



***An Exploration of Continuity and Change of Yoruba Oral Performance Strategies in the Poetry of Akeem Lasisi***  
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**Abstract**

Two poems of Akeem Lasisi are examined in this study, Àsàbí Alákàrà' and "Ekun Ìyàwó". Akeem Lasisi's poetry performance is orchestrated directly on stage through the deployment of a rich blend of actors, singers, dancers and drummers. Lasisi also adds the comic trope of satiric banter. The comedic embellishment is used by Lasisi to revolutionise the Yoruba oral performance in English. By adopting video, Lasisi progresses from "written orality" into contemporary "digital orality". In conclusion, Akeem Lasisi presents unwritten performed poetry, conceived as "performance actual", using digital platforms. By these, he injects unique enactive styles that transform the Yoruba oral performance poetic tradition, and also ensures its continuity.

**Introduction**

Nigerian literature, just like the literatures of other parts of the world, has both an oral and a written variety, with the former predating the latter. Non-literate communities of pre-colonial Nigeria just as the non-literate natives of pre-Columbus America or early medieval peoples of pre-Renaissance Europe as well as aboriginal populations of the world possess rich oral (literary) cultures which tell something about their societies. These oral traditions, consisting largely of myths, legends, folktales, fables, parables, proverbs and other forms in musical and dramatic productions act as a means of disseminating cultural mores and perpetuating the people's genealogical, historical and cultural heritage. Nigerian literature also has its own rich oral foundations out of which have grown the sophisticated and quite impressive tradition that it possesses today.

The oral literature of Nigeria encompasses the diverse communities that inhabit the Nigerian geographical space; poetry (especially among the Yoruba of South West) being the most prominent and perhaps most developed. The Yoruba occupy such an important and quite outstanding position in the literary history of Nigeria no doubt because Abeokuta town in Western Nigeria before others had had the privilege of first contact with missionaries who along with the gospel also brought literacy and Western learning. Lasisi as a descent of the Yoruba tribe showcases the beauty of the Yoruba Oral traditions through his performance poetry through the deployment of the recent advancement in digital technology. This he does not only to showcase his heritage but also to portray continuity as his poetry still reflects synergy with the western practice.

This study examines continuity and change of oral performance strategies in the poetry of Akeem Lasisi,. The study departs from the areas which many researchers have already worked on, rather the gap in knowledge that this study addresses is the identification of characteristics and components of oral performance poetry, especially as identified in Yoruba oral performance tradition; and strategies of presentation in Akeem Lasisi's poetries. Also given attention in this study is what informs or has informed Lasisi's performance poetics. These will be set in relief against a backdrop of digital technological processes that now pervades the world and how the various new formats of recording, producing and circulating poetry have impinged upon the work of this poet.

**Literature Review**

**Performance Poetry and New Media**

Unlike in the oral culture where poetry is created in an oral 'space' constituted solely of utterance and verbal transmission, and in the print culture where poetry is inscribed on the printed page as its medium of transmission; in the New Media culture, the whole scenario changes completely. The New Media (aka Digital/Emergent Media) is an important multifaceted technological development in our present world. Because of its phenomenal capabilities and boundless reach, it cuts across cultures, geographical landscapes, languages, and social strata. With New Media poetry

is regularly encountered through various digitised personalised channels, through which a poet can generate and/or present his work to his audience. This is the process of creating a following on any Social Media platform. Social Media is the interactive aspect of the New Media.

The New Media culture continues to challenge individual resourcefulness and creativity of modern poets to maximise these dynamic possibilities afforded by the New Media. The technology also phenomenally extends the ranges of continuity between orality, traditional print culture and the contemporaneity of digital platforms for performance expression. The New Media's basically democratic, relatively independent and completely classless landscape makes it such that ideas, opinions, comments and views are easily shared and cross-fertilised without any social or cultural constraints. It is a classic example of utter accessibility. This happens by users liking, following, flagging, sharing and/or re-sharing, commenting on, an original post. As a result, many aspects of local, national and even intercontinental communications are opened up and the post assumes a life of its own, sometimes generating hashtags for further action. This multiplies the availability of the same content across many platforms and among many different users in different parts of the world in real time. The farther a post travels, the wider the owner of the post is known in any part of the world.

