

POETICS OF THE YORUBA INCANTATIONS

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Article Info

Keywords: Incantations, poetics, Yoruba, African, traditions.

DOI

10.5281/zenodo.17511030

Abstract

Incantations are creative manipulations of words for specialized contexts and purposes. It is a functional form of usage to which some sacred properties are ascribed. Incantations constitute one of those oral sub-genres that generate controversies on the sameness of African oral literature and the West's orthodox literary practices. Western critics think that many African oral traditions do not qualify for literature because of the sacredness of the African traditions. However, this paper explores the poetic features of Yoruba incantations that qualify this oral poetic sub-genre as authentic poetry despite their seemingly non-secular function. The argument of this paper is hinged on the internal qualities of incantatory usage, such as content, style, linguistic properties, physical features, and figurative expressions that share seamless similarities with elements of orthodox poetry. With illustrations from some types and forms of incantations, we conclude that despite their functional attributes, incantations qualify to be classified as poetry like others from other cultures of the world.

INTRODUCTION

From all indications, the fact that incantations are part of the vast indigenous oral traditions of the Yoruba people cuts across the views of all. An analysis of the text of any incantation would also place the form squarely under the general form known as mythography or simply myth making (Okpewho 1980: 2-3). Incantation is an aspect of the pre-literate society and behaves like other myth-making processes. The other elements of myth-making include myths, legends, epics, taboos, and totems, all of which are generated from the interaction of humans with fellow humans and other natural elements of the environment. The oral nature of these forms' acquisition and transition constitutes some problems in their analysis and criticism.

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Orcid ID: 0009-0002-0553-1532; 0009-0006-9206-9460

Unlike in classical mythologies that are written, most indigenous oral traditional forms do not have a definite form. The nature, form, and internal details of incantations vary. Each performance of the incantatory poetry allows enough room for the performer's ingenuity and unmitigated elasticity in the choice of content to the extent that any two performances may not look exactly the same except for certain aesthetic and generic qualities.

Okpewho (1983: 114) appears to be an attempt to explicate the transition of certain mythical traditions into non-sacred literary practices.

To trace the movement of the mythopoetic fancy, it can be said that this fancy concerns itself with the entire spectrum of the social universe: from issues that translate into experience in terms of more or less remote history to those that constitute existence in a more transcendent sense.

Mythopoetic is a term devised by Okpewho, which aptly captures the essence of some oral traditions that are an admixture of sacred practices that explore the means of oral rendition. The practice of incantations among the Yoruba is a typical example of this practice.

Although this essay may be in partial agreement with Oriloye (2009) that the sources of data for the study of incantation are becoming increasingly remote in Yoruba, it is important to note and correct the impression that African scholars have neglected research into the use and practice of incantations. For more than 4 decades now, more scholars have shown renewed interest in incantation research. Far from the rather myopic self-aggrandizing claim by Oriloye that his (2009) essay on the contents and features of incantatory poetry is a "pioneering effort," there are scholarly records of such works as Olabimtan's (1971) M.A. dissertation. Others include Olabimtan (1980), Abimbola (1977), Fabunmi (1972), Adeoye (1985), Opefeyitimi (1984), Raji (1991, 1993, and 2003), Dopamu (2000), and Opefeyitimi (2008), which is a doctoral thesis. As more scholars across the globe become interested in indigenous oral traditions, so does the interest in incantatory works. However, the exploration of this sub-genre for recreation and fun is still very limited owing to the popular belief that it is sacred, occult, and restricted in practice to a class of initiates.

Theoretical Framework

Theorizing African literature has been a source of unabated controversy in critical and creative domains. Even for written texts based on relatively explicit contents, scholars observed that Western critical paradigms often failed to capture the essence of African indigeneity within such texts. Dasylyva (1999: 1) makes a significant recourse to Wole Soyinka's persistent call that "African critics should come up with home-grown literary canons" that would "evolve and globalize African critical standards." To address this critical gap, he writes further that The term 'alter-Native' was coined by Funso Aiyejina who established the alternative variety of some new breed of African poets. He described the mode and form of their new poetry as an interface foregrounded by traditional African philosophy, hermeneutics, and poetic modes. It is the idea of 'nativity' by the poets and the conscious determination to offer something fresh and different from what had been which endeavour us to the term 'alter-native'.

