



Variations in the application of the components of the oral performance to Yoruba chants

Gboyega Kolawole

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It is common knowledge in oral literature that every oral form is naturally performed. The components of the oral performance are, namely, the text, the oral artist, the audience, music, and histrionics. Though these components apply to the performance of all oral forms, whether narrative or poetic, they are employed in diverse manners in consonance with the nature of the oral form being actualized. This is called the context of performance. The aim of this article is to do an inquiry into the contextual varying of the use of the components of the oral performance among oral traditional forms with emphasis on Yoruba oral traditional chants. My objectives are to verify how the nature of each chant dictates the degree to which the components can be applied to it in context. In other words, the prominence or unimportance of any component of the oral performance in each poetic form is determined by the rules surrounding the actualization of the subgenre. This survey is delimited to the Yoruba oral poetic forms classified as chants. The first is the context-restricted group that limits the use of the components of the oral performance by its own rules, thus making any deviation a taboo. The second group comprises forms that were originally context-bound but have begun to acquire secular features thus deemphasizing their invocatory worth and metamorphosing into entertainment subgenres. The third is the class of poetic forms that were originally secular. They have not only remained so, but have also absorbed the many influences of modernity. The data for analysis constitutes 13 oral forms which have been transcribed and translated from Yoruba to English. (Yoruba is one of the indigenous languages or mother tongues of Nigeria.) The oral performance theory which enumerates the variables listed above and functionalism which reveals the essence of the contextual applications of those components are handy for the theoretical framework and grounding of this article. Further, the oral-formulaic theory will be applied to chants in the first group above because their potency is tied to their formulaic structure. **Keywords:** oral performance, artist, text, audience, music, histrionics, Yoruba modern oral chants.


Introduction

In this article I investigate the variations in the adaptation of the ingredients of the oral performance to Yoruba oral traditional chants. The components of the oral performance are the text, the oral artist, the audience, music, and histrionics. Though they apply to the performance of all the poetic forms, they are not used to the same degree; their application is informed by the individuality or background of the oral traditional poem. In other words, varying standards and procedures surround the performance of each chant. 'Yoruba' refers to the group, culture, and language of more than 44 million people predominantly living in the southwest of Nigeria and other parts of Nigeria and on the fringes of Benin, Togo, Ghana, and Ivory Coast.

In this study, upon its findings on the variations, I posit that there are three categories of poetic forms in the context of the oral performance. The first is the context-restricted group that limits the use of the components of the oral performance, by its own rules, thus making any deviation a taboo, sometimes with consequences. These forms are *Ìyèrè ifa* (Ifa divination chant), *Èsù pípè* (Esu invocatory chant), *ofò* (incantation), *irèmòjé* (hunters' funeral dirge), and *òkú pípè* (funeral dirge). The second group consists of forms that were originally context-bound but have begun to acquire secular features, thus deemphasizing their invocatory worth and metamorphosing into entertainment subgenres. They include *Sàngó pípè* (Sango invocatory chant), *Oya pípè* (Oya invocatory chant), *ìjálá*

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(hunters' chant), and *èsà egúngún* masquerade (ancestral) chant. The third is the collection of poetic forms that were originally secular in the sense that they have no leaning with any divinity, they have remained so, and have also absorbed the many influences of today's vicissitude. These are *oríkí orílẹ̀* (lineage praise chant), *ràrà* (praise chant), *ekún iyàwó* (nuptial chant), and *etiyerí* (satirical chant). This work is delimited to the 13 oral forms that belong to the chant mode.

The fieldwork that produced the current qualitative data used in this analysis was done in conformity to principles of collectanea—a pre-fieldwork activity of sourcing for competent artists; the actual fieldwork activity of recording the performances on audio devices; and the post-fieldwork activity of transcribing, translating, and analysing the data or performances. The data used in this discourse are part of the mass used for my doctorate which was awarded in 1990. Vansina's principle of the verbal testimony of the chain of transmission was adopted throughout the fieldwork activities. This was applied to both individual and group informants or performers. The technique of analysis is content analysis.

Any oral text is so described because its life is founded on its performance. Considering the quantum of oral performances recorded so far, in contrast to the diverse repertoire of myths, legends, folktales, proverbs, riddles, invocatory chants and songs, panegyrics, funeral dirges, lullabies, and topical songs, there is no gainsaying that the oral performance as the soul of the oral text has been underutilized for a long time. But the situation has changed recently as scholars have begun to make the conscious effort to address the prominence of the oral performance by taking folklore out of its relegation. When African folklore received any attention at all, it was from scholars who were more interested in the taxonomy and the functions of its diverse repertoire; little or no attention was given to the actualization of the oral text by ethnologists like Edward Tylor and James Frazer, who carried out the pioneer exploration of Africa culture, and also anthropologists like Claude Levi-Strauss. Many theories were propounded for the purposes of doing meaningful research in the new area. The historical-geographical, the historical-reconstructional, the functional, and the psychological aptly took care of the forms and purposes of the subgenres of African oral literature but the germane role of performance was ignored. However, Milnum Parry, Albert B. Lord, and David Bynum realized the lacuna and propounded the oral-formulaic theory. W. E. Abraham, Dan Ben-Amos, and Alan Dundes, among others, brought to the limelight the often-taken-for-granted importance of the oral performance. Isidore Okpewho's contribution is special here. He has consciously and consistently geared his efforts towards finding a strong foothold for the oral-formulaic theory, using his vast field experience. His efforts are complemented by the fieldwork of other experienced scholars such as Eldris B. Makward, Chukwu Azuonye, Enoch S. T. Mvula, Ropo Sekoni, and Liz Gunner. On her part, Ruth Finnegan laments the fronting of "generalized theory" (40) by anthropologists above fieldwork and the analysis of the data collected.

