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Orality, performance and creativity: A descriptive perspective of the Izon Obobo bi necromancy

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African traditional literature is fraught with songs, dances, riddles, jokes, proverbs as well as chants, incantations, invocation, rituals and musical performances. Some of these features are found in earlier poet, Christopher Okigbo's *Labyrinths* and comparatively recent poet, Christian Otobotekere's *A Sailor's Son: in the wake of dance and games*. Oral poetry in Izon tradition is diverse but one that is often neglected in scholarly discourse is the elegiac poetry of the 'Obobo bi' or necromancy which involves songs, dances, rituals, recitations, incantations and performances. The study will focus on the orality, performative style and creativity in the spoken word as a sub-genre of African poetry. This paper therefore seeks to investigate the poetry of *Obobo bi* with the aim of projecting into scholarly attention and reveal the alienation, liminality and the hidden literary aesthetics of the *obobo bi* tradition. The study hinges on the post-colonialism theory. Data for the study were collected from live performances in the Kolokuma communities of Bayelsa State as well as from the researchers' introspection. This study is relevant for scholarship and society because the tradition which is fast fading due to influence of Christianity is now being projected to the consciousness of the world as a form of oral literature.

Key words: Orality, incantations, necromancy, creativity, liminality, alienation.

INTRODUCTION

The unique orality and creativity involved in the performance of the spoken word defines the African culture. Finnegan (1970) argues that although oral literature is not as popular as the written literature 'it seems to convey on the one hand the idea of mystery, on the other that of crude and artistically underdeveloped formulations (1).' In a similar manner, Gunner (2007) posits that: '[...] orality, manifested as types of formed speech communication, in some circumstances coexisting with music in the form of song, or with instruments and dance generated in an almost

unimaginable range of genres that enable and empowered social, political and spiritual existence (67). Before the advent of the written form, African traditional culture was in the oral medium, which means that the African continent is largely dominated with orality. Ngugi (2005) argues that 'the written word imitates the spoken'. (1133). In the words of Akporobaro (2012), 'A [...] fundamental feature of oral literature creation is orality [...] (4)'. It echoes the fact that African oral performance raises the profile of poetry and triggers, as well as excites the audience in a special way. In other words, Africa

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is an oral continent, within the global cosmos environment. Therefore, earlier writers like Christopher Okigbo use orality in, what Udoeyop refers to as 'expressing their worldview, the mythology of their consciousness' such as, closeness to nature, prophesying of the socio-political situation of Africa and the portrayal of ancestral worship.

Similarly, Christian Otobotekere, a Poet-King, who is a traditional ruler and a poet accentuates the intricate nexus binding man and nature in poetry that is laden with orality and the realization of nature, man and spirituality. In the same vein, Ojaide (2016) explains that:

African poets who incorporate African Oral traditions into their works have an African cultural identity....their poetry absorb performance techniques, especially of repetition, humor, sarcasm, irony and often the poems are dramatically moving (430).

The orature or orality of traditional African literary form has managed to endure to modern era because orality represents the consciousness of the people and a reflection of their religion, myths and legends (Udoeyop, 1973, 4). This present work takes a descriptive perspective of the '*Obobo bi*' or necromancy poetic performance which is accompanied with incarnations, invocations, chants, dances and songs which are the quintessential qualities of oral poetry.

Statement of problem

Obobo bi is one of the several oral performances that define African oral literature. It is a performance that derives from the deep religious beliefs of the Izo people which establishes a relationship between the world of the living and the world of the dead. This customary performance is fast fading as a result of the influence of Christianity in African societies. This unique African orality and performance as part of the diverse Izo elegiac poetry has been largely neglected in scholarly discourse. The need to preserve this custom as a literary artifact via a conscious renaissance of the '*Obobo bi*' or necromancy therefore is the motivation behind this present study.

Objective of study

The objective of the study is to critically describe and analyze the elegiac qualities of the chants, incantations, invocations and songs involved in the *Obobo bi* ritual performance. The study will also identify and highlight the literary and poetic features of the '*Obobo bi*'. The study will focus on the orality, performance and creativity of the oral poetry. A general aim of the study is to characterize the universality of orature across cultures in Africa.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research is hinged on the literary theory of postcolonialism and the philosophical liminality theory. These theories are suitable for the study because they capture the essence and the reality of the *obobo bi* as a literary and trado-religious performance. The study on the *obobo bi* dramatic poetry is an attempt to revive and project the custom, howbeit as a literary artifact back into consciousness of the world after having suffered denigration and suppression by the invasion of the alien Christian religion. Of course, postcolonial literature is the literature by people from colonized or previously colonized countries. Therefore, the theory discusses the negative consequences of colonial and revolts against cultural imperialism especially the debasement and suppression of indigenous cultures and religious beliefs. Therefore, the Postcolonialist approach to the study of African oral poetry is adopted in this paper since, according to Loomba (2005), it espouses the relationship between the African heritage and the challenges of colonial control (1105).