A typical example of the existing critical gap which the "Alter-Native" theory of African oral narratives intends to fill in the absence of incantatory poetry from the western taxonomical classification of poetry. For instance, a search through Holman's (1932/1970) Handbook to Literature indicates no entry for the word incantation or any of its derivations. The deliberate attempt to omit incantation from a list of literary terms simply underscores the fact that incantations are not accepted as a poetic sub-genre in the West. What further proof would have been required to convey the inadequacy of Western critical yardsticks in the analysis of African mythopoetics?

Faced with the issue of existing classificatory and theoretical paradigms, Opefeyitimi (2008-34H) introduces a radical but creative blend of theories by clipping the sociological, narratology, and hermeneutics to derive social-narra-neutics for effective analysis of incantations and incantatory poetry.

Understanding some basic workings of these theories is useful as this paper intends to explore them in the analyses of the contents and contexts of incantatory poetry by the Yoruba. For instance, we may need to push beyond the frontiers of the use of incantations for magical effects by providing some “alternative” lexico-semantic analyses of some relevant texts. This paper also sees the need to tinker with the psychological implication of some signs—the signifier and the signified—with the intention of lessening the fear of attachment to the subject of incantation before Yoruba users can decide to trivialize or “play with” these oral forms (Ajayi 2014:8, 107-119).

Some incantations function at different levels, both as a separate genre on its own and as content within some other sub-genres, such as the panegyric, epic, or legend (Olugbamigbe 1997), making it relevant to consider a blend of theories.

Incantatory Poetry

Ordinarily, one would have expected that defining incantation would have opened up a plethora of conflicting ideas and terminologies. However, this is not the case as most scholars have approached their definitions from a functionalist perspective. The first to be considered is Olabimtan (1971: 7), who sees incantations as follows: Words spoken, chanted, or sung by a magician or a believer in magic (usually as a set of formulas referring to events of the past) to invoke divinities, ancestral spirits, and supernatural forces believed to be inherent in certain objects to accomplish a desired end.

Similarly, Dopamu (2000: 63) describes ‘ayajo’, a variance of incantatory poems from its point of usage:

In ayajo, we encounter stories and myths that refer to critical events in the past. We recall such incidents or events in the past to bring about similar incidents or events at present. In other words, in reciting such myths, we renew the forces that formerly brought about the desirable outcome and effect in the present situation.

After reviewing a number of definitions, especially from dictionaries and encyclopedias, Oriloye (2008: 33) concluded that “an incantation shall be construed as ‘a set of words or statements, based on folk thoughts and used to achieve particular results which are beyond the ordinary.’”

From the existing attempts at defining incantations and in line with the purpose of this paper, we want to see incantations as the creative use of words based on man’s experience the interface between history and the immutable qualitative nature to achieve some functional effects. It is preferable to conceive of the genre from a plural sense. Dopamu (2000: 78) identified 15 different variants of incantations based on the functional contexts of usage. Raji (1991) identifies and discusses incantations under three broad categories that can still be further subdivided. Raji’s classifications are based on the level of volatility of the contents of incantations where *àásán* has the most dangerous content, *ògèdè* is less volatile than *àásán* but more potent than *ofò*. However, Oriloye (2009) however identified *àyájó* which he calls precedent *ofò* which he simply refers to as “statements or promises.” Although Oriloye’s classifications are descriptive, his choice of “words,” statements, or promises” is open to controversy. This is because all incantations use words and statements.

For the purpose of this paper, incantations shall be classified into two types: harmful and non-harmful incantations. Harmful incantations are those whose content and intent are considered non-friendly to both the speaker and hearer. Incantations that inflict a negative impact on the mood, emotion, attitude, behaviour, or well-being of a recipient interlocutor are considered harmful. In contrast, incantations attract the approval of the receiver.

Contexts of Incantatory Poetry

The use of *ofò* is prescribed and highly situational; its power is unleashed in the context, performed by the right person, and for a specific purpose.

1. Religious and Ritual Contexts:

Worship: Invocations to Òrìsà (deities) like Ẹ̀ṣàngo (god of thunder), Ògún (god of iron and war), and Ọ̀sanyìn (god of medicine) to invite their presence, seek their favour, or thank them.

Sacrifice: Incantations are recited to activate a sacrifice, direct its purpose, and ensure its acceptance by the spiritual forces.

