

# CONTENTS AND FEATURES OF YORUBA INCANTATORY POETRY

**ORILOYE, S.A.**

*Department of Music, College of Education  
Ikere Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria*

## ABSTRACT

*The use of incantations to achieve particular results is not peculiar to creed, climate or colour. It is a universal Phenomenon. Since the exponents and practitioners of incantations are often held in contempt. Scholars tend to shy away from investigating it, though it is a rich genre of Yoruba Oral literature. That its exponents are dying out without adequate replacement makes the challenge to investigate, collect and document this genre an urgent one. This study is one of the pioneer efforts, sets out to examine specimen incantations to highlight the folkthough that underlies the composition of incantations and the validity of the premises on which the constituent lexical items are based. This is in addition to attempts at defining it and establishing its universality. A literary study of this neglected genre has revealed that most incantations are constructed on the results of observations, experiments and logical reasoning.*

**Key words:** *Incantation, Universality, Genre, Novice, Heathen, Heathenish, Efficacious.*

## INTRODUCTION

Scholars have written a lot on the various genre or Yoruba Poetic forms. But the area of incantation has been deliberately neglected. This is perhaps because incantations and their verbalizations are considered esoteric and weird and are therefore treated with contempt. While Scholars are reluctant to research into this art from those who know and perform it would not let a person who does not belong to a particular group or whoever is not knowledgeable in a particular art, vocation or practice (Novice) into their “secret world” for fear of letting the cat of the bag. Since they regard it as a major source of strength to be guarded jealously, they too are reluctant to share the “secret” with others.

Scholars deliberately avoid this area of study for fear of being misunderstood and subsequently branded heathenish. Thus, this area of rich Yoruba oral poetry continues to suffer neglect. Yet, it is in grave danger of extinction since its practitioners are dying out without adequate replacement. Incantatory poetry is discovered to be built on literary devices such as logic, contrast, word play, correspondence, contrast and others which give its beauty as a literary genre worthy of Scholarly investigations.

Most dictionaries consultants seem to agree in construing incantation as a “magic word” this implies the use of particular set of words to enforce the performer’s desire to bring about certain result. Collins Dictionary of English Language defines incantation as a “magic word”. And according to Good Level Dictionary of English Language, an incantation is, “the art of using certain words and ceremonies to raise spirits. The forms of words so used a magic charm or ceremony”.

For the purpose of this study, an incantation shall be constructed as “a set of words or statements, based on folkthoughts and used to achieve particular results which are beyond the ordinary. Incantation is not a religion. Whereas religion is concerned among

other things, with definitions of what is unknown in the scientific sense or in the supernatural realm, incantation is the use of certain words or statements to harness the potential powers of Nature to particular effects, positive or negative.

Vernon (1962) emphasizes that the power behind magic (incantation) is not controlled by supernatural being but by mortal man. This according to him belongs to the realm of “inanimate power”. Therefore, incantation like science, is a direct manipulation of the Natural or unknown forces to meet the desire of man.

The all embracing character of incantation is derived from the word universal which is used to mean anything, design or practice that has a worldwide usage. This means anything material or nonmaterial that has a worldwide acceptance or application. The use of incantation as a means of achieving particular results is found in the oral and written records of various cultures and civilizations from the ancient Summerians to the modern times. However, it is given different labels by different people. It is mostly known as “magic” in the West.

Another related term is the efficaciousness of incantation which is employed in the to construe the attributive qualities of certain word, art or practice that produces results when applied or used correctly. It is believed that if proper words or statement are used, spells are cast; this spell could and would exert power just as an herb has healing effects. The appropriate words so uttered are supposed to act in the supernatural world in the matter-of-fact manner just as water in a dam would rise if the dyke is well constructed or a game is hit and killed by bullets if the shooter is able to aim well. It is also believed that an incantation would work efficaciously for whoever is able to apply the correct “formula” regardless of age, creed or sex of the addressor.

However, this study would not concern itself with either the mystical attributes of incantations which make them efficacious neither would it delve into any rituals or ceremonies that would go

along the performance of this oral genre. Rather, it would concentrate on a literary study of the contents and forms of specimen incantations in order to highlight their beauty as a literary genre.

### **Types and forms of Yoruba incantations**

Whereas Vernon (1962) identifies five types of magic, Yoruba incantation poetry exists in only three forms. These are *Ofo* (word), *ayajo* (Precedents) and *Ogede* (statements or promises).

An *ofo* is marked by terseness. Oftentimes it consists of one or more but very few words such as *eewo* (taboo), *ma se* (don't do it or don't succumb). By its construction and use, it would appear that an *ofo* is more for use in emergencies where situations might not permit recourse to long statements.

