified and transformed in meaning by the variable social tones, valuations and connotations it condenses within itself in specific social conditions in or case, the society (117).

When we talk of meaning, on the other hand, we mean the sense that a word or

a group of words convey; the idea of utterance, that is, the intended message you want to convey. There could be diverse meaning to utterances yet, a word acquires its meaning by its acquisition to its neighbouring words in a pattern. Thus, words can have double meanings depending on the context in which they are used. Since words in any human language assume various levels of meaning depending on their usages, we try 'to assign, to each word and sentence, the meaning associated with it in that language. In the aspects of language or linguistics, one's cultural background comes into play coupled with the fact that speakers can become creative, in their use of language. This is also applicable when words assume symbolic statures and why in semantics, we have denotative, connotative, lexical, situational, structural and grammatical meanings. Thus, symbols are connotations and their meaning, a product of certain shared systems of signification in language.

These are some of the many features in and elements of language we should be mindful of, when we do a componential analysis of symbols and meaning in Tiv oral poetry. Semiotic theory is adopted in the article. Peirce's sign theory, or semiotic, is an account of signification, representation, reference and meaning. Although sign theories have a long history Peirce's accounts are distinctive and innovative for their breadth and complexity, and for capturing the significance of interpretation to signification.

Gunner asserts on the weight of oral poetry or art that:

Orality need to be seen in the African context as the means by which societies of varying complexity regulated themselves, organize 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).

The word “orature” has been a conceptual development from the contestation of “pure” orality and literacy, later described as the “great divide theory” (Finnegan, “Literacy” 112-4) and the African oral forms' extension as a field of folklore which has been as appendage of anthropology over a long period of time (Ahmed 186-98) Aliyu 51-6, Babajo 9-13, Zirimu and Bukenya, 88-105).

Oral story-telling and oratory generally is an art that is highly valued in the society. Tiv oral artists have great humour and the ability to instantaneously improvise songs and dances for any occasion (Keil, 1979: Ker, 2002).

Song One: Traveling Has Become Weary To Me

This poem begins with a short call thus:

Tiv Version

Mfaer me er ye shi me zua a
Wankwagh u hendankeimo ne ga

Zendekpangukpemyol (lines 1-3)

English Translation

I don't know what I will do
To also get something to rise
from this song

Traveling has become weary for me

From the starting point in the call, we can picture the condition and state of mind of the poet. His opening words symbolize and portray a person who is agitated. This agitation shows in the call which is short. A person who is agitated has no time for long speech. He speaks in fits and starts.

The opening lines of the response confirm our first impressions of the poet and his situation as he says:

Tiv Version

Mzamberiorakekeer me yisatarjekpa

Mngu a kyekyega.

Man kwagh u a me mkuremer
ayatsenge neya

English Translation

I have begged bicycles from people
like I would cover the world yet

I have no bicycle

And that which drinks oil as if it
has eaten its gullet.

(lines 4-7)

From the signification of the words in the above excerpt, we now know where the poet is coming from and who he is. Now also, we see him as someone who begs and is dependent on others. In the last line of the excerpt, the poet alludes to a motorcycle as that which drinks oil (fuel) as if it is gulletless, that is, without control. The poet continues that he knows where his help can come from:

Tiv Version

Or u nan a nam ye me de zanber
iorka Aondo

English Translation

The person who will give me so
that I will stop begging from
people is God.

Shin a luseketeri Aganyi Man Pado Awunha a lu nan mokpaa Saakangohol me zawegh ye.	Or will it be Secretary Aganyi And if Pado Awuna is to give me It is only take that I will bring out my hand.
--	--

(lines 8-11)

The poet knows that the only giver who will give him enough to stop him from begging people is God but since God is an abstract concept, he thinks it should be his benefactors Secretary Aganyi and Padopas Awuna who are physically present. The poet adds that it is only when he is given that he receives, he cannot bring out his hand unless he hears, he continues:

Tiv Version

Judge Anundukaermkengersha
iorgashinii
Wan Mishi Gyôior I gem tsughunmo

English Translation

Judge Anundu is it because I do
not look at people
Daughter of Mishi Gyo that people
have began lying to me

(lines 12-14)

The poet symbolically and astutely refers to his blindness as not looking at people. Now we know that he is also blind and can understand why he says he is a beggar. Now we understand why he says he receives only when he hears: take. A blind man doesn't see therefore he can't be looking at people and their faces to see their countenances and know how they feel about him. Maybe, this is why they are lying to him now.