Initiation: This is used during rites of passage into secret societies (like Ọ̀gbóni) or during the initiation of priests and priestesses to invoke spiritual protection and knowledge.

2. Occupational and Guild Contexts:

Hunting: Hunters (*ode*) use powerful *ofò* in *Ìjálá ode* to charm their weapons, become invisible to animals, control wild beasts, and ensure a successful hunt.

Farming: Farmers bless seeds, protect farms from pests and thieves, and invoke fertility and timely rain.

Blacksmithing: Worshipers of Ògún use incantations to control fire and metal to make tools and weapons strong and effective.

3. Medicinal and Therapeutic Contexts:

Herbalism: This is one of the most profound applications of *ofò*. Herbalists recite lengthy and complex incantations over herbs (*oògùn*) to awaken their latent healing properties. The words are as vital as the herb itself.

Healing rituals: These rituals are used to extract illness, neutralize poison (*májèlè*) or break curses (*Èpè*).

4. Judicial and Social Control Contexts:

Oaths and Covenants: Binding statements used in traditional courts to swear to the truthfulness of a testimony. The *ofò* invokes calamity on the speaker if he or she lies.

Cursing (Èpè): To punish a wrongdoer, seek justice, or enact revenge. The power of the curse is derived from the cause's righteousness and the speaker's authority.

Praise, sanction, and marital contexts: Warfare warriors used incantatory poetry to become bullet proof, confuse the enemy, and empower their weapons before battle.

Consistent with the thesis of this paper is Akporobaro's (2000: 60) submission on incantatory poetry. In what appears to be an attempt to subjugate the magical elements of this class of poetry he writes.

The words being chanted may be believed to have some magical power, or the words may be recited along with the performance of a ritual that is believed to have some magical power. The chanter's wish may be to procure a cure for an illness, overcome an enemy, and achieve success in some endeavour. This form of recitation often possesses intrinsic literary qualities of either form, structure, or imagery.

Olabimtan (1971: 127) lends credence to this position in the following observation:

Ofò and *Àyájó* incantations achieve their various purposes by the use of several poetic devices, principally repetition and imagery.

This leads us to the next aspect of our discussion of incantations. Poetic devices involved in incantation rendition

Olugbamigbe (2006:42) observes that incantations manifest the following poetic features:

- a. metric language
- b. dependence on the sound effects
- c. derivation from the social realities
- d. lyricism
- e. metaphorical and idiomatic expressions

This paper seeks to test the manifestation of the above mentioned features and a few others against some texts of incantations.

Metric Language. One of the most basic properties of poetry is that the words are measured and arranged in a number of syllables on lines that run into verses or paragraphs. (Holman 1970: 12) This example is taken from Raji (1991: 12) as follows:

Ajà – tééré lorúkò à ñ pòwó!

Ajà – tééré lorúkò à ñ pòwó!!

Ajà – tééré lorúkò tí à ñ pe ara

Ajà – tééré lorúkò tí à ñ pe ara

Slim dome is the name we call a hand

Slim dome is the name we call a hand

The round dome is the name we call the body

The round dome is the name we call the body

Like the orthodox poems that are measured in metres, the above lines can be measured.

Sound effects. Sound is another prominent feature of poetry. While orthodox poems depended on sound effects to achieve poetic characteristics such as rhymes and rhythm, incantation uses tonal variation to achieve rhythm and musicality.

Olúgbón ẹ̀ ti ẹ̀, ó gbó

Arèsà ẹ̀ ti ẹ̀ ó yè

Ọwàràngún ẹ̀ ti ẹ̀ ó ye peregede

At different levels of the three popular lines of incantation, the three possible tones—fall, mind, and rise—are used to produce a musical effect in the rendition of the lines.

Social Realism. Despite the involvement of magic and supernatural tendencies, incantations derive their contents from natural elements and social realities from the environment. This is similar to the content of orthodox poems, such as odes, epics, and panegyrics. An example is this extract from the Yorùbá protective incantation.

Igi kii wó lóko kó pará ilé

Àjà kii jìn nílẹ̀ kó pèrò ọ̀nà

A kii gbón mi ká peku

A kii kungbó ká peja

A tree does not fall to kill someone at home

A home ceiling falls to kill someone on the road

Rats are not hunted in a stream

Fishes are not hunted in a bush fire

These lines use elements of nature and realities within the environment.