The oral performance theory readily applies to this analysis because its components are in focus and are to be applied to the 13 oral forms employed in this article. The oral-formulaic theory is a natural theory to use because most of the context-restricted oral forms are frozen in content for the sake of potency or to deter proliferation of content. The functionalist theory is an inevitable tool for analysis as it posits that folklore has four functions which collectively hold society together and ensure its survival. The adherence to the rules that guide the performance of oral forms strengthen society just as the violations of the taboos and totems threaten it. This applies most prominently to the context-restricted group of chants which are invocatory in purpose and design and must be followed to the letter to experience its potency. On the other hand, deterrence naturally erupts when a taboo is broken; for example, the invocation to *Èsù pípè* is not chanted when the sun is at its peak as death may strike even the surrogate of the same godhead chanting it. The chants in the group have outright medicinal value and they are used for spiritual healing. This sustains the functionalist approach.

The performer or the oral artist

The marked difference between the oral and the literate poet is the medium of delivery. While the latter leaves the words to be decoded by the reading public, the former realizes the words through concrete actions, thus bringing the message directly to a watching and listening public, the well-informed audience. Okpewho duly acknowledges Malinowski's seminal insight and in re-wording it, he reaffirms that "Performance is the lifeblood of the oral art, and a proper understanding of that art must take due account of the context [...] of its creation" (*A portrait of the artist as a scholar: an inaugural lecture delivered at the Faculty of Education Lecture Theatre, University of Ibadan, Thursday, 18 May, 1989* 24). This is to be replicated, for emphasis, in a subsequent discourse where he illustrates

the pre-eminence of performance (“The Primacy of Performance in Oral Discourse”). In an equally apt manner, Malinowski opines that “the text [...] is extremely important, but without the context it remains lifeless” (24).

The importance of the style of delivery is confirmed in Finnegan’s aphoristic statement that “[t]he bare words cannot be left to speak for themselves” (15). This assertion is corroborated by Tedlock’s view of the impossibility of translating style even when words have been converted from one linguistic medium to another (40). Finnegan and Tedlock’s views and the related opinions of other folklorists negate Levi-Strauss’s structuralist view or Fischer’s psychoanalytic view which lays undue emphases on content at the expense of its verbalization. It becomes imperative, in Okpewho’s words, to consider “the text of performance in the circumstances from which it is derived” (*The Oral Performance in Africa* 17).

Many scholars have argued that the essence of folklore is its verbalization. Dundes hardly hesitates therefore to denounce those literary critics who elevate the text and relegate its context (22). It is also in sharp reaction to this that Wilgus provocatively and ironically entitles his article “The Text is the Thing”; he defines the text from the point of view of the indispensable nature of context which itself determines the texture of the text (240). Ong’s fundamental question “What is the text, oral or written?” (*Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* 10) corroborates Wilgus’s definition of the oral text. It is in consideration of the variables just mentioned that Wilgus pleads with deviant folklorists to address the issue of performance. A lonely person of the oral performance is such that every performance of a particular piece produces a new text. This applies even to near frozen poetic forms like *Ìyèrè Ifá/Ese Ifá* among the Yoruba. Even when the same *odù* (*Ifá* chapter) emerges twice, the client is not the same, even when there is an apparent similarity of purpose. Even though *ofò* or incantation is expected to be rendered with precision, the tone and tempo may vary. Further, the performance of the same text by ten performers will be equal to ten actualizations of one text because the nuances of extra-linguistic gestures will vary. The reason is that each performer is likely to have a peculiar emotional interface with the content. Variation in the performance of the same text does not necessarily lie in word content but in certain unconscious factors of performance by the artist. This is attested to in Abdulkadir’s description of oral poetry as “open-ended” because “at different performances, the singer may add new elements” (24). A discussion of the factors of performance and how they are varied to match the circumstances of the oral poetic type is necessary at this point.

The nature and mode of the oral performance have been the concern of various scholars, including Okpewho, who has devoted two classic books—*Myth in Africa* and *The Epic in Africa*—to the elements or resources of the oral performance. Despite their differences in the use of terminology, Innes, Okpewho, and Azuonye agree that the oral performance is either spoken, sung, or recited; Azuonye further emphasizes the four principles of “functionality”, “authenticity”, “clarity”, and “creative variation” in any oral performance (42). The performer, the narrative images tapped from the related culture, and the audience are major elements in the oral performance. Other elements are the artist’s “objectifying of the action” (42), his emphasizing of the message by repetition, and his use of bodily gestures to complement the verbal codes to express other aesthetic elements.

The oral performer is not the Western-oriented actor who is on stage to render his memorized lines after which he takes his exit, nor is the place of performance the proscenium structure in which a curtain is drawn between actor and audience, and lighting parameters are calculated to achieve ambient lighting using a luminaire (Oni 22). The performer is that traditional and historical artist who performs certain ceremonial rituals as a priest, surrogate, or whoever is involved in a spiritual enactment as a devotee. The traditional performer is also the poet who uses as his repertoire the vast material of the culture in which he is performing and to which he belongs. He can be construed as an “alternative to traditional historiography”, to borrow the words of Johnson (51). He is bound by certain conventions dictated by both the poetic sub-genre he performs and by the cultural milieu in which he is performing. A lonely person in a secluded place at the height of the night recounting a piece of *ofò* (incantation) for a benevolent or malevolent purpose is a performer of the verbal art, even when the text is essentially secretive like the following:

Onirèkú-n-kú kii fidi bale
 Ki àyè o mo gbà á
 Agbon lomo agbonin
 Awònin lomo Olóta
 Ìlèbè lomo Olóku
 Olápémi láá pè
 Alájàlá láá pébò
 Olówò maje kí òwò ó kú
 N là á peeyan
 Ifá bá n wèyàn ma jéeyan okú
 Kí wón ba n kó gbogbo ire ayé tēmi (Owolabi I)

Onireku-n-ku's chest never touches the ground
 Without the ground accepting it
 The wasp is the child of Agbonin
 Awonin is the child of Olota
 Ilebe is the child of Olokun
 Olapemi is what we call always
 Any sacrifice is shared according to Alajala
 The spirit of trading forbids the death of trading
 That is the name we call man
 Ifa let people multiply, forbid their death
 Let them give to me all my life.