The poet affirms this:

Tiv Version

Ka ma gbayuan or shaimo ne

Nan yângorker a moga

English Translation

When I call someone through this
song

Ermo m sônsenegh bee Azongo yum

He does not bother to look my way

(lines 16-18)

That I have begged like Azôngo

The second line of the above excerpt has several levels of signification. It could mean the person does not turn to where he is calling or he cares less and is indifferent to his call because he begs too much. Then, the last line of the excerpt explains everything to us. Here in this line, the poet makes a symbolic but significant comparison between himself and Imbor Azôngo, a myth

whose begging is legendary in Tiv land. This explains why no one cares or bothers about him any longer. To this people his begging has become habitual and can be ignored. But the poet makes a comparison between himself and the Hausa beggars.

Tiv Version

Nengeasepirashembake Hausa
Ka he igbudugbem u zamber

Kpamba a memnan ye ga
Mo m zamberke Tivyabee iorerka
aperaya
(lines 19-23)

English Translation

Look at the blind in Hausa land
It is on the road that they have continued to
beg
Yet people have not stopped giving them
I who beg in Tiv is seen by people
as pretence

This is significant and implies that he, like the Hausa blind, should continue to get assistance from people and people should not tire of helping him. He says his helplessness is real and is not pretence as other people think and believe. He therefore implores his benefactor:

Tiv Version

Chur, chur, mzamber
Sabastine Jugu a nōngo a mo

(lines 24-25)

English Translation

With clapped hands
I beg Sabastine Jugu to assist
me

'Churchur' as used by the poet, presents the picture of one who is begging with one open hand beating against the other. It is a sign of complete helplessness and resignation before his benefactor for assistance. The poet continues:

Tiv Version

Ainge yamfa ne iv lev lev
Nongonen a mokpa
Tukwa u pulughhembe u nahang

(lines 28-30)

English Translation

Now I know you are filled to the brim
Assist me but the flour that flies off
Is never more than the one prepared as
food

'lev lev lev' in line one of the above excerpt signifies that the benefactor is now full to the brim with wealth which is why the poet says the benefactor should assist him. The poet says the little that is given him will be

insignificant compared to what they have. The benefactor should take the one given the poet as the flour that flies off which takes nothing away from the one that is cooked for food. The poet laments the health condition of one of his benefactors thus:

Tiv Version

Mvaa Hange Abiem Zugukeimo ne

Abiem Zugu Kunde Vambe ma a lu
gbongbon

Dyna, mato u mbaamoovvelu Dyna, the motor vehicle that singers drive and
move about in

Hendannimbir ne kpa ma m hendakeng
shaciu wan Ligomkpa yen shimaze

(lines 31 —36).

English Translation

I lament for Hange Abiem Zugu in this
song.

Were Abiem Zugu Kunde Vambe in
good health.

Dyna, the motor vehicle that singers drive and
move about in

I should have also driven

Because daughter of Ligom is also one
whose heart is not lacking.

In these last lines of the poem, the poet implies that were this benefactor in good health, he would have bought a Dyna bus for the poet because his benefactor's wife is also a woman with strong determination. In essence, the poet is saying that, if one could really have what one wanted, life would be easy.

Song Two: I Have Dug A Well That Never Dries

In this second poem also, the poet begins with a short call:

Tiv Version

OrtindiAdemkumakeimo neJor yam

lev lev

MdughkajorayandeI om zee.

(lines 1-4)

English Translation

OrtindiAdem is fit in this song my ngi
well is very full

I have dug a well in the soft canesit
never goes dry.

Unlike his agitation in the call of the first poem, this call signifies the poet's excitement to announce to the world the wonderful thing that has happened to him. The words in this call signify that this benefactor is a man of affluence (a well that is filled up). Therefore, the poet sings of a man of affluence (he has dug a well) who never tires of giving him (that never dries up). He affirms this in the opening lines of the response:

Tiv Version

Iorzua a mi mbakesen a mokpa

Ka ma za shin mi mivtyegh

M kesetyôkpenga

Me eraiega

(lines 5-8)

English Translation

People have gathered and are fetching with me

But when I get there I fill my pot

I have not fetched half pot

I will not tell lies.

The above excerpt signifies that although others are also enjoying his benefactor's benevolence (fetching the well with him), he gets his fair share (fills his pot) anytime he goes to the well to the benefactor. This is a fact he cannot lie about.