*Ayajo* as a precept is a restatement of a past mythical occurrence of a similar situation, how it occurred, when, why and where it occurred as well as the aftermath or consequences of such an occurrence of action. This is closely akin to the citation of precepts in a legal tussle in order to assist the judge in taking an equitable decision. It is therefore used as a catalyst to achieve an identical result as obtained in the precept cited.

The *Ayajo* vary in length. While some are short, others are fairly long. Some even contain more than one precept for emphasis. The general format of an *Ayajo* is therefore the citing of historical precedence which implies going through particular historical facts, then, there is an accusation and the subsequent exoneration or implication of the accused as the desired consequence expected on the addressee may be. An example is thus provided:

- 1) *L'ojo t'opo ye n'lle Oyo*  
*Ni gbogbo aye n de 'be lo ki won*  
*Ikele nikan l'o ku ti ko lo*  
*Ikele ojo naa l'aso pupa*  
*Eewo Orise*  
*Aso pupa ki I b'oku de saree*  
*Eeso orisa.*

*The daily "pillar" crumbled at Oyo metropolis  
All the 'World' was there to commiserate with them  
Only Ikele did not go with them  
The Ikele of the day is Red cloth  
Taboo  
Red Cloth does not accompany corpse to the grave  
Taboo.*

The above *Ayajo* provides the explanation that by refusing to follow other to commiserate with the bereaved at Ojo, Red Cloth was able to escape being used as a shroud. The goal of the *Ayajo* is therefore that since Ikele was able to prevent ill-luck by not joining the bandwagon, the addressee too would escape an impending disaster in which other might be involved.

On the other hand, *Ogede* relies for its efficacy, on the immutable laws of Nature many of which could be observed, verified and proved empirically in the environment, either in the individual or collective experience of the people.

Both *Ofo* (word or phrase) *ayajo* (precepts) and *ogede* (statements) have a common denominator in the use of mystical experiments and mythical occurrence or precepts to subject the elemental world to the will and service of man. Olatunji (1982) explains that generally, an incantation can be identified by its mystical and metaphysical experiments, namely the subjection of the universe to man's will, a symbolic word play wherein lies the belief in the essences and sympathies, the invocation, the repetition and the ascertains-and features that invest it with weirdness. *Ogede* or *ofo* do sometimes contain some of the features of *ayajo*. But most often, they consist of a restatement of one or more of the immutable laws of Nature which are easily verifiable. However, there are others that are based on purely literary devices such as word play, tonal or semantic correspondence or contrast of the lexical items employed in the poem.

## The problem of translation

Oral literature is most often rendered in the indigenous language or dialect of the performer. Such a language is usually rich in the use of narrative literary devices and figures of speech. However, to translate from the indigenous language into a target one is often fraught with the danger of detracting from the meaning or the “word picture” that such a performer would wish to paint for his audience (Abimbola 1982). This view has largely influenced the translations of the specimen incantations from Yoruba into the English Language hence the apparent structure naivety of some of the translations.

## Specimen incantations

2. *B' Agbe ba ke n'igbo*

*Gbogbo egbe Agbe a gb'oun Agbe*

*B'Aluko ba ke I'odan*

*Gbogbo egbe Aluko a gb'ohun re*

*Olugboun, gb'oun mi.*

*If Agbe crows in the forest*

*All Agbe's colleagues would echo the crowing of Agbe*

*If Aluko crows in the dale*

*All the Aluko's colleagues would echo its crowing*

*Olugboun (Natural Echo), Echo my voice.*

In the above poem, line 1 and 3 are contrast “gbo” (forest) and “Odan” (dale or grassland) respectively. Both lexical items are denominator in being environmental characteristics. Lines 2 and 4 are the reactions to the action of each bird by its peers. This too demonstrates a sameness of reaction in two different environments.

However, whereas in line 2) the noun *Agbe* is repeated, in line 4), a pronoun is substituted for what should have been a repetition of the noun “Aluko” as obtained in line 2). This should be viewed as a deliberate move to break the monotony of repeating the names in order to enhance the oral qualities or the rhythm of the entire poem.

## The socio-cultural analysis of the poem

*Agbe* is the indigo-coloured African coco-coco bird while *Aluko* is its cam wood paste (purple) coloured counterpart (Idowu 1962). Both as wild cocks crow at regular intervals. The apparent regularity of their crowing or cooings has been observed by the Yoruba farmer who then attaches much importance to it than he has come to use the crowing as a means of timing his activities on the farm.