The *obobo bi* custom which is the subject of study as a literary performance demonstrates an existential relationship amongst three worlds – the world of the living, the world of the dead and the world of the unborn. This performance is a spiritual inquest into the consciousness of the spirit of a dead person in order to find out if he/she was a witch before death. Therefore, we also relied on the liminality concept originated by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner which describes cultural experience "of being betwixt and between (44). Woods (1999) also explains that liminality is "a third space or in-between space which emerges from a blend of two diverse cultures or traditions" (45). The middle passage is the spiritual realm between the dead and the living. The theory shows the temporospatial connection between humans and the spiritual realm. The liminal theory is useful for the study because of the deep African traditional belief on the existential and communicative relationship between the world of the living and that of the dead. The *obobo bi* provides a medium for the manifestation of this relationship.

METHODOLOGY

The *Obobo bi* is a performance narrative laden with dialogue and poetry. It shows the tripartite relationship that binds the world of the living, the world of the dead and the world of the unborn. In the course of the fieldwork of the research, data were collected in Igbedi and Olobiri communities in the Kolokuma/Opokuma Local Government Area of Bayelsa State to watch live performances. The applied method of observation of the performances of the ritual of *obobo bi* is usually led by a traditional religious worshipper accompanied with a number of *obobo* (instrument) bearers and a small group of singers. The researchers also relied on personal reflections, introspection of childhood experiences of live performances. Lastly, interviews were conducted with elderly members of the communities to extract the significance of the ritual.

These methods are appropriate for the study since the researcher came into close visual contact with the activity being investigated. The interviews also afforded the researchers access to the deep philosophy behind this ancient tradition.

Concept of *Obobo Bi*

African oral literature is deeply-rooted and closely associated with the belief of the supernatural forces. The *obobo bi* tradition is an age-old one among the Izõn people of the Niger Delta. It is an act of necromancy in which a soothsayer establishes a line of communication between the dead and the living. This *Obobo bi* is specifically directed at the dead who is/are requested to confess, through the *obobo* (ladder) to the living if or not he/she was a witch or wizard while he/she was alive on earth. The confession also included the atrocities or wicked deed the person had committed before his/her death. This is a kind of judgment for 'sinners' in Izõn tradition and culture because a confessed witch or wizard was (and is still) buried in the evil forest.

Somehow, the practice of polygamy has also contributed to the dominant themes in the African oral literature, which include envy/jealousy from the co-wives, and witchcraft. Akporobaro (2012) explains that 'in much of the legends, ballads, and tales of the rural African world there is always an overwhelming consciousness of cruelty, jealousy, witchcraft and hatred as the characteristics traits of man everywhere' (426). But most prominent amongst these themes is the practice of witchcraft, which denotes the use of supernatural powers to influence others. Ngugi (2005) explains that:

There is a gradual accumulation of values which in time become almost self-evident truths governing their conception of what is right and wrong, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, courageous and cowardly, generous and mean in their internal and external relation. Over a time this becomes a history. Culture embodies those moral, ethical and aesthetic values, the set of spiritual eyeglasses, through which they come to view themselves and their place in the universe [...] Culture therefore is a product of the history which it in turn reflects (1134).

These explain the reasons for the African belief system that witches' powers are evil and are capable of killing, maiming and even outright destruction of people in a more secretive manner. Therefore, while alive, some persons who are accused and discovered to practice wizardry are exposed and relevant punishment meted to the persons. But some people are so reticent that in the real life they pretend to be very good and are exposed at death. To some extent, this seems to be a global phenomenon in the study of oral literature but time and space hinders further discussion on this. But the point is that oral genres provide the means of formalizing and reviving new experiences, an explicit example is the elegiac poetry of *Obobo bi* of the Izõn tradition of the Niger Delta. Finnegan (1970) (describe elegiac poetry as the songs, chants and recitations, which are performed at funeral and burial ceremonies (146). She further states that elegiac poetry is not accorded its properly recognized in Africa (151).