The performer of the lines above is seeking blessings and protection using magic as a catalyst, while also praying for fellow humans to partake of the supernatural benevolence. There is an element of syllogism in the approach; because the benevolence is given to others (premise) he cannot be denied it (conclusion) The text is expectedly secretive because incantation is believed to be a selfish tool. The woman with a wailing child strapped to her back for which she sings lullabies to lure it to sleep so that she can minimize the distraction from her chores is no less a performer. In *èsà egúngún*, the Jénjù masquerade of the Alipini clan of the Oyo Kingdom with his group of cane bearers and the ensemble of drummers that trail him is the obligatory performer. The artist can be the *adósù* or surrogate in *Sàngo pípè* and *Oya pípè*, the lead mourner in *irèmòjé*, or the solo chanter in *òkú pípè*. Bascom adds that the time and place of performance determine the nature of the performance (334). It is probably to corroborate these ideas that Okpewho in his study of *The Ozidi Saga* attempts “to marry aesthetic and sociological insights” (*Oral Performance* 14) because “Literature and Sociology must fuse” (8). In view of these peculiar demands of the oral performance, it becomes odd to define oral poetry without due consideration of “the fervid atmosphere of the open performance” (*Epic in Africa* 52). Nor is it proper to analyse oral texts in isolation from the context of actualization.

The text

One peculiarity of the oral text is its complex, changing nature during performance, which separates it from the literary text, a fixed text. This raises the question of authorship of the text. An outstanding feature of any oral performance is the fluidity and malleability of the text. The volume of his text and its power to give the audience a high degree of upliftment is the mark of the eminence of the oral artist. The oral artist often has a pre-performance text which he rehearses at home and then the real performance text which is the product of a heavily altered version of the former. The determining factor here is the nature of the audience he encounters. His pre-performance text is easily sub-merged by his performance text, which is usually the result of the spontaneity of his reaction to the diverse histrionics of the audience before him. This is besides the high voice quality and the mellifluous voice, which he should possess: “A charming voice”, Sekoni contends, greatly effects “aesthetic harmony” (141).

Ngal raises a number of questions: “Who is the Creator? The people? The artist? Or both at the same time?” (335). The importance of the question is better realized in the elasticity or malleability of the oral text in various ways such as “thematic addition, subtractions or rearrangement”, to allude to Tedlock’s terms (285). The non-

fixity of the oral text is itself determined by the authorial empathy which makes the artist side with the hero and denounce the villain in oral narratives. Bowra therefore comments on such a poet who can “indulge emotions and sentiments and add greatly to the richness and variety of this poetry” (32). Obafemi’s findings on the Okura expatiate for us the probability of a single but lengthy performance involving ritual, masque dramaturgy, and dance for entertainment (6).

The non-fixity of the text is also the result of the dual role of the poet as both the performer of the text and the critic of some distinguished members of the audience. The experience shown below confirms Basgoz’s assertion. As he puts it, the performer “discloses his opinion, ideas and values. He praises and condemns persons, institution, human relationship of the past and present like a social commentator” (7). These complementary remarks are so described as internal digression because they are not in the pre-performance text which the author has rehearsed; they are the results of his encounter with the audience. Among the Yoruba chant repertoire, the text of *ijálá* (hunters’ chant), which has metamorphosed into a near secular text over time; *ràrà*; *oríki bòròkíní* (praise chant); *ekún iyàwó* (nuptial chant); and *etíyerí* (satirical chant)—which are essentially secular—are good matches for the malleable, elastic kind of text. In contrast, religious oral poetic forms such as *Ìyèrè ifá*, *Èsù pípè*, and *ofò*—which are known as frozen forms—will not allow this editing because it will tell on the potency of the performance.

The case of Owolabi Aremu, an Oyo *ijálá* artist reported by Olatunji, is quite interesting as a watershed. The artist who was paid to entertain the visiting governor of the state impulsively did a turnabout to express his bitterness over the negligent posture of his government (Olatunji 194). This was an unusual situation of the artist’s preference of satisfying the taste of the audience to the distaste of the patron. The sponsor of the performance was unsuccessful in dictating the tune, so he readily stopped the piper’s own ‘deviant’ tune; the elderly *ijálá* artist was immediately harassed out of the hall.

The maltreatment of the performer as experienced by Owolabi Aremu would have been a taboo in a different context of performance where sacred texts are enacted on behalf of the community. The Yoruba *gèlédé* poet, either of the Ketu area or of Oyo North, is essentially a satirical poet and his text is basically dominated by vituperations, lampoons, and even curses directed towards evildoers, whether highly placed or of low origin. He is believed to have been endowed with psychic powers and therefore cannot be harmed or hounded by any controlling character who feels hurt. *Gèlédé* is a more ritualistic brand of *èsà egúngún*. Every *gèlédé* performance is a ritual process for socio-religious cleansing, in which case the text is non-elastic. As for *èsà egúngún*, the texts of masquerades that are performed for cleansing purposes, they remain reverent as in *Olóòlù* and *Jenyò* in the Oyo area and *agemo* in the Ijebu area. But the texts of the *cégún aláré* are fluid and audience-influenced because they are an entertainment group as indicated by their title.

The assertion of the sacred text in a performance is confirmed by Okpewho’s fieldwork on Aniocha storytellers in the defunct Bendel State where a raconteur claimed to have been spiritually bestowed his *opanda* (box-harp) and a Sunjata narrator traced his *Kora* (guitar) to a spiritual origin (*Oral Performance* 7). Even among the Hausa, the Bori surrogate is believed to be under spiritual guidance when he metamorphoses into a trance just as the Yoruba Sango surrogate’s hypnotic state is considered spiritual. Subsequent pronouncements made by artists in this state of trance are deemed to be prophetic and authoritative. Their texts in general are fixed and reverent. Texts of this character are reverberations of the oral-formulaic theory; they are structured and designed to achieve a target upon their rendition. An example chant is incantation which relies on collocation and repetition for its potency. Vansina classifies texts of this type as belonging to the “esoteric traditions” (34). So far it has been established that the artist has at best two texts, the first being the pre-performance text, which he rehearses prior to the performance, and the second being the audience-prompted text, which is the consequence of the audience-artist encounter and reactions.

