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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Performative agency and transition in Àlàbí Ògúndépò's ìjálá and Yẹmí Ẹlẹ́buìbọn's Ifá chants

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Abstract

Indigenous Yorùbá poetry is often defined by such features as context, structure, tonal quality and the performer's identity. Early taxonomy of the poetry focused on the poetics that could be deduced from a long tradition of practice. Recent scholarship in literary and cultural studies has been more interested in showing the ways in which the poetry is being inflected by encounters with postcolonial modernity. While these recent contributions demonstrate how new forms, such as *ewì*, distil expressive nuances from the older forms and invent new performative practices to address new publics, such studies encourage a generalization that credits to the new forms all the modern advances recorded in the indigenous forms themselves. Looking at specific indigenous forms in terms of how postcolonial modernity has reshaped them, rather than considering them another set of additions to a new generic category, allows us a clearer view of their transition. I track the inventions and changes in the practice of two Yorùbá forms, *ìjálá* and Ifá chants, using the performances of Àlàbí Ògúndépò and Yẹmí Ẹlẹ́buìbọn. I rely on ethnographic data to show how mutating audiences and electronic storage and retrieval systems have continually shaped composition and performance, discuss the imperatives of modernity and economy in the performative choices of the artists, and show how the performers simultaneously manage their resistance to and adoption of the modern.

Résumé

La poésie autochtone yoruba est souvent définie par des caractéristiques telles que le contexte, la structure, la qualité tonale et l'identité de l'interprète. Les premières taxonomies de la poésie se concentraient sur la poétique qui pouvait être déduite d'une longue tradition de pratique. Les recherches récentes en études littéraires et culturelles se sont davantage intéressées à montrer la manière dont la poésie est influencée par les rencontres avec la modernité postcoloniale. Alors que ces contributions récentes démontrent comment de nouvelles formes, comme l'*ewì*, distillent les nuances expressives des formes plus anciennes et inventent de nouvelles pratiques performatives pour s'adresser à de nouveaux publics, de telles études encouragent une généralisation qui attribue aux nouvelles formes toutes les avancées modernes enregistrées dans les formes indigènes elles-mêmes. L'examen

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des formes autochtones spécifiques en termes de la façon dont la modernité postcoloniale les a refaçonnées, plutôt que de les considérer comme un autre ensemble d'ajouts à une nouvelle catégorie générique, nous permet d'avoir une vision plus claire de leur transition. L'auteur retrace les inventions et les changements dans la pratique de deux formes yoruba, les chants *ìjálá* et Ifá, en utilisant les performances d'Àlàbí Ògúndépò et de Yẹmí Ẹlẹ́buìbọn. Il s'appuie sur des données ethnographiques pour montrer comment des publics en mutation et des systèmes électroniques de stockage et de recherche ont continuellement façonné la composition et l'interprétation, traite des impératifs de modernité et d'économie dans les choix performatifs des artistes et montre comment les interprètes gèrent simultanément leur résistance au moderne et son adoption.

Resumo

A poesia indígena ioruba é frequentemente definida por características como o contexto, a estrutura, a qualidade tonal e a identidade do intérprete. A taxonomia inicial da poesia centrava-se na poética que podia ser deduzida de uma longa tradição de prática. Os estudos recentes em estudos literários e culturais têm estado mais interessados em mostrar as formas como a poesia está a ser inflectida por encontros com a modernidade pós-colonial. Embora estas contribuições recentes demonstrem o modo como novas formas, por exemplo o *ewì*, destilam nuances expressivas das formas mais antigas e inventam novas práticas performativas para se dirigirem a novos públicos, esses estudos encorajam uma generalização que atribui às novas formas todos os avanços modernos registados nas próprias formas indígenas. Olhar para formas indígenas específicas em termos do modo como a modernidade pós-colonial as remodelou, em vez de as considerar mais um conjunto de adições a uma nova categoria genérica, permite-nos ter uma visão mais clara das suas transições. Acompanho as invenções e mudanças na prática de duas formas iorubás, os cantos *ìjálá* e Ifá, usando as performances de Àlàbí Ògúndépò e Yẹmí Ẹlẹ́buìbọn. Com base em dados etnográficos, mostro como as audiências em mutação e os sistemas electrónicos de armazenamento e recuperação moldaram continuamente a composição e a performance, e também discuto os imperativos da modernidade e da economia nas escolhas performativas dos artistas, e mostro como os intérpretes gerem simultaneamente a resistência e a adoção do moderno.