The nexus between the world of the living and the dead

The Izõn *Obobo bi* as an act of necromancy is a kind of oral literature involving the dead, which relates to the raising and reanimation of the spirit of the dead. It is an elegiac poetry with an exclusive orality, which demands a special performance bravura and originality in the verbal expression of songs, dances, chants and recitations. In the words of Finnegan (1970):

The significance of performance in oral literature goes beyond a mere matter of definition: for the nature of the performance itself

can make an important contribution to the impact of the particular literary form being exhibited (3).

This is not to say that the written form of literature is incapable of creating impact, because both forms are performance based. The point is that the performance of oral literature is different because of the symbolic motions involved and the aura of emotional involvement. This symbolic attachment of emotions characterizes the African oral literature for instance, the focus with issues of life after death, witchcraft, which is the practice of witches using supernatural powers to influence others are typical of the belief system. As mentioned earlier, the African traditional belief system recognizes the existence of supernatural powers, which may be in form of witchcraft. Witches are said to be discreet that some of them hide under religion to perpetrate malevolent deeds. These are very familiar terrain.

This kind of elegiac poetry of the Izõn is symbolic and its performance is during burial ceremonies because of the belief of the people that the living should investigate the activities of the dead person, when he was alive as the prelude to the burial ceremony. In the words of Okoh, 'performances by poets and griots are not necessarily or exclusively for entertainment but as a way of exposing and exploiting the *Africanness* of such materials being performed'. (323). The process of investigation of the dead is the "*Obobo bi*," which literarily means necromancy via a ladder. And it is graphically presented as the instrument, which one climbs to meet the Maker (God) for the final judgment.

In the *Obobo bi* oral elegiac poetry, the necromancer artistically chants, sings and dances to a particular rhythmic tone in the investigation of the spiritual purity by reciting and invoking the spirit of a dead person. This special performance provides to members of the audience a ritualistic experience that bridges the past and present and shapes their contemporary lives. It is the belief of the Izõn that before and after death, human beings should be subjected to partial judgment concerning their earthly activities. It takes the form of investigation, aim at ascertaining the level of evil or good deeds of the dead, while alive. The tradition demands that the living should investigate the truth before the commencement of the burial rites. This process of investigation is the *Obobo bi* which is a ladder, as mentioned earlier. And it is theatrically and graphically presented as a prop, the instrument, which one uses to climb to meet the Creator.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Oral poetry, as a medium of artistic expression, just at other forms of poetry, is geared towards elevating the human soul and communicates morals to the society. In the words of Ojaide (2016):

Third Generation of Modern African poets went back to their indigenous African oral literature to borrow techniques for their writings, focusing on meaning in their poems since they wanted to change their society [...] these poets have gone back to fuse tradition and modernity [...] they took form and techniques from the oral tradition and fused them into what their preceding modern poets had done (432).

This is a reminder that African oral literature should be rooted in African culture and that the African Voice can only emanate from Africa. The *Obobo bi* ritual is an ancient practice and a vital component of the culture of

the Izo people. It is a unique oral performance which depicts creativity in the people in a typical African setting. In the Izo cosmology, there is the belief in life after death and that the soul of dead should naturally ascend to God, as stated earlier. When a man or woman dies, members of the deceased family would perform an inquest into the soul of the departed to ascertain if s/he was pure in heart and to know the evil deeds if s/he was a witch. Accordingly, therefore, the *Obobowe*, literally a necromancer and the traditional custodian of the oral elegiac poetry of the *Obobo bi* would be invited to perform the ritual. Therefore, the necromancer performs the investigation or inquest of the purity of the dead and proclaims the verdict accordingly. The *Obobowe*, upon sighting the clientele performs some form of ablution with accompaniment of songs:

Tuba ki bo ni I-gbeleyema
Who is coming to touch me

Merein merein, kirii merein toin
Turn and turn, turn and stop

Tuba ki bo ni I-gbeleyema
Who is coming to touch me

Merein merein kirii, merein toin
Turn and turn, turn and stop

The meaning of the song is symbolic as it transmits and demonstrates to the visitors that their mission has been revealed in the *Obobowe's* vision. The visitors are ushered into the apartment with a warm welcome, while he hums the songs as they lay their request and the purification with a gourd of wine ready for libation. He nods understandingly and rushes into the inner apartment for his special 'Abuluku' costumes. The *Abuluku* is a skirt costume, which is unique to the *Obobowe* in performing this spiritual custom. The *Obobowe's Abuluku* is designed in traditional colours unique to the ideals of the people. This is what Finnegan (1970) meant when she said that the: '[...] dirge can be conveyed not only by a verbal evocation of mood but also by the dress, accoutrements, or observed bearing of the performer. This visual aspect is sometimes taken even further than the gestures and dramatic bodily movement [...]' (5).