But the idea of elasticity of the text does not cut across all 13 Yoruba oral poetic forms within the current delimitation. This yardstick can only be applied at varying degrees. Gizelis identifies three major types of creation: “re-creation”, “limited creation”, and “real creation” (167). In my fieldwork, diverse encounters match the descriptions of Gizelis on the higher side; we can easily distinguish among these three-ritual performance, secular performance, and other performances that fall between the first two.

In the rituals of community or personal worship, the performer must not add or subtract, for it is either forbidden or it renders void the prevalent purpose of worship. ‘Amankulor describes this situation as that of “limited creation”. He reveals the spiritual repercussions of a superfluous deletion or addition of the text by the artist from the main concern in the Ekpe masquerade ritual performance among the Igbo (122). Ritual poets

cannot and must not create their own texts because of the peculiarity of purpose. There are replications in the Yoruba setting for illustration here. There are the *orò* purification rites, the *Èsù* invocatory performance, and the annual *Egungun* propitiatory rites as performed by the *Olòòlù* and *Jenyò* of the Oyo area, the *agemo* of the Ijebu area, the *gèlèdè* ensemble of Oke Ogun, and the Ketu of Benin Republic. For the illustration of texts that are forbidden to be edited by the performer, *Èsù* invocatory chant is handy:

Akinkèhindé baba sùré wá o
Ki o wa gborò lódò omo
Otékoyodé, ológbòrò kùmò
Kudu lópòópó, bó o de bo de bó o
Bá enu odi ni í gbé roko
Èsù ti o lohun ni tà lágbo,
Baba ò lohun tà lágbo, ewó ebo ni n wá
Bo ba si kòrò ebo, yo di kùuúkù ruru
Kente orun, èpè ji ni kùtùkùtù daşo eèèmò bolè (Esubunmi I)

Akinkeinde, father hasten
 And collect money from your child
 Otekayode possessor of the big cudgel
 The short one on the street
 Who farms at the outskirts of the town
 Esu who has no single purpose among the crowd besides collecting sacrifices
 When he has collected the money for sacrifice, he makes ready his fist
 The trouble of heaven who awakes to foment trouble.

In the above chant type, the performer should not add to or delete from the text, it is performed in a low tone, it must not be recited past noon time or when the sun is at its upper culmination and it is accompanied by the sacrifice of a domestic fowl. That is the process when the purpose is that of seeking the benevolence of the divinity. In converse, the process can be initiated for a malevolent purpose by reversing it or by violating the procedure. This is done when the surrogate is invoking the spirit of *Èsù* to cast a spell on a perceived enemy. The chant is now performed in a high tone, at past noon and palm kernel oil (not a fowl this time), which is a totem to the divinity, is offered as sacrifice. Deliberately committing these taboos is for the purpose of invoking the wrath of the divinity against the victim. The performer must take to her heels after the act, or she could be the first casualty of the wrath of *Èsù*. The duality of purpose in the liturgy, of using it for good or bad purpose is a validation of the Yoruba belief that *Èsù* is an ambivalent divinity that does good and bad.

Liz Gunner has revealed of the Zulu *izibongo* that forms in this category tend to be oral-formulaic in content and performance (47). Because these forms do not accommodate any deviation in style, forbid any digression, and restrain any textual addition or subtraction, they can be described as context-restricted or frozen. The creation of the text of performance is of great importance here. When the texts of religious performances are concerned, ownership and control can only be ascribed to the cult of origin or the community in general and, as such, additions or subtraction, or even re-arrangement, are not allowed to preserve the potency of the supplication and to ensure divine intervention. These are echoes of the theory of functionalism as these chant types are designed to keep society intact through the intervention of the supernatural and to sustain the moral code through reward and deterrence. Gronemeyer reveals the precursor of the modern-day proscenium theatre as the liturgical process that featured the passion enactments of ancient Egypt in the worship of the god Osiris or Nimrod. This is only an amplification of the general view that modern imaginative theatre started with a living theatre that centred on invocations for divine intervention (42).

As for primarily religious oral forms which gradually take on the features of the secular such as the Yoruba *Sàngó pipè*, *Oya pipè*, and *ijálá*, the artist usually starts with the religious text and later delves into the relevant secular matter such as lineage praise chants to the satisfaction of the audience. This metamorphosis of the text from the ritualistic to the secular, or the enactment of a context-restricted form in a context-free manner, has been described by Bynum as “Optative performance” (12). For illustration, *ijálá* is a chant that is primarily dedicated to *Ògún* the Yoruba god of iron, it is performed only by hunters. But it has since acquired some secular content and in contemporary experience, the repertoire has become an entertainment sub form less than a poetic form

composed for the liturgy of the god. The only part of the repertoire that still echoes the origin of purpose is the regalia of the hunter which is compulsively donned by the performers. Even the opening part of the text which procedurally should be the homage to the god of iron is no more considered an obligatory element in the chants of successful but chiefly commercial artists like Ogudare Foyanmu whose music pervades the length and breadth of Yorubaland. The lines below demonstrate a subject matter that is essentially secular, patriarchal and sexist; they have no nexus even with Ogun or his lifestyle:

Táa bá kógún aya jo nínú ilé
 Tipá tipá la ó fi ri méta won.
 Tí wón n tójú oko gẹgẹ bó se ye
 Won n se sánmori oko
 Níbi tó ye de góńgó gégé boó se tó
 Wón moko ó tójú
 Wón mò bo se ye kó dára fóko
 Awon iyàwó ti Lákáayé
 O selégbè léyìn won nun-un. (Ogunmodede)

If you have a harem of twenty women
 Hardly do you find three out of them good enough
 Who would take good care of the husband
 Whose mannerisms give the husband joy
 Who behave according to expectation
 They take good care of the husband
 They prepare good meals for the husband
 Those wives whom Ogun *Lákáayé*
 Will prop up tremendously.