For instance, the BBC television reported on March 19, 2019 that at least 4000 people across the globe had viewed on Facebook (FB), the original video of the horrendous attack on a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand. The shootings, which took place on the 15th of March were also said to have been watched live by no fewer than 200 people in different parts of the world before it was pulled down by FB because of widespread complaints about the violent and disturbing content. This distressing video was available in real-time because the attacker had attached his FB-connected video-cam to his face cap prior to committing the act. Thus, as he was mowing his helpless victims down, FB users online at the time were watching live. The point of this example is to emphasise the global reach and tremendous influence of New Media through its various platforms.

The Internet is such a phenomenal invention of modern man which today is radically transforming the way peoples of the world relate with one another. Its reach is yet to be matched by anything produced in print. For instance, the senate of the United States in its investigation of Russia's suspected complicity with (then candidate) Trump in the 2016 American presidential elections, was able to determine (in July, 2018) that no less than 126 million people in the US alone accessed political adverts placed by Russian agents on FB prior to the elections.

#### **Lasisi's Poetry and the Deployment of the New Media**

As the world continues to reach out for the original roots of poetry, embedded in the oral arts of the spoken word, it is crucial for important and successful poets to catch up with contemporary means of reaching vast audiences in the best possible ways. This will naturally assist a digitally accessible artist to enjoy more prominence and popularity than one still bound within the pages of a book. This is one major way in which Lasisi becomes an important link from the current state, represented by Osundare into the future of performance poetry in Nigeria. The critical gap between Osundare, the page-bound poet and potential vast audiences on the digital platforms are being reached by Lasisi with his stage performances disseminated through the New Media platforms of social media. By his favouring the digital production and presentation of his poetry, Lasisi fills a major gap between popular poetry and its potential audiences in different parts of the world.

Lasisi goes directly to the stage with performance, accompanied by his musical group playing different functions in the entire poetic delivery. Lasisi rightly observed in an interview with this writer that Osundare, because of his peculiar circumstances as an academic may somewhat have been "limited" to an audience quite different from his, and that this kind of audience's acceptance of performance may yet be restrictive. In his own case, Lasisi takes poetry to corporate events such as AGMs, Executive Retreats and others, social gatherings such as weddings, birthdays, funerals; and other allied events. He packages his poetry into Compact Discs (CD), Video Compact Discs (VCD), and uploads his poetry videos unto different platforms such as YouTube, WhatsApp and others.

Moreover, Lasisi's poetry videos are often played on a number of Nigerian television stations, including such cable networks as Africa Magic. The voice of poetry through these novel ways goes way beyond the page and unto different stages in different parts of the world without the singer of the tale being physically present. This is a new age for new possibilities of poetic performance. This study hopes to reinforce the theoretical perspective of the close connections between literature (poetry) and modern media, as presented by developments in New Media today.

#### **Methodology**

This study examines continuity and change of oral performance strategies in the poetry of Akeem Lasisi. Two poems of Akeem Lasisi are examined in this study, *Àsàbí Alákàrà* and *“Ekun Ìyàwó”*. The study departs from the areas which many researchers have already worked on, rather address new gap in knowledge.

## Analysis

### i. Audio-visual delight

In Lasisi's "Èkún Ìyàwó", the *oríkì* poetic model takes another, albeit modern dimension. Apart from presenting it in video instead of the written page, other dramatic additions that may not be regular features of the traditional "Èkún Ìyàwó" chant were added. While the regular characteristics of epithet-piling, eulogising of lineages are present, Lasisi adds the physical presence of dancers, singers, and the Yoruba operatic feature of dramatic action to this performance. In the different movements of the performance, the friends of the bride who are given more than a fair share of the entire performance constitute a bridal party singing their own songs. Their presence is reminiscent of the Greek drama chorus that sings its own songs which reflect on the dramatic action taking place.

In Lasisi's "Senwele Ìyàwó," the sequel to "Ekun Iyawo," in the same album, the friends of the bride play the role of chorus and more. Their songs, serving sometimes as interlude, comments, or observations endow the performance with definitive entertainment value. Apart from the aural pleasure of hearing their songs, there's visual pleasure too of beholding them. The bride's friends in their colourful costumes constituting of *iro* and *buba* made of *asọ-oke*, with intricately tied head-gears and jewellery to match, altogether present to us poetry as "videonic" expression. It is a total package.