Introduction

Indigenous Yorùbá poetry is sometimes defined by such features as contexts, structure and tonality. Much of the taxonomy attempted in the early scholarship on the genre, especially in Yorùbá studies, is therefore safely drawn from observable constants that are sanctioned by long practice and which performers hardly dare to upset. Three poetic forms were given prominence in those early attempts at classification: ìjálá (Babalola 1966), ìyẹ̀rẹ̀ (a form of Ifá poetry) (Ọlátúnjí 1972), and ẹ̀sà or iwì (Olajubu 1974). There are many other poetic traditions not so robustly written about, such as rara, an areligious genre focused on favourable profiling of its referents by deploying oríkì and other panegyrics (Babalola 1973), and ẹkún ìyàwó, a short bridal lament found among the Oyo Yorùbá. All the early studies on the three forms base their classification on observable generic denominators such as context of performance, vocalization, performers and thematic content. Babalola associates ìjálá with the worship of Yorùbá divinity Ògún, and notes that naturally therefore, 'hunters predominate among the worshippers of the god Ògún' (Babalola 1966: 3). Writings on the other two forms have also pointed out that the latter were *ab initio* defined by religion and profession; ìyẹ̀rẹ̀ 'is a form which is peculiar to devotees of ọ̀rúnmìlà, the Yorùbá god of divination system' and 'Ifá herbalist-diviners, known as babaláwo and their followers' (Ọ̀látúnjí 1972: 69), while ẹ̀sà, also called iwì, is 'chanted exclusively by members of the Egúngún [ancestor veneration] cult' (Olajubu 1974: 31) and onídán performers, 'who go about in groups of six or eight with their children and wives and a troupe of drummers who are usually permanently attached to the group' (*ibid.*: 32).

More recent scholarship, mainly in literature and cultural studies, is united by a focus on the ways in which modernity has inflected the context and shape of performance of the poetry. Ewì, a very popular new form distilled from various indigenous poetic sources and of which these recent studies seem enamoured, is considered to sit astride the indigenous and the modern. Rita Nnodim calls it 'a semi-oral semi-written genre of poetic expression that oscillates between the written and the oral' (2006: 155), and, according to Akin Adesokan, it is 'Yorùbá poetry composed in print and recited over an orchestra of percussive, folk, or authored music, with or without sung sequences' (2017: 2). What Nnodim deems most fascinating is that ewì has convened a new pan-Yorùbá audience that is larger than what was ever thought possible with previous indigenous forms. Oyeniyi Okunoye (2010; 2011), while looking specifically at the work of the ewì poets, especially Olanrewaju Adepoju, says that by exploiting the expressive advantages of both orality and writing, and by adapting to the sundry media offered by new electronic storage and retrieval, not only has ewì entrenched itself as a viable form, but, by doing so, it shows the regenerative capacity of Yorùbá performance culture.

While showing many interesting ways in which the Yorùbá poetic genres responded to modernity, there is a generic classification implicit in these discussions that tends to overlook advances in the indigenous poetry itself. To focus on ewì poetry specifically, a usage of the name has been exploited in a way that assigns credit for innovation achieved in the indigenous forms to ewì. And this discourse is slippery to engage because it latches on to the fact that all poetry is essentially ewì. In a sense understood in both performance and academic texts, all poetic forms in Yorùbá are ewì.[1] In other words, while ewì today is more widely used to specifically refer to the specific modern Yorùbá genre as practised by Adepoju and Oladapo, the name also broadly refers to poetry. Tunde Adegbola and Damola Adesina (2020) argue with ethnographic and archival proofs that ewì is indeed a twentieth-century neologism, and they conclude that it was adopted to label a new Yorùbá form equivalent to poetry as conceived in the Western tradition.