The poet therefore calls another benefactor to know them:

Tiv Version

Tar nguwa or, or we yolnaga

Se mbanAôndonamigagbo

Mpeven a pevagabem

(lines 10-12)

English Translation

It is the world that makes one, one does not make himself

To some of us God has given me a walking stick

I have always felt my way with the stick

In the above excerpt the poet implies it is God that has made him blind. It is God that has given him a walking stick which he always feels his way with. He also acknowledges the fact that it is God that made him blind and he did not make himself blind:

Tiv Version

Wan AjioAwuna ma ne masemirinmo
zamber

Mbagevnpaa ma ye lumunzwawam

(lines 18-20)

English Translation

Daughter of AjioAwun if you
had also soaked my begging

Others too would have agreed with my
mouth

The soaking of his begging symbolizes the staging and celebration of his poetry. This is when others too will agree with what he sings (his mouth). The poet continues:

Tiv Version

English Translation

Iori tar ne cii sookakyaviimenger All the people of this land desire the sign
of the lamp
Ka we a ôron a or Iormbagev When you are only saying other
u lumun
kpeerga people do not agree totally
(lines 21-22)

The sign of the lamp in the above excerpt means people need enlightenment and clear vision without which people find it difficult to agree with what he says. Further on the poet says:

Tiv Version	English Translation
Mo mterorkpehenshorirno je kpa	I have called a diviner in my song
Gandeyobongiwanmo	Yet bad luck is killing me
Ami fashor de doo	Ami knows how to divine well
Kpatesekombola ermsorga	But did not reveal the fetish violated for me to set right.

(lines 23-26)

The poet in the above excerpt, expects that since he calls a diviner in his song, the diviner should have divined and revealed the fetish (kombo) he has violated that brings him bad luck for him to set right. Otherwise, the poet continues:

Tiv Version	English Translation
Or ngu a tônduzwa a mo	When someone promises me
Nan erenhwala galerenAbuul	He never does as he says, IerenAbuul
Ieren me memzende a kuwam	Ieren, I shall stop travelling with my death.

(lines 29-31)

To the poet, his bad luck symbolizes his death. It is this death that makes people dishonour the promises they make to him. He says it is better therefore, to stop travelling with his death (bad luck). He asserts:

Tiv Version	English Translation
Wan Ivokwagh, mama wan Ivokwagh	Daughter of Ivokwagh, mother daughter of Ivokwagh.
Mzamberchankyerkpatôngom won	I have begged of poverty to the

extent that my gullet now
protrudes.

(lines 32-33)

This means that the poet's continuous shouting as he sings, has made his gullet protrude. The poet concludes thus:

Tiv Version

Iormbamo .mterenkpa
Vezasaamkorshakererikorom

English Translation

The people that I call in my song
Have loosened the rope off my neck
so that it can catch me.

(lines 34-3)

The poet concludes that even those he calls in his song, his benefactors who are supposed to be his helpers have abandoned (loosened) him and for poverty to quit (to catch).

The oral methods of composition and performance are the kernel of oral literature discourse. The forgoing analysis demonstrates symbols and meaning in Tiv oral poetry as captured in AmmeYońg in performance.

Conclusion

The paper discussed symbols and meaning as employed by a Tiv Oral Poet. It is interesting to note that these symbols, and their message carrying signs, are also to be found in the idioms, figures of speech, proverbs, tales and wise sayings which have their meanings, purposes and significance in every given context of their usage. However, the paper acknowledged the difficulty of bringing oral pieces on paper and commenting on them. This is because in every translation, the original of what is actually said is lost, as one cannot translate effectively from one's language to another; from one culture to another. What is achieved, is at best, a representation of approximates of the original. Okpewho affirms this when he says:

I must confess that, as I turn into English (a language which I understand very well), I have allowed myself a few liberties in representing what I consider to be the appeal of the text (114).

We would agree with Okpewho that liberties are taken in translation, in

deciding between a number of alternatives and what phrases would do most justice to the poetic circumstances.

Translation, as a linguistic activity, involves a careful study and attention. The paper has therefore tried as much as possible, in the transcription and translation, to capture and represent all stylistic, verbal idioms, foibles and even clumsiness of the original fabric and its aesthetic aura. The discourse however regrets his inability to pass across, special effects like the rise and fall of the poet's voice and other paralinguistic expressions, which have an unusual way of deepening the effect of the poetry on the audience.