The dimension of audio-visual delight is one of the distinctly unique advantages of the video format of poetry presentation. Apart from successfully attracting an appreciable audience to poetry, it affords the viewer a level of visual literacy too. Recall that the cinema originally began as "silent movies," where even though one did not hear any sound, but yet by watching we do understand what is being presented and thereby get entertained. So also, in this age of sight and sound, because the video is seen first of all as entertainment, there is a certain kind of compulsion on the part of the poet to please his audience while simultaneously providing them edification. This also adds significantly to the enduring Yoruba operatic tradition from which Yoruba theatre originally evolved.

### ii. Eulogy- *oríkì*

The subject, in "Èkún Ìyàwó", the subject (Iyawo) sings her own praises and those of her parents and progenitors by herself. First, her own eulogies:

#### *Yoruba*

òkònkókó ní mí o!

tí mo k'òsùpa r'Òsogbo

tí mo w'ẹwù oyè r'Qba Ààgùn

("Ekun Iyawo", opening lines)

#### *English Translation*

I am òkònkókó

I went under the moonlight to Oshogo

I dressed in royal robes to meet king of Aagun

(Translation is mine)

Then, those of her parents:

Baba mi iba o!

O, my father!

Iya mi iba o!

O, my mother!

Iba ni n go f'ọjọ oni ju, omo Alarape Today is only for eulogising you, child of

Alarape

T'ori adase ni hun'mọ, iba o gbọdọ

Because a lone ranger suffers dire

hun'mọ eniyan

consequences, but the deferential one hardly

comes to grief

Ko ma ni hun mi lo'ni o

This shall not turn to grief for me today!

Baba mo ju'ba ki'ba se o

My father, I reverence you, let my veneration be acceptable!

Iya mo ju'ba ki'ba se o

My mother, I reverence you, let my veneration be acceptable!

Ire eja l'omi lo kuku mo

After all, the benefits of the fish are tied only to the water

Ire kọnkọ l'odo lo ma wa o

the benefits of the frog are only found in the river

Eyi te ba wi loni o

Whatever good words you pronounce on me today

Aladuke mo ni k'arọ o romọ o

May arọ (affirmation) attach permanently to it

Ire loni ori i mi afi're!

May my head receive only good things today, only good things!

("Ekun Iyawo", Movement 1)

(Translation is mine)

Apart from her personal lineage *oríkì* and those of her parents, the bride also did a number of other *oríkì* performances, especially while appreciating her parents' care of her and their efforts in seeing her off into marriage. She also specifically sang the *oríkì* of her drummer. The appellation piling of these performances are interesting. The *oríkì* for the drummer features piles of appellation, no doubt to boost his ego while on the job:

Onilu mi alula! Onilu mi alulowo

My drummer may you prosper. My

lowo o

drummer may you become rich!

Aboju ilu bii takanda! Aboju omele bii

The surface of your drummer is like a white

seṣe ẹfun! sheet of paper. The surface of your drum is as white native chalk

Ofilu gb'abuke naro You're able to raise even a hunch-back to standing position  
 Àyánpélé, Àyángbèmi, Àyándáre nle! Ayanpele, Ayangbemi, Ayandare, I salute you!  
 ("Ekun Iyawo", Movement 3)

### iii. Costuming, setting, spatial communication

Watching Lasisi's multi-level deployment of performance characteristics such as costuming, setting, spatial communication, such as dance and other physical gestures like facial expressions, hand movements such as pointing, fist clenching, etc., the poet shows his dexterity at multi-media performance strategies. This is an important stage in the continuous progression of performance poetry in Nigeria. Several levels of performative characteristics are deployed in the video. Some of these performance strategies, which are quite peculiar to Lasisi because of his use of the sight and sound device of video (which in Latin means "I see"), see the poet maximising such characteristics as voice, especially different pitches he deliberately uses to make specific emphasis during his poetic delivery.