The occasional need to differentiate the older indigenous genres from the modern ewì has resulted in fashioning retronymic identifiers such as ewì àdáyébá (indigenous poetry) for the old forms such as ìjálá, ẹ̀sà and rárà, and ewì ìwòyí or ewì ìgbàlódé (modern poetry) for the modern form.[2] The adoption of the term 'ewì' for the poetic

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[1] For example, Oludare Olajubu clarifies with a footnote in his article on iwì (ẹ̀sà) egúngún that 'the word iwì should not be confused with *Ewì which is the general term for all types of Yorùbá poetry*' (1974: 41, emphasis added).

[2] The terms *ewì àdáyébá* and *ewì ìgbàlódé* were used by Àlàbí Ògúndépò in his conversation with the writer. *Ewì iwoyi* has been favoured in academic conversations since Akinjogbin edited an anthology of the same name (1969).

sui generis that Nnodim and Okunoye describe has its root in a similar classification by Adeagbo Akinjogbin (1969). In his introduction to the collection of Yorùbá ewì, *Ewì Iwoyi*, Akinjogbin had earlier pronounced that 'ewì ni orúkọ àjùmọ̀jẹ́ tí a fún ẹ̀yà *àkọsílẹ̀* kan tí a máa fi ohùn sọ tí a sì máa fi ohùn dídùn kà [ewì is the name adopted for a type of *writing* performed and read in a poetic voice]' (*ibid.*: 13, emphasis added). Even as the writer later broadens his entries to include the more indigenous types such as ìjálá and iwì/ẹ̀sà, the pronouncement has to some extent made writing conditional for ewì: for example, it is in keeping with that understanding of the form that Okunoye (2010), while writing on the modern ewì, also includes Àlàbí Ògúndépò and Yẹmí Ẹlẹ́buìbọn, ìjálá poet and babaláwo/Ifá poetry performer respectively. The inclusion may be understandable in the context of the two artists having exploited writing as a medium of, or aid to, performance. While sociality, admittedly, compels dynamism in the ways in which poetry is continuously invented and used (Anyidoho 1994; Kaschula 1997; Barber 2009), my concern about this discourse and tradition of classification, however, is that it elides individual and particular assessments of indigenous Yorùbá poetry as growing forms. It is fascinated by the orality–writing interface to the point that the specific and peculiar ways through which each genre mutated in response to modernity and related encounters are occluded as all of them are homogenized as ewì. In this work, I adopt the latter, narrower classification and thereby make a distinction between ewì, on the one hand, and ìjálá and Ifá poetry on the other. While not discounting ewì as a novel generic category practised by artists such as Ọláńrewájú Adépọ̀jù and Ọlátúbọ̀sún Ọládàpọ̀, ìjálá and Ifá performances considered here are, contra ewì, deemed continuous from traditions that have always been undergoing modification to the extent of adjusting to new socio-cultural imperatives.

Àlàbí Ògúndépò (b. 1943) is the oldest living professional ìjálá poet. His amateur and professional practice dates from the beginning of the second half of the last century to the present. Born to ìjálá-poet parents, Fátókun and Ògúnrìnọlá of Ṣakí in Oyo State, Nigeria, Ògúndépò's practice began naturally as imitation of his parents and older siblings; he would later distinguish himself by providing curtain raisers before adult performers and during occasional performances at primary school events (*c.*1953–59). Apart from performing live professionally and using the regular media of audio and video records, Ògúndépò has participated in most of the modern performance media: popular theatre, modern literary theatre, writing/photoplay series, television and radio broadcasts, electronic media and outdoor advertisements.