The artist is either making a social commentary in support of polygamy generally or he is using his performance to settle a score with some women in his harem who are not indulging him as he expects. But Ogun the god of iron whose benevolence is being invoked in favour of wives that are caring, was not known to be a polygamist like Sango the god of thunder. Nor did Ogun make any tenet that encouraged polygamy. The harem is intended to make wives compete for the husband's attention by pampering him with food and sex at the whims and fancies of the husband, or according to his dictates.

The performance of *The Ozidi Saga* in Ibadan in 1963, a rather long distance from its original context of performance, is yet another instance (Okpewho, *Oral Performance* 6). In Gizelis' classification, the above will be regarded as a re-creation. However, secular oral forms leave the artist to determine his own text and he usually has a relatively skeletal material or text at the initial stage of performance; the bulk of his subsequent text is determined by the kind of audience he faces and the extent to which he is inspired by the same audience, and more so his ingenuity. This third category of creativity is "real creation". For illustration, *ràrà*, *oríki bòròkiní*, *etíyerí*, and *ekún iyàwó* are good matches for this category.

An outstanding feature of any oral performance is the fluidity and malleability of the text. The volume of his text and its power to give the audience a high degree of upliftment is the measurement of the eminence of the oral artist. His pre-performance text is easily sub-merged by his performance text, which is usually the result of the spontaneity of his reaction to the nature of the audience before him.

In view of the notion of textual interpolation, which is a sustaining element in oral performance, it is necessary to make a few remarks on the idea of digression, which constitutes the bulk of the supplementary text. The notion of digression is peculiar to all oral performances. In any given context, deviation from the subject matter of the moment will be considered as digression. Although 'digression' is a negative term in most contexts, it is a positive and obligatory element in oral performance. In fact, it is a common saying among folklore scholars that any fieldwork on oral performance short of digression is fake. This is because an oral performance is a live performance and the mark of it are the inevitable 'intrusions' and the consequent elasticity of the text. The poet's own realization of an unwarranted deviation from an oddity in the text and his prompt move to check this could constitute digression. In his analysis of the *Kambili Epic*, Okpewho cites the example of music which, when overutilized, constitutes digression (*Epic in Africa* 61), and examples abound in Yoruba oral performance

where the audience constitutes the chorus. When the artist senses that the excesses may cause him to stray, he conventionally cuts in to say, “*E máà jé ó ju méjì méjì lo*” (Do not let it exceed two in number). This is in reference to the chorusing of the refrain.

One can also distinguish between internal and external digression (*Epic in Africa* 185–8). Internal digression is that situation in which the chorus or the co-performer gives input. A ready example in the Yoruba context is found in the practice of *ijálá* by Ogundare Foyanmu whose *ajánánsí* performs the role of the random commentator. In *dadakúàdà*, a Yoruba song form domiciled among the Yoruba of Ilorin, the *bòtó* does casual ejaculations to affirm the lead performer’s proclamations. This is done with great rhetorical strength as shown in Ajadi’s study of the *ijálá* chant, “*Iba Olodumare*”. External digression can be considered as the artist’s reaction to the various forms of happenings, mostly among the audience, which are directly or indirectly related to the context of performance. An intrusion from someone not in the audience may also be a source of digression. An example of this is an *èsà egúngún* performance recorded by me, in which there was an instance of this. The noisy manner in which an erring marriageable girl snatches an object from a toddler makes the latter to cry out. In anger, the female artist quickly admonishes the aggressor by singing an abusive piece on her physical defect of a near-breast-less chest.

The audience

The audience is next in importance to the artist. The traditional African poet is neither the solitude-loving poet like the contemporary modern one nor is his poetry the frozen type accessible to only a limited literate audience. The audience of the poet is a live one, which gives an instant critique of the poet’s performance. The audience is a product of “living oral traditions” which Tedlock describes as “participatory” (515). If the oral performer is the kingpin of the verbal art, then he revolves only around the audience. In Olatunji’s assertion, the audience is the “raison d’etre” (180), for without an audience, the oral performance ceases to bear its title. It takes two entities to enact the oral delivery: the oral poet and the live audience. Okpewho’s experience in *The Ozidi Saga* has shown that the influence of the audience could be felt in a “participatory of critical capacity” (“Primacy of Performance” 160). In a stronger sense, he views the sage as a true test for the audience-artist relationship. Okpewho entitles this section on the audience “Approbation and Encouragement”. That the audience is an inevitable force in the performance is seen in their ability to slow down or quicken the pace of the performance. Okpewho’s study of *The Ozidi Saga* has revealed that some factors are responsible for the reaction of the audience. For instance, an audience treated to a good song will urge the artist to play an encore while it choruses. In contrast, they may urge the artist to hasten if a particular aspect of the performance bores them or if the artist introduces an unwarranted suspense. For illustration, let us consider the case of Azemaru’s die-hardness or magical invulnerability in *The Ozidi Saga* which tenses up the audience that is curious to witness Ozidi’s triumph over this antagonist. So, they urge the artist to quicken the pace of performance. However, this same audience wants a prolonged session of the butchery of this foe by Ozidi.