In addition to this, it has also been observed that once a member of the flock begins to crow, the others would quickly join in the exercise. And so, from this observation, the incantation quoted has been developed, based on the premise that, “if... then...” or “whenever... then...” The incantation is therefore a product of observation, and a confirmation of the immutability of some of the laws of Nature which manifests in a sympathetic response by the others to the crowing or cooing strain begun by one.

3. *Oun a wi f’ogbo*  
*L’ogbo n gbo*  
*Oun a wi f’ogba*  
*L’ogba n gba.*

*Whenever we tell ogbo*  
*Is what Ogbo (only) hears*  
*Whatever we tell ogba*  
*Is what Ogba (only) accepts.*

The above incantation is constructed on the semantic correspondence of the lexical items *Ogbo* (a leaf) and *Ogba* (barn). Also, the semantic correspondence of *gbo* (to hear) and *gba* (to accept or acquiesce to) gives meaning and force to the poem, to command the addressee to hear and accept whatever he is told without a second thought.

Literary, line 1 and 3 refer to the actions *gbo* (to hear) and *gba* (to accept or acquiesce to). Thus, line 1 and 2 make a re-stating the desired objective of the incantation. This is based on

the premise that since *ogbo* would hear or obey whatever it is told and *ogba* would accept whatever it is told, then the addressee is expected to comply, without questioning, whatever he is told as emphasized by line 2 and 4 of the poem.

### **Features of Yoruba incantation poems**

Whether *ofo*, *ayafo* or *ogede* it has been discovered that Yoruba incantatory poems are not regular in the number of lines or syllables. Also the number of precepts or statements to be cited is not fixed. This largely depends upon the knowledge and expertise of the user. A user might therefore cite more than one precept in a bid to achieve his objective. Precepts are usually drawn from the mythical history of the people.

On the other hand, the contents of *ofo* and *ogede* are based on the immutable laws of Nature as well as some other literary devices. These are therefore verifiable and empirical in most cases. For instance, the following are cited:

- 4) *Omi kii san*  
*K'o b'uju w'eyin.*  
*Water never flows (and)*  
*"Look" back*
- 5) *Ojo t'a ba be 'takun*  
*L'ewe re n ro.*  
*The day (the stem of) a climber is cut*  
*Is when its leaves wither.*

Whether long or short, incantations are always in single stanzas. This is because an incantation is designed to achieve only one objective at a time. This makes it functional for only one objective at a time. This makes it functional for only one episode at a time; though it can still be used for identical purposes at later date. Every incantation is a complete thought, unique and independent of the others. However, this does not prejudice the appearance of one or more lexical items from one incantation in some others. The view of Bamigbose (1982) is informative in this respect.



Incantations are usually performed as a genre on its own. But sometimes, they find their way into other genre of oral literature such as *ewi*, *iwi egungun* (masquerade chants), *iyere ifa* (divination chants) and song performance and ordinary discourse. However, whenever they find their way into other genre, they would only occur as literary devices to emphasize the particular point being made. At such times, they are believed to be divested of the cryptic energies which make them efficacious; and are therefore taken for granted and performed like any other genre. In all, the use of incantations outside their original context enriches discourse or verbalization thus making such more memorable

The delivery style of incantatory poetry is simple recitation. In their original context, incantations are neither sung, chanted nor intoned. Their performance is not accompanied by any musical instruments. This creates a uniformity of performance technique and style throughout Yorubaland.

As an esoteric art form, the performance is never made elaborate. It is therefore restricted to the solo performer who, most often performs in secret. It is therefore an art form which needs no audience either for appreciation or participation. Incantations are dispensed in an impersonal "business like" manner. In fact, people usually keep distance from wherever incantations are being performed in their original context for fear of being smeared with their effects. All these make the performance of incantations in their original context not only unique but also different from other verbal arts such as *ewi*, *ijala*, *esa*, *ege*, *oriki* or any other.

In the construction of incantation poems, many literary devices are freely used. These include word play, lexical matching, juxtaposition, contrast correspondence, semantic contrast and semantic correspondence among others. These give this peculiar genre of the Yoruba Oral literature an artistic beauty that is almost unparalleled by any other Yoruba literary genre.

As an esoteric "science" the composition of or hypothesis on which incantations are built is mostly the immutable laws of Nature, most of which are verified and are therefore empirical. They are therefore not much different from any other scientific laws in the sciences. It could thus be defended that incantation are in further development and the application of the laws of Nature to achieve particular result desired by man.