Born into a household of professional hunters in Òṣogbo, Osun State, Nigeria and pledged before birth to Ifá,[3] Ifáyẹmí Ọ̀ṣundàgbonù Ẹlẹ́buìbọn (b. 1947) is a babaláwo.[4] While the awo profession naturally makes him a performer of Ifá poetry, Ẹlẹ́buìbọn, more than any babaláwo in Nigeria in the last century, has reconstructed and repurposed the performances associated with Ifá. Like Ògúndépò, he has featured in most of the definitive stages of cultural production in Nigeria: traditional live performances, popular theatre, radio and television production, audio and video record production, literature and electronic media, and outdoor advertisements. Ògúndépò and Ẹlẹ́buìbọn illustrate better than any of their contemporaries the response of the traditional performer to cultural encounters that have reshaped their society and profession from the beginning of the last century to date.

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[3] Ifá is a system, overseen by babaláwo, comprising spirituality, divination, healing, philosophy, poetry, etc.

[4] Ifá priest, diviner, healer and performer.

While insisting that the works of Àlàbí Ògúndépò and Yẹmí Ẹlẹ́buìbọn remain ìjálá and Ifá poetry respectively – not ewì ìwòyí, narrowly speaking – the two poets are used in this article to explore the nature and extent of recent shifts from orthodox artistic practices, to reflect on the factors that impel those shifts, and on how the artists articulate and manage the tension that emanates from them. The discussion relies on recorded performances of and conversations with the two poets, and ancillary texts from co-poets and key informants.

Breach and limits of structure

The composition of many of the poetic forms anticipates third-person participation. For example, 'ìjálá, ẹ̀sà, rárà and ègé chants' have well-known formulae in which songs 'are [either] punctuated or ended with a song dictated by the lead chanter' (Ọlátúnjí 1979: 190). Audience participation, for example, is encouraged in the structure of ẹ̀sà in the musical two- or three-liner that the lead poet introduces and that is repeated by a chorus of co-performers and audience. In ìjálá, the lead poet at the end of a turn may introduce a two-line song:

Lead: Ó tán nbí 'ò tán, aláṣejù o
Ó tán nbí 'ò tán, aláṣejù
K'a s' ọ̀rọ̀ fún'ni k'á sì fẹ́, aláṣejù

Chorus: Ó tán nbí 'ò tán, aláṣejù o

Lead: Served you right, stubborn immoderate fellow
Served you right, stubborn immoderate fellow
It's good to be heedful of advice, stubborn immoderate fellow

Chorus: Served you right, stubborn immoderate fellow
(Yemitan 1963: 14, my translation)

The repeated first two lines here are intended to induct the audience into an accessory performative role, for if the poet's companion(s) were co-hunter poets already in the know, the lead performer is more likely to open the song without the repeated lines. In that case, he would start with only the lead line and his companions would easily follow with the familiar complement.

The disposition of Àlàbí Ògúndépò has always been unorthodox, ever since his early recording days. Although he largely adopts the traditional compositional formula, the poet has begun to incorporate into his ìjálá features that would later dominate and redefine the art. In 'Kádàrá 'ò Gb'óògùn', a solo performance recorded in 1971, he opens with ìyẹ̀rẹ̀, performance poetry of the babaláwo, but closes with a structurally familiar ìjálá song.[5] From the early 1980s, when he began to record more frequently, his composition started to be more daringly inventive, with elements and styles of delivery appropriated from other forms. The two identical works recorded for Olatubosun Records in 1981, *Ìjálá Aré Ọdẹ* volumes 1 and 2, adopt musical accompaniment resources of gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́ and folk songs, not ìjálá. Progressively, Ògúndépò's performance has become inventive to the point of adopting a complex musical accompaniment performed by a specialized group. This pattern of composition reflects a transition from the phase when 'Yorùbá verbal artists are not professionals' and 'live primarily on the proceeds of their [other] profession as farmers, weavers, herbalists, and hunters' (Olajubu 1978: 684–5) to the phase when the co-performing audience has been pushed to the sidelines and the poet becomes the uninterruptible cantor, the professional. This *transition*, for the poet, is imperative, for

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[5] Àlabí Ògúndépò, 'Kadàrá 'ò Gboògùn', recorded by Val Olayemi, 1971, Archive of Sound and Vision, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan.