The *Obobowe's Abuluku* bears the three Izo traditional basic colours namely the: 'Inu' (blue) 'Obosi' (red), and Qloq (white). These colours are unique and symbolic of the Izo traditional belief. The 'Inu' (blue) is the colour that depicts the heavenly bodies, the sky, which is the abode of the Creator. The 'Obosi' (red) represents the human blood, the very existence of man. The 'Qloq' is the white colour and it symbolizes peace. The white being the neutral colour of the three compliments and combines with the other two colours

interchangeably. The white blends with the red as well as the blue. In fact, in the colour spectrum, the white is the origin of all colours. The white represents the daytime, when man executes the daily activities. According to the Izo traditional belief, the black colour signifies night, a time when the Heavens spread her blanket after intoxicating all the good humans into a deep state of sleep, except the evil minded that keeps vigil to commit atrocities to mankind.

The *Obobo bi*, like the Akan dirge, Yoruba dirges and even the self-praise songs of South Africa, *Izibongo*, also the talking drum droning the praise of heroes and notable personalities. A notable feature of oral literature is audience participation. For instance, the orality and the performance style of the *Obobowe* involve the audience. This unique sub-genre of the African oral poetry is performed with ingenuity by local professionals who possess the ability to improvise and who are socially conscious in order to be able to capture and sustain the attention of the audience and the tempo of the performance.

The *Obobowe* arrives at the arena of the burial ceremony and takes hold of the *Obobo* (ladder) high on his shoulder in company of three other men who could be described as *obobo*-bearers, performs the oral rendition of the elegy in form of chanting. This is accompanied with drumming, which alternated with the chants: the drum is high when the voice of the necromancer is low, and goes low when main actor's voice comes up loud. Intermittently, some of these songs are sometimes rendered in form of chants, recitations and evocations; this is part of the performance:

Iri kpo, iri korogha
Even when it dries, it does not dry off completely

Edudu me dudu
Praises

Parara parara
Praises

Opu du
A big heritage

Bouteinowe, boutu gbagha
The hunter does not reveal the secrets of the forest

Eriye kpo, erigha gba,
What he sees, he pretends not to have seen

In a euphoric state, the audience is pensive about the verdict of the *Obobowe* on the one hand and fate of the dead man and his family members on the other hand. The drumming, songs and even libation continues, and then the climax; the *Obobowe* shouts calling the spirit of the dead to climb onto the *obobo*:

Duwei bona Obobo gho gbanai
 The dead person, come and climb on the ladder
 I-daɣ mọ I-yengi mọ I-tijin (nia ifie)
 Your father and mother calls (four times)

Duwei bona Obobo gho gbanai
 The dead person, come and climb on the ladder
 I-daɣ mọ I-yengi mọ I-tijin
 Your father and mother calls

Duwei bona Obobo gho gbanai

The dead person, come and climb on the ladder
 I-daɣ mọ I-yengi mọ I-tijin
 Your father and mother calls

Duwei bona Obobo gho gbanai
 The dead person, come and climb on the ladder
 I-daɣ mọ I-yengi mọ I-tijin
 Your father and mother calls

Sọbọ, bona obobo gho gbanai
 Sọbọ come and climb on the ladder
 Sọbọ, bona obobo gho gbanai
 Sọbọ come and climb on the ladder
 Sọbọ, bona obobo gho gbanai
 Sọbọ come and climb on the ladder
 Sọbọ, bona obobo gho gbanai
 Sọbọ come and climb on the ladder

In the first four stanzas of the poem or song, the *Obobobiwei* or *necromancer* actually refers to the present condition of the dead person, which stands for 'Duwei'. But in the last four stanzas, the *Obobobiwei* emphatically mentions the name of the person; 'Sọbọ' in this discussion means just any name in the real performance. In live performance, the necromancer calls the name of the dead person who is being investigated. In the midst of songs, chants and invocations, the *Obobobiwei* moves forwards and backwards, in an energetic display. This performance is not just a demonstration of the creativity and perfection in the memorization of the chants, songs and dances; it also signifies the *Obobobiwei's* full control of the dead persons' spirit. Then he chants further:

I-ye ebinimi aba, ebianga duo sọ
 If you are pure, follow the path of righteousness

I ma seinimi aba, seianga duo sọ
 And if you are evil, follow the evil path

I-ye ebinimi aba, ebianga duo sọ
 If you are pure, follow the path of righteousness