While it could be stated that incantatory poetry is an old art form, there are those that could be classified as "new" or "contemporary" since they are constructed with contemporary materials whose relative age could be established with ease. Such lexical items are drawn from the social, historical, religious, economic and philosophical issues of our times. For instance the are the following:

- (1) *Reluwe kii rin k'o w'eyin.*  
*A train does not move and look back.*
- (2) *Opa kan ni Fulani fi n da igba maluu*  
*With only one rod, a Fulani controls two hundred cows.*

This is evidence that few incantations are being constructed with new materials almost on a continuous basis. Like most African verbal Arts, incantations are orally learnt and orally transmitted. This makes it an aural-oral art form. Because it is oral, every member of the society has access to them, especially the simple and straight forward ones especially *ofò* and *ogede*, some of which are often used for emphasis in ordinary discourse or musical as literary spice. The longer and more "serious" ones are more restricted in use and circulation. As a dynamic genre, new incantations are being composed continuously with new materials, using the same logic, observation and exploiting the immutable laws of Nature as the guiding principles.

### **The Future of Yoruba Incantatory Poetry**

As an aural-oral art form, and the rate at which the exponents are dying without appreciable replacement, the future of the Yoruba

incantatory poetry is being threatened. Being esoteric in context and restricted in use, incantations are no longer popular hence research into it becomes more urgent than ever. Being associated with heathenism, ritualism and evil intent, society continues to treat it with extreme contempt. The youth are least interested in it and its use. They would therefore not learn or practice it. This explains why it is rapidly falling into disuse. The significance of Yoruba incantation is taken for granted whereas in actual fact this rich genre is part of the Yoruba philosophy.

However, as new ones are being composed, with contemporary material, especially by the youth, incantations are gradually being divested of their usual aura of mysticism which may have guaranteed efficaciousness. Thus they are an instrument for occultic pursuits. This falls within the range of bascom (1964) calls, "Continuity of change"

## CONCLUSION

The study of incantatory poetry has long been left by scholars, mostly for social and psychological reasons. As an esoteric aural-oral art form, restricting in performance, it is not very popular with the people though they are aware of its existence as a genre. The rate at which it is being learnt, performed and transmitted is so slow that its survival is becoming bleak. Also its exponents are fast dying out without appreciable replacement. All this mean that incantations may soon fade out of the Yoruba Oral Literary genre. Though new ones are being composed with contemporary material such are largely meant for ordinary usage in discussions rather than occultic ends.

This work is obviously one of the pioneer efforts at studying this genre of the Yoruba Oral Literature. No standard format exists to guide the present the present efforts. The study is therefore based on the general principle of research in oral poetic forms. In view of these difficulties, this study cannot therefore claim to be in-depth or exhaustive, though this was the set goal. However it must have succeeded at calling attention to a neglected area of scholarship.

In view of its literary beauty, scholars are challenged to take interest in investigating this area of the Yoruba oral literature as a rewarding field of study. The exponents who are invariably the custodians of this poetic form should be challenged and encouraged to “open up” and make their knowledge available to posterity. Society too should change its perception of the genre, its exponents and practitioners. Scholars should begin to collect, transcribe, translate and analyze specimen poems for the records. This rich oral genre should be placed on the curriculum, especially in the area of poetry. This should be at the secondary and tertiary levels. Government and the private sector should fund research into the rich culture heritage of their various peoples. Such should be documented for posterity.

## REFERENCES

- Abimbola, W.** (1982). *Note on the collection, transcription, translation and analysis of Yoruba (Oral) literature.* In Adebisi Afolayan (ed) *Yoruba language and literature.* Ibadan: University Press Ltd. and University of Ife Press.
- Bamgbose, A.** (1982). *Lexical matching in Yoruba poetry.* In Adebisi Afolayan (ed) *Yoruba language and literature.* Ibadan: University Press Ltd. and University of Ife Press.
- Bascom, W.** (1964). *Continuity and change in culture.* Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Collins Dictionary of the English Language (1968).**
- Good Level Dictionary of the English Language (1974).**
- Idowu, E. B.** (1962). *Olodumare: God in Yoruba belief.* London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd.
- Oriloye, S. A.** (2007a). The problems of “Actress” and “meaning” in “Juju” music. *International Journal of Language and Communication* Vol. 1 (1& 2): 96-115.
- Oriloye, S. A.** (2008b). Music as a catalyst in the process of spirit possession. *Journal of Arts and Humanities International Research and Development Institute.*
- Oriloye, S. A.** (2008c). The Effective Powers of Praise-names and Incantations. (Unpublished Manuscript).
- Olatunji, O.** (1982). *Classification of Yoruba oral poetry.* In Afolayan, A. (ed) *Yoruba language and literature.* Ibadan: University Press Ltd. and University of Ife Press.
- Vernon, G. M.** (1962). *Sociology of religion.* New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company.