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APPENDIX 1: TIV VERSIONS

IMO I HII: ZENDE KPA NGU KPEM VOL.

Mnder:	Mfaer me er ye Shi me zua a wan kwagh u hendankeimo ne ga Zendekpangukpemyol	
Miumun:	Mzamberiorakekeermoyisatarjekpa Mnguakyekyega - - - -	5
	Man kwagh u a me mkuren Er a yatsenge ne ya Or u nan a nam ye me de zamberiorkaAôndo Shin a luseketeriAganyi	
	Man PadoAwuna a lu nan mokpaa Saakangohol me zawegh ye JoojiAnundukaer m kengershaiorgashinii Wan MishiGyo	10
	ior u gem tsughummo Shin m faimoidughunga Ka ma gbayuan or shaimo ne Nan yôngorker a moga	15
	Ermo m son senegh bee Azongo yum .Nenge a se pirashembake Hausa Ka he igbudugbem u zamber	20
	Kpamba a memnan ye ga Mo m zamberkeTivya Bee iorerkaaperaya Chur, chur	
	M zamberSabastinZugu a nOngo a mo Imo terWanyar u Gur cha igba KpayerIriorGanjorga	25
	Aiengeya m fa ne iv lev lev NOngonen a mokpa Tukwa u pulughhembe u nahanga	30
	MvaaHangeAbiemZugukeimo ne AbiemZuguKundeVambe Ma alugbongbon Dyna, mato u mbaamoovveluhendannimbir	
	Ne kpa ma m hendakeng Shaciu wan Ligomkpa yen shima zee.	35

IMO ISHA U HAR: MDUGH KA JÔR AYANDE

Mnder:	OrtindiAdemkumakeimo ne Jôr yam ngi le v le v M dughkajOrayande I om zee	
Miumun:	Iorzua a mi mbakesen a mokpa Ka ma za shin mi m ivtyegh Mkesetyokpenga Me eraiega Ya wan Manger Akumengom Tar nguwa or, or we yoinaga Se mbanAondonamigagbo Mpeven a pevagabem Foga u Igbazendanengen a mo je karenga Er a luzegeorkpa we yoler wen kehega F {eyanapakamanyOr Shima a lumvihin Kpashighe la m saankengkeng Wan Ajio Awuna Ma ne masenmirinmozamber Mbagenev kpa a ma velumunzwawam ior tar ne cii sookakyav l imenger Kawe a ôron a Or iormba gen u lumunkpeerga Mo mter orkpehenshorimojekpa Gandeyolbongiwuanmo Amifashordedoo Kpatesekombo la ermsOrga Wan Anger KeraOr a oryawou we Anetsegbawer a nengeshamotsembelee Or ngu a tondo zwa a mo Nan eren he zwa la galeren Abuul lerenmomemzende a kuwam Wan Ivokwagh mama wan Ivokwagh Mzamberchankyerkpatôngom won iormbamo m terenkpaveza Saamkorshakyer Erikôrom	5 10 15 20 25 30 35

SONG TWO: I HAVE DUG A WELL THAT NEVER DRIES.

Call: Ortindi Adem is fit in this song
my well is very full
I have dug a well in the soft canes
It never goes dry.

Response: People have gathered and are fetching with me
But when I get there, I fill my pot
I have not fetched half pot
I will not tell lies
So daughter of Manger Akume, my mother
It is the world that makes one, one does not make himself
To some of us God has given me a walking stick
I have always felt my way with the stick
Foga Igbazenda has never seen me and passed by
Even as he is a big man, he is never proud of his worth
Also when I arrive at his home and I am upset
But that time I rejoice at all costs.
Daughter of Ajio Awuna
If you had also soaked my begging
Others too would have agreed with my mouth
All the people of this land desire the sign of the lamp
When you are only saying other people do not agree totally
I have called a diviner in my song
Yet bad luck is killing me
Ami knows how to divine well
But did not reveal the fetish violated for me to set right
Daughter of Anger Kera tell your husband
Anetsegba to take very good care of me
When someone promises me
He never does as he says, Ieren Abuul
Ieren, I shall stop travelling with my death
Daughter of Ivokwagh, mother daughter of Ivokwagh
I have begged of poverty to the extent that my gullet now
protrudes
The people that I call in my song
Have loosened the rope of my neck
So that it can catch me.