I ma seinimi aba, seianga duo sọ
 And if you are evil, follow the evil path

I-ye ebinimi aba, ebianga duo sọ
 If you are pure, follow the path of righteousness

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I ma seinimi aba, seianga duo sọ
 And if you are evil, follow the evil path

In Izon culture, clockwise rotation is negative and wrong while anti-clockwise rotation is positive and right. At the climax of the invocation of these mystical doggerels, the spirit of the dead is presumed to have climbed on the ladder ready to respond to the *Obobobiwei's* inquest. The *Obobobiwei* repeats the chant three times for a male spirit and four times for a female spirit. These numbers are significant in Izon tradition as they are usually observed in many other activities regarding male and female personalities. But in this particular chant, the necromancer faces the direction of the *Obobo* towards where the corpse is lying-in-state. Just when the audience expects the *Obobobiwei* to inquire directly and announce the verdict, he keeps everybody in suspense and bursts into another round of singing:

Yanrin-o beiyo bi yanrin
 Let the arena quake

Yanrin-o beiyo bi yanrin
 Let the arena quake

Tolitolitoli
 Leakages upon leakages

Yanrin-o beiyo bi yanrin
 Let the arena quake

Yanrin-o beiyo bi yanrin
 Let the arena quake

Tolitolitoli
 Leakages upon leakages

Yanrin-o beiyo biyanrin
 Let the arena quake

Like a volcanic eruption, the earth must quake and open up spiritual holes, which are invisible to the ordinary person, for the interaction proper to take place between the spirit of the dead person and the *Obobobiwei*. Characteristics of elegiac poetry, the repetition of these familiar formulaic words is strictly for emphasis and to attract spiritual power and inspiration and transmutation into the spirit world.

In a twist of fate, while continuously moving forwards and backwards in a trance, the *Obobobiwei* turns the direction of the *Obobo* anti-clockwise. This indicates that the dead person is innocent of witchcraft. But if the *Obobobiwei* turns the *Obobo* clockwise, it implies that the dead person is guilty of witchcraft. This is another significant pointer to the African oral tradition, which regulates the earth in a unique and typical traditional method and an exclusive preserve of the people. It is a significant and relevant aspect calling for scholars' attention because the tradition is fast fading now. After the verdict of the *Obobobiwei*, the burial ceremony proper commences with the audience in particular, the family members of the deceased person jubilating with songs, dances and recitations:

Wo bara ogono
Our hands are up
"We are victorious"

Wo bara ogono
Our hands are up
"We are victorious."

And chants like:

Wo wari uge
Our family is victorious

Wo weniyo asin korogha
Blood does not follow our path
"No blood guilt in our life"

Wo weniyo boubou
Our movements are smooth

This is the point of jubilation, when the verdict is favourable, but if otherwise, the dead man receives abuse as the immediate family members bury their heads in shame in the evil forest. With these, the *Obobobiwei's* performance has fulfilled the most fundamental and essential aspect of the elegiac poetry of the Izon speaking people of the Niger Delta.

Conclusion

This study highlights the relationship between oral and the written literature, while examining the Izon oral tradition of '*obobo bi*' necromancy. The study revolves around the Izon *Obobo bi* tradition and oral performance literature which is fast fading because of the pervasive influence of Christianity. The study reveals that African oral literature is deeply embedded in culture and tradition and it shows the aesthetics in literary creativity. The paper highlights some of the parameters of oral literature such as oratory, songs, chants, incantation and

invocations as well as the use of repetition and metaphor.

From this study, it is obvious that African oral poetry teaches morals and uplifts the human soul. The discussion hinges on the aspects of human relation with nature, the framing of sacred time and space that is life and death, and the respect for culture and traditions. The study also examined the aesthetic of performance, the body of the performer, relationship between audience, unique costumes, colours and time in relation to the Izon oral literature. The essence and significance of the elegiac poetry of *Obobo bi* is to bridge the link between the living and the dead. Spiritually, it connotes the relationship and belief in life after death. In sociological terms it is an indication of exploring the two extremes of existence (life after death). In the performance process of this unique elegiac poetry, there was the introduction of the magical connection, the suspense of the audience during the *Obobobiwei* interaction with the dead, which conscientiously and significantly acquaintance the past and present of the African belief system. This paper has highlighted the fact that oral poetry is sine qua non in the authorial prediction of the study of Modern African Poetry. The paper has provided pointers for further researchers to reconnoiter into the rich spoken heritage of the African continent.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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