> tí ayé bá ń yí, t'éèyàn dúró lójúkannáà tẹtẹrẹ, wọn o gbàgbé olúwaarẹ̀ . . . Nisìn-ín, nígbà t'á wa fẹ́ẹ́ jókòó ti ǹkan yìí [ìjálá], táa fẹ́ pè é n'íṣẹ́ ẹ wa, tá à n'íṣẹ́ mîì, ó yẹ ká máa ro ọpọlọ wa lójoojúmọ́ . . . Kìíse ìjálá àwa-ara-wa-ríra-wa nìkan. Gbogbo ìwọ̀nyẹn tiẹ̀ ti gbà'gboro kan; àtẹni tó mọ̀'jálá a sun, àtẹni tí ò'mọ̀'jálá, gbogbo wọn ni wọ́n m'orin yẹn
>
> whoever remains static when the world is moving is quickly forgotten . . . Now that we have decided to make this [ìjálá performance] our only profession, we need to be reflecting creatively all the time . . . It should not just stop at àwa-ara-wa-ríra-wa [two-liner song] ìjálá. In fact, that pattern is already well known in town; both ìjálá poets and non-poets know it.[6]

For the poet, transition also has a very interesting literal dimension. Ògúndépò informs us in the 2002 conversation quoted above that 'tẹ́lẹ̀tẹ́lẹ̀ . . . ìjálá, àjókòósun ni. Àwọn àgbà iwájú u wa náà, títí di ìsìnhín, wọ́n ń jókòó ni [the ìjálá used to be a sedentary art. The poets who came before us always sat down to chant, even up till today].' A major aspect of *moving* the art from the amateur and semi-professional to the professional phase, for Ògúndépò, therefore, is leaving the seat to stand and walk as he uses his entire body to deploy kinaesthetic signs during live performances. I return to the discussion of the other dimensions of professionalization shortly.

Sacred texts are often susceptible to disuse in light of strict provisions that moderate their performance and ensure their fixity. Daniela Merolla thinks that 'elements of such literatures are at risk of disappearing when styles and texts are linked to specific languages and rituals that are no longer performed as they were in the past' (Merolla 2014: 80). Ìyẹ̀rẹ̀, the performance of Ifá poetry by babaláwo during ritual and/or festive occasions, is similarly considered walled off from innovation. According to Olatunde Ọlátúnjí (1972), ìyẹ̀rẹ̀ has a compositional structure that discourages addition from sources extratextual to the Ifá sacred corpus.[7] Of the four elements listed as the 'content and structure of ìyẹ̀rẹ̀ chant' (namely, homage, address to audience, Ifá verse and song coda), the obligatory three are sacred Ifá verses, and homage and coda that are themselves partly or wholly composed of odu Ifá texts. The component that speaks to the general audience is the only optional element. Both Ọlátúnjí (1972) and Wande Abimbola (1976) further explain that regulatory antiphonal 'yesses [hiin]' and 'nos [báun kọ́]' from co-babaláwo constitute cues by which performing babaláwo are prevented from inserting wrong or invented lines: 'their response is either Hen en in "(Yes, you are correct)" or Ba un ko "(No you are wrong)." If the chorus replies Báun kọ́ thrice, the leader is forced to stop for another person to take over from him' (Ọlátúnjí 1972: 69). Abimbola indeed provides a more dire context 'where a priest [babaláwo] makes a serious mistake while chanting in defiance of the expressed wishes of the congregation … [and is] thrown out of the meeting in shame' (Abimbola 1976: 15).

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[6] Interview with Àlàbí Ògúndépò, Ajáwùú, Ọ̀ṣogbo, 30 November 2002.

[7] The corpus consists of many narrative verses in 256 categories. They are invoked during divination as a guide to the client's solution.