In some contexts, the artist is like a puppet on the strings of the audience because the latter is a product of a culture and is well versed in its customs and traditions. The oral poet simply obeys the dictates of the culture, for if he deviates unnecessarily, even when the content sounds offensive, his verbal art is considered out of place, and he is at the mercy of the audience. The performance of the Onikoyi praise poetry illustrates this. A performer of *oríkí orílè* is considered a custodian of the history of the lineage whose praise poetry he is chanting. The performance of the *Èsò Ìkòyí oríkí* often elicits emotional purgation in the descendants of the lineage who are present. They are respected, professional warriors though the honour ascribed to their feats is rooted paradoxically in disgrace because they are also warmongers who would initiate aggressions for the sake of the spoils of war. Expressed in another way, the Olukoyi (Onikoyi) lineage as soldiers of fortune were equally great looters of the property of their captives. They had the uncontrollable urge to steal such that when there was no war, they would start one. That is the reason their *oríkí* or lineage praise reflects these two contrasting sides. The picture thus created is that their valour is enmeshed in stealing, “their honour rooted in dishonour” to borrow Alfred Lord Tennyson’s words in *Idylls of the King*. This oxymoronic nature of the *Èsò Ìkòyí* is revealed below:

Eni tí kò mòkan mòkàn
 A ní Oníkòyí rẹ̀ẹ̀ kólé
 A ní Oníkòyí rẹ̀ẹ̀ jalè
 Íkòyí ò jalè rí
 Íkòyí ò kólé
 Bì wón ba rógun
 Tí ègbón ba mérú
 Àbúrò a sì mérù (Duroriike)

The one who is less informed
 He will say that Onikoyi have gone to burgle
 He will say that Onikoyi have gone to steal
 Ikoyi have never stolen before
 Ikoyi have never burgled
 When they encounter any war
 As the elder brother gathers slaves
 The younger brother also gathers their belongings.

The choice of words in the chant is informed by a deliberate attempt to play on the graphology of words using tonal contrast that is characteristic of the Yoruba language. For instance, *mérú* (take slaves) and *mérù* (loot property) look alike in orthography but they are semantically in contrast; they are differentiated by the high tone (ú) and the low tone (ù). There is also parallelism in “*Tí ègbón ba mérú*” (As the elder brother gathers slaves) and “*Àbúrò a sì mérù*” (The younger brother also gathers their belongings.) The beauty of this linguistic device is in the rhythm it creates in its performance as a chant mode. The artist’s rendering of the lines above is not taken as offensive because those unpleasant lines are part of the repertoire and he must not deviate from the established corpus.

A great degree of originality is required of the artist because there is nothing new in a performance whose text is already familiar to the audience; his ability to make fresh the old wine skin of the oral tradition in a new wine skin of the oral performance makes the difference before an audience that is both the respondent and the judge. This is usually achieved using rhetorical devices that enable the creative genius to blossom.

The size of the audience is also determined by the kind of performance. By virtue of functionality, some performances require a limited audience. The performance of *ofò* restricts the audience. In fact, it does not require an audience if the performance of it strictly requires some secrecy, and most incantations are performed in privacy. The content of the following lines demonstrates this idea very clearly:

Ìbà o o o èyin iyá mi àjé
 Ológinni òru
 Afínjì eye tí nfòkà
 Eye nlá ti n fegungun se’yín
 Ajèdò èyàn mǎ bi (Owolabi VII)

I salute you: mothers called witches
 Cats in the heart of the night
 The scrupulously neat birds that fly about
 Big birds that have bones for teeth
 You who feed on human liver without any feeling of nausea.

The performance requires a zero direct audience because it must be clandestine; if this were performed in the open the performer would probably be demonised, declared a witch, or lynched because it is only for a diabolical purpose that any being will invoke the spirit of witches. The real audience is the victim of the performance as he is being hexed through the intervention of the witches. The lines are can as well be recited by an *Ifá* priest who must chant the eulogy of witches before expressing his plea for intervention into the plight of his client. For some type of incantations, for example the Yoruba *gbètugbètu* (a charm that throws the victim into a trance hence forcing the will of the performer on the victim), only the immediate audience or the desired audience is the victim. Another instance of a limited audience is in the performance involving *Ifá* (verse for divination purpose) in which the client of the *Ifá*, who by virtue of the context is passive, constitutes the only audience. The priest of *Ese Ifá* (*Ifá* divination

chant) chanting a chapter of the corpus to a troubled individual who has come to solve his problems is a performer before a limited audience. If he chants the same corpus of *Ifá* in a responsorial style with a complementing chorus before a whole community at an annual festival, there is a change in context which has necessitated a change in the size of the audience. *Èsù pípè* forbids the presence of a large audience because in most cases it is the surrogate of Esu the Devil invoking the spirit of the god to hex some targeted person(s). *Sàngó pípè*, *Oya pípè*, *èsà egúngún*, and *ijálá* are religious poetic performances associated with an unlimited audience personified by entire communities. *Ìrèmòjé* falls in between the limited and the unlimited audience types; its audience is limited to only the guild of hunters who are witnessing the funeral rites of a fellow deceased hunter. It is forbidden for non-initiates to eavesdrop on, overhear, or spy on any part of the rites. This funeral process as a rite of passage has been analysed by Ajuwon (16–31) stage-by-stage using representative examples.

Music

“Music is the griot’s soul”, says Okpewho of the Madingo griot (*Epic in Africa* 59). The oral performance may turn stale without music (Darah 24). Music is a refuge for a straying poet—it is a face-saving device for his faulty performance. Also, music has a therapeutic effect; Ogun, the Yoruba god of iron and custodian of the sacred oath who is also the subject of *ijálá* was said to have been cured of his skin disease after listening to an *ijálá* (Babalola 4). In addition, Euba (471) has clearly asserted that poetry and music are inseparable and considers music from the perspective of its mode of delivery. There is vocal music and instrumental music and Okpewho has on his part given it a functional consideration for it is employed for thematic reiteration or as interlude (“Primacy of Performance” 170). Music is the crux of any oral performance. It is as indispensable to the oral performance as rhythm is essential to written poetry. Music is an obligatory element in some performances, especially in invocatory chants, because such performances are consummated by the performer’s falling into a trance, which would have been impossible without the commensurate music. In a context of this kind, music is the springboard that lifts the artist to the spiritual realm.