Incantations use songs. Olugbamigbe (2006: 41) observed that songs occupy a prominent space in the existence of indigenous Africa. Africans use songs to express virtually every aspect of their emotions—pain, anger, joy, love, etc. It is therefore not out of place to see lyrics as part of incantatory poetry. An example is taken from the popular *Ògbórí Èlémòşó* drama by Léré Pàímó (Olugbamigbe 1997).

Ewé iyeyè igba ni o

Ewé iyeyè igba ni i

Ọjọ́ tí o dàà kò i pé o

Ewé iyeyè igba ni i

Ìyeyè leaves are definitely two hundred
 Ìyeyè leaves are compulsory to be two hundred
 My appointed days are not yet complete
 Ìyeyè leaves are definitely two hundred

Metaphorical Expressions. Incantations largely operate on what critics refer to as semantic correlations. It could be positive or negative. In each divide, incantations explore the similitudes in two different items to conclude on the chanter's desire.

For instance, this popular line says,

Àlọ rámi rámi làá n

A kii rí àbò rè

Only the departure of the water spiral is observed

No one sees it coming back

This line triggers incantations that provoke the sufferer to embark on a journey of no return.

Apart from the features discussed above, incantations feature on certain other premises. First, some symbols represent certain incantations. Even when such symbols are silent and passive, they are understood to be capable of causing severe harm to their targets. A good example exists in some totems used to cast spells on certain items, places, or people. This understanding includes the fact that the incantations have been invoked into the totems before they are placed. Such incantations, whether fresh or in arrears, are capable of inflicting equal harm. Here, the issue of semiotics becomes relevant to both spoken and signified incantations.

In addition, the realization that incantations have been used brings people to the expectation of its effects on the receiver. This is the psycho-analytical aspect of incantations. From these perspectives, this paper recommends the use of incantations as literary elements for poetic patronage rather than for aversive magical practice. All the elements identified in the features of incantations and even some relevant others that have not been discussed can be adopted and adapted for creative oral renditions.

The ever growing comedy industry can tap from the wide range of devices available in incantations to draw jokes for entertaining their audience. For instance,

Bí a bá ní a máa mú òní

Fáyemí làá mú

If we plan to pick òní

It is Fáyemí that we choose

Èrín làá rìn fonná oti

Erín lomodé rin jìyan alé

Èrín làgbàrá n rìn kodò lójú ònà

E rẹ̀rìn-ìń sí mi ẹ̀yìn ẹ̀rò ìwòran

One shows his teeth when fetching the fire in the furnace

Children smile when eating a pounded yam supper

The rain water gleefully joins a flowing river

All of you in the audience should laugh at me.

Ọwọ ọmọdé kii ká igi oşè

Ọwọ ahón kii ka to imú

Ònií màá paá

Ọla màá paá

Enu, enu lẹsẹ fí pa èkùró ojú ọ̀nà

Chelsea, máa gbọ o

Ọwọ yin kò ní ká Arsenal

The child's arm cannot enfold the Ose tree

The tongue's hand cannot touch the nose

Today, I will crush it.

Tomorrow, I will crack it.

It is only the foot's desire to crack a nut on the road

Listen, you Chelsea soccer Club

You will never dominate Arsenal

Bí a bá bomi tútú sómi gbígbóná

Se ló n rọ wọ̀

Bí a bá fòkèlẹ sẹnu,

Se lòòfà ọfun n fà á

Add cold water to hot water

It gets cold easily or it easily gets cold.

If we put a morsel in our mouth

It is pulled by the lungs

Conclusion

One basic contribution of this paper to the discourse of incantations is that emphasis should be shifted from the magical properties of incantations to their functional but less harmful attributes for a more popular exploration of the poetic sub-genre. Like other poetic sub-genres in written and oral literature, incantations can also be a good source of entertainment and refreshment devoid of sacred or magical attachments. However, all these can be achieved through a reconstruction of the contents and contexts of the oral performance of incantations to reflect the less sacred oral traditions of modern-day realities. This is not going to be a completely strange development as examples of such de-mythified explorations in the past abound. A good example is the modification of the costumes and motifs of the *Egúngún* myth by Lagbaja in his own peculiar style of musicology.

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