### iv. Drum

In Lasisi's poetry videos, 'Àsàbí Alákàrà' in the album *Ẹlẹlẹtùrẹ*, 'Ẹkún Ìyàwó' (the Bride's Poetry), in the album *Ẹkún Ìyàwó*, the poet makes extensive use of the talking drums (gangan and bàtá), to pass across different idiomatic, sometimes humorous and mischievous messages to his audience in the course of poetic performances. The end aims at being an entertainment. For example, in the performance of 'Àsàbí Alákàrà', a witty poem parodying the male gender as a cunning crafty tortoise attempting to snare a supposedly foolish female; the poetry performance using drum language cleverly plays the male and female genders against each other in a game of wits. In the opening montage, the gangan drum said as follows:

"Bílèèdì, bílèèdì. Ẹ má f'abeè ìfàrí se'ré. Blade, blade. Do not play around with the Bílèèdì."  
 shaving blade. Blade!

(Interpretation mine)

With this coded message given by bàtá drums, which tantalisingly prepared the audience for a thrilling encounter, the performance of 'Àsàbí Alákàrà' commenced. In the drum message, which ominously warned of the dangers of toying with the shaving blade, the poet deliberately set up an emotionally charged atmosphere between Àsàbí and her male antagonists. The drum was indirectly saying that just as the blade is meant for shaving, so also is it capable of causing injury, especially if carelessly handled. This implies the double-edged nature of the blade as an instrument of positive and negative abilities. The Yoruba sometimes refer to the tongue metaphorically as a sharp blade (*abẹ*), especially when used scathingly. This Lasisi prefaces the performance of 'Àsàbí Alákàrà' with the talking drum anticipating an atmosphere where barbed and taunting words will be flying around. The audience is thereby primed to expect a charged performance where the dramatis personae will be using words against each other in very interesting ways. And true to this promise, the drum gave out taunting messages at different points of the performance such as the following:

Kó tó d'áyé n kó/2x. We gave birth to a child only yesterday;  
 A bí'mo lánáá, ó l'óun ò bá wa se mo. Now he says he's not keeping company with us anymore.  
 Kó tó d'áyé n kó? How about before he came into this world?

(Interpretation is mine)

Also, in Àsàbí Alákàrà, physiological communication to the audience is amply displayed by the male characters playing ayo game under the tree. These men, in the poet's attempts to lay emphasis on their impure intent towards Àsàbí, used such facial expressions as winking, smacking of the lips, laughing raucously, while striking their hands together as a mark of male solidarity, clenching their fist in suggestive ways-all to strike home the poet's intent of this poem as a social commentary on sexual predation of men against vulnerable women in society. In this poem, even dance is used as a communication strategy. Towards the end of the performance, a male dancer engages in a vigorous suggestive dance during which he twists his entire body, flails his arms, and holds out his danshiki, while at the same time winking with his eyes in improper way, in the direction of Àsàbí and her friends under the tree.

Apart from this drum adding its own acoustic and cultural flavour to the performance, its message here is highly coded. It represents a male voice teasing the female character (Àsàbí Alákàrà), who throughout the performance had been throwing guided barbs at the different tortoise-like male characters who were attempting to deceive and seduce her into situations of compromise.

To show her or to prove to her that she may not know all that she thinks she knows after all, the drum's message, assuming a male persona, taunts Àsàbí and in effect scoffs at her supposed smartness with her quick and quite hurtful under-cutting of the males' trickiness. Lasisi assembles drums and discerningly puts them to use. In order to achieve his performative purpose, he displays his Yoruba cultural knowledge of the function of drums in a communicative situation. It is a common Yoruba characteristic that runs through other works of Lasisi almost in a

similar fashion.

### Conclusion

This study of Akeem Lasisi's works have revealed that the poet relies heavily on the Yoruba oral performance poetic tradition as the framework for his poetry with features such as songs, drums, music, rhythm and dance, verbal actions, including tonal counter-points, euphemisms, allusions, figurative language such as verbal irony among others in their poetry. He also adopts Yoruba oral poetic models of *ewi*, *oriki*, song of abuse, as structural frameworks present in his poetry. He practices automatic code-switching between Yoruba and English with his poetry rendered mostly in English but often accompanied with Yoruba songs. In light of the above, the study reveals that Lasisi's poems are characterised by performance actual, resulting in him achieving his performance aim through different methods. His overall impact however, is a legacy of the continuous relevance of the oral performance poetic tradition to modern Nigerian poetry.

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