The mode of performance of any piece of music is of great importance and it deserves a comment here. The mode could either be solo, responsorial, or antiphonal. In most cases, songs are performed solo when there is only a single performer without accompaniment. In this context, the audience complements the artist’s effect by playing the role of the chorus—but only if the song falls within its familiar repertoire such as the Yoruba *iwèrènde* (traditional songs). Some poetic forms do not allow the use of chorus or instruments; *Èsù pípè* and *ofò* forbid this while *òkú pípè* is performed solo by the professional mourner. In his study of the role of the chorus (*amshi*) in the Hausa context, King (118) asserts that the presence of the chorus gives the desired melody. Among the Yoruba, *ekún iyàwó* requires an obligatory chorus that comprises the bride’s age group which accompanies her in the roving performance. The chorusing of the bride’s tune enlivens her spirit amid the burden of sobs she must cope with.

Another mode of musical performance involves the use of accompaniment which refers to the use of musical instruments, especially drums. In totality, African musical instruments have been categorized into membranophones such as the drums, aerophones such as flutes, chordophones such as harps, and idiophones such as gourd rattles (Ndege and Nicholls 3–13). Some instruments of origin accompany several oral sub-genres which enable the audience to identify the kind of performance even without any knowledge of the verbal content. This is to say that drums are generic and have cultic origins. For instance, the *ijálá* ensemble includes drums regarded as those of hunters such as *àgádá*, *àgèrè*, *akítínpá*, the hunter’s flute *ogo* and the *dùndùn* drum. Any performance of this set echoes the activity of guild of hunters, immediately, even from a remote point. However, the situation is open-ended because many oral forms have borrowed from other sub-genres in the Yoruba context.

Drums are the dominant forms of musical instruments. Most drums are either single-headed or double-headed membranophones. They vary in size and acoustic effect. Drums are usually generic sets and are primarily traceable to cult worship. For illustration, the *àgèrè* set is dedicated to *Ifá* and Ogun worship and are beaten in sessions of *Ìyèrè Ifa* and *ijálá*. Royal sets are associated with stools and are restricted to such contexts—an example being the *Òwò* set which resides only in the palace of *Òlòwò* in Ondo State. Drums in this group are context-bound, they are designed to achieve mystical goals, and are not used outside such goals because of the taboos attached to them. The attribute of fixity of use demonstrates their oral-formulaic nature and the religious and social goals they achieve for the community are in tandem with the functionalist theory.

Among the Yoruba, the most prominent musical instrument is the talking drum, *dùndùn*. The *dùndùn* and *bàtá* sets are the most used in traditional events because they are not context-bound and are secular instruments

(Laoye 17). In general sense, drums are means of economizing thought or words; they are place holders for verbal expressions. The talking drum is particularly noted for its ambiguity of expression, a quality that could be engineered by the drummer when he sets out to confuse an addressee who is seen as an object of ridicule. What the drummer simply does is to beat a familiar formulaic tune of praise for the contrasting purpose of aspersion.

Ong describes the African talking drum as “an abstract signaling code [...] a way of producing, in a specially styled form, the sounds of words of a given spoken language” (“African Talking Drums and Oral Poetics” 411). However, the language of the drum is not for the novice and Ong expresses it succinctly: “The drum language is not understood ipso facto [...] when one knows the spoken language it reproduces. Drum language has to be specifically learned even when the drums speak one’s own mother tongue (411). Ong’s observation points to the acoustic semiotics involved in the interpretation of the language or the generic identification and their cultic origins. The talking nature of the drum is determined by the extent of mastery of the drum by the drummer. No drummer was comparable to Ayanyemi in their ability to make the drum talk among the Yoruba (Fatokun 24). Ayanyemi Atokowagbowonle is by indigenous public consensus the most skilled master drummer in Yorubaland, Nigeria. In another vein Babawale (109) describes the *bàtá* set of drums as “stammering” drums because they can pass messages, but they do have the nimbleness found in the *dùndùn* set.

Histrionics

Extra linguistic gestures are also surrogates of verbal expression. The performer employs them as a device of mime. In some cases, they could be a placeholder for verbal deficit on the part of the performer. Okpewho cites the case of Erivini, the lead performer in *The Ozidi Saga* who did “not have the gift of words” but was a “fine performer” (*Blood on the Tides: The Ozidi Saga and Oral Narratology* 115). Eyewinks, different facial expressions, and manipulations of the body express the mood and the emotion of the characters. In Scheub’s words: “The body movements of the performer reveal the basic repeated patterns of complex narrations and in so doing lead the members of the audience to aesthetic experience of the message” (348).

Okpewho’s study of *The Mwindo Epic* and *The Ozidi Saga* has revealed a great deal of the effect of histrionics or the unspoken but understood message. The first manifestation of an *ekún iyáwó* performance is the bride-performer’s shedding of tears and the sustenance of a jocund mood. These extra-linguistic gestures are natural; the young girl is metamorphosing from puberty to full adulthood and motherhood but in an unknown environment, in the name of marriage. This is a situation that makes her future tricky by a fifty-fifty chance. This temper pervades the totality of the performance of the nuptial chant on the eve of her marriage. *Èsù pipè* is actualized with precision and in a frenzy devoid of distraction because any disruption will incur the wrath of Satan (*Èsù*) who in his blind rage can make his own invocator the victim. During an annual festival the *Sango* surrogate advances into a trance like the Hausa *bori*. As soon as he loses the power of speech, he acquires the psychic power to probe the unknown. The process gives birth to prophetic messages of varying moods of joy, sadness, surprise, fulfilment, and resignation, reflecting his encounter with the spirit of *Sango* directed to community and its leadership and its influencers. The case of metamorphosis into trance matches the principle of the oral-formulaic theory that activities involved are fixed and must be observed with precision and focus, without which those activities amount to nothing. In *èsá egúngún*, the ancestral masquerade performance, one marked feature is the elevation of body manipulation and the relegation of the voice. As the sharp tones of *bàtá* drums take over, a figure in a mask and robe must use his neck, chest, waist, buttocks, arms, and legs in a masterly display which now determines the success of his art.¹ Any such person performing a masquerade is expected to be an acrobatic dancer. The manifestation of the performance of *ofò* is the total concentration of the performer on the subject. He must not only look desperate in activating the potency of the text (or in avoiding the repercussion of a breach of the process), and the repetition of words in symbolic numbers of three, seven, nine, etc. are matched by an eager face. Though repetition may be used for the beauty of rhythm in some contexts, in the performance of incantation, repetition is for the purpose of potency assurance, without which there will be no verifiable outcome. For illustration the following lines will suffice:

Ogóró ogóró ogóró
 Ògúnsan Ògúnsan Ògúnsan
 Òjodá omo afidádálúú
 Ìjà té jo já nijósí
 Tí Olú Ifè fí gbóri lówó ò re
 Omo Olú Ifè nàá lo wá taà yí
 Óní tóo bá ta òun tóo bá ro òun
 Òun o pàghín fún oríi rẹ
 Má à ta máà ró o (Owolabi VIII)

Ogoro ogoro ogoro
 Ogunsan Ogunsan Ogunsan
 Ojoda son of he-who-uses-his curving tail to cause pandemonium in town
 The battle both of you fought the other day
 In which Olufe defeated you
 It is the child of the same Olufe you have stung
 He promises that if you do not pain or hurt him
 He will sacrifice a snail to your head
 Don't pain him, don't ache him.

The efficacy of this incantation was verified by this writer by a mere chance while on a second field trip to Owolabi Aremu, an Ifa priest and the head of Ifa priests and medicine men in Oyo State of Nigeria. This author was with him when a person stung by a scorpion was brought in nervously, and upon sacrificing a snail to complement the incantation rendered, the young girl was relieved and discharged. While the example just given is that of repetition for potency of charm, repetition may be for the reason of celestial connection for the purpose of getting revelation, let us consider the example below:

Eríwo yà,
 Eríwo yà,
 Eríwo yà,
 Àyà gbó àyà tó
 Omo eríwo osinki
 Òrúnmilà Eléríí ipín
 Ikú rí bí àtéwo
 Òrun ajepo má pòn ón
 A tóri eni ti o sunwòn ʒe
 Odúú tii du orí elémèrè 10
 Kóri elémèrè má fò
 Atóbájayé má jáyà lolo (Famoriyo II)

Eríwo yà
 Eríwo yà
 Eríwo yà
 Aya gbo Aya to
 Offspring of Eriwo Osinki
 Òrúnmilà, the sole witness of predestination
 Iku is like the palm
 He who feeds on palm-oil without turning red
 Rectifier of the ill-fated *ori* [destiny]
 So that the *Emere's ori* is not destroyed
 He who provides a good company in life.

The lines constitute the panegyric of Òrúnmilà, the Yoruba god of divination who is the author of the corpus of Ifa divination. Ifa is also a synonym for Òrúnmilà. The piece of poetry is the beginning of an inquiry process of seeking revelation concerning a troubled client who has approached the Ifa diviner for healing. The lines have no variations because it is forbidden for the *babaláwo* to vary it by adding to or deleting from any part of the corpus.

If he does no vision may be revealed. Prior to the performance of these lines, the client must have been asked to bring out any money earned by him to which speaks silently, divulging the challenges that have brought him to the enclave of the babaláwo or diviner. After rendering the short verse, the diviner is expected to get a revelation that links him to one of the sixteen major chapters of Ifá corpus. He then chants the story of the persona whose name is eponymous to the chapter. The client is asked if the story told matches the purpose for which he has come, and in most cases the answer is the affirmative. The solution is usually by analogy; the divine prescription given to the ancient persona is extended to the present client. In most cases sacrifice is offered. The phrase “*Eriwo yà*” has been retained in the translation because they have no English equivalents and because of the tinge of mysticism in the words. By inference the phrase is a like a code used in opening the doors of the abode of Olódùmarè the Supreme God to the diviner. In *Òfún Meéjii* (the 16th chapter) of Ifá corpus, Òrúnmilà clearly states that “Olódùmarè is the be-all and end-all of human existence” (Kolawole 92).

This experience fulfils the principle of the oral-formulaic theory that the content of the oral form can be frozen or fixed, and it also justifies the principle of functionalism that folklore plays a role in the lives of persons and the community. In Christian worship, for example, certain extra-linguistic gestures have universal symbolic meanings. Ojoade (124) reports on Eto Baba’s vast use of unspoken gestures that are clearly understood. For illustration, a performer’s making of the sign of the cross on the forehead or chest symbolizes the holy trinity; it also means that he is a Christian and not a Jew. My fieldwork inquiry into the 13 Yoruba poetic forms has enabled us to know the vastness of extra-linguistic movements of body features as complements or as placeholders for verbal messages.

Conclusion

This analysis has accounted for the obligatory nature of the components of the oral performance, namely the oral performer, the oral text, the audience, music, and histrionics. They are obligatory in every oral form on one hand, but imperatively varied in their degree of occurrence or application to the diverse poetic forms on the other. This is informed by the peculiarity of each oral poetic form. All 13 sub-types enumerated can easily be categorized as context-restricted (frozen) because they are religious or diffused (having the quality of a categorical variable) because they are losing their religious steam and turning secular or context-free because they are not religious in origin. The significance of a study on oral performance is in our realization of the fact that it is important to appreciate the verbal parameters discussed so far because they are resources that give the art its life. The performer must be conscious of the participatory but critical audience, which applauds his creative genius but condemns his inability to meet the expectations of the audience. Digressions are the result of spontaneous observations of the oral text by the artist or reaction by the audience, which force the artist to add, to subtract from, or re-arrange his text. Music is ancillary to a successful performance for it enlivens both audience and performer and ensures continuity of performance. Added to this are the stylistic resources that the artist employs, tapped from the vast mine of socio-cultural and linguistic elements for rhetorical effects.

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Notes

1. There is also a remote human who manages the performance of the masquerade who is called *Mariwo*. He is hardly seen as he is confined to the grove from which the masquerade proceeds and to which he recedes.

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