The existing understanding, represented by Ọlátúnjí and Abimbola, has apparently been influenced by a modern assumption of the sacred text as *scripture*, an inviolable *writ*. Orality, to which Ifá is moored, however, has no place for such closure. While, admittedly, there is relative oversight to dam indiscriminate inflow, existing Ifá texts show updates that have been obviously invented to address new encounters. In 1971, at the palace of the traditional Yorùbá ruler, the Alaafin of Oyo, a team of babaláwo congregated to chant their goodwill in Ifá pípè,[8] ìyẹ̀rẹ̀ and songs for Lamidi Adeyemi III, who had just been installed as Alaafin. A lead babaláwo poet begins with prayers to stymy all potential adversaries of the Oba, citing Ọ̀bàrà-Ọ̀sẹ́, an odù[9] that 'r'ọ́bi dà s'órí oníbi [makes evil backfire against whoever planned it]'. The lead, before introducing the song that ends his verse, notes that it was Ọ̀sẹ́ (the character in the narrative) who 'mú'yẹ̀rẹ̀ … sunkún ù'pín [declaimed his fate in ìyẹ̀rẹ̀]' and 'yanu kótó orin awo ní ńkọ [opened his mouth to chant as do the initiates thus]':

Lead babaláwo:	Òh, jẹ́ nse tèmi ò é
Co-babaláwo:	Jẹ́ nse tèmi ò é
Lead babaláwo:	Òwò kìí f'ówò l'órùn
Co-babaláwo:	Jẹ́ nse tèmi.[10]
Lead babaláwo:	Oh, let me be about my business in peace
Co-babaláwo:	Let me be about my business in peace
Lead babaláwo:	One worker does not suffocate another
Co-babaláwo:	Let me be about my business in peace.

The origin of this song's formula (if not the song itself) is very recognizably Yorùbá-Islamic.[11] It is laid on a well-known *alásàláátù* compositional format of which the best-known version is as follows:

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[8] Ifá pípè is the chorused repetition of selected Ifá verses being chanted by a lead babaláwo.

[9] An odù is a body of Ifá verses.

[10] 'The Awo Aláàfin', 1971, Archive of Sound and Vision, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan.

[11] Four respondents – three Yorùbá persons and a babaláwo – confirmed this. They were first exposed to an a cappella version of the song to prevent cues.

Lead: Báaríkà rẹ ò é
Chorus: Báaríkà rẹ ò é
Lead: Àlàájì tó re Mọ́kà t'oo bọ̀
Chorus: Báaríkà rẹ.
Lead: You are welcome
Chorus: You are welcome
Lead: You Pilgrim who went to Mecca and returned
Chorus: You are welcome.

As already pointed out by scholars of the genre, ẹsẹ Ifá (the infinite verses that odu Ifá contain) and ìyẹ̀rẹ̀ are not exactly the same thing; one quick way to clarify this is that ẹsẹ are the *raw* texts of Ifá verses from which not only ìyẹ̀rẹ̀ but also other genres draw their content, ẹsẹ's location within Ifá practice notwithstanding. Ìyẹ̀rẹ̀ is just a performance of selected ẹsẹ by babaláwo, with one of them leading at a time. Ifá texts are, as such, performable even in extra-ìyẹ̀rẹ̀ contexts. The ẹsẹ Ifá is, in fact, more frequently performed ad lib and solo by babaláwo than in the disciplined context of ìyẹ̀rẹ̀. Ifá is, therefore, taken here as a broad field from which performances, including those non-contiguous to Ifá divination, draw content. Going a little further afield in the way that ẹsẹ Ifá texts themselves are constituted, while they are broadly classified into 256 odu (sixteen major and 240 minor odu), the constituent ẹsẹ (narrative verses) under the sixteen odu are so infinite that no one babaláwo knows them all. This would weaken the kind of unbreachable surveillance attributed to the Ifá institution by Ọlátúnjí and Abimbola. Most importantly, the corpus is so thematically and chronologically capacious that there cannot but be invented updates at some point to cater to cultural and historical exigencies. This vastness accommodates narratives such as the one set in the mythical past when penises were detachable so women could keep them whenever their husbands travelled,[12] or a relatively recent one about how Ọ̀rúnmìlà's wife gave birth to Prophet Mohammed,[13] or even a more recent one on the technological ascendancy of the 'white man' over the 'black man'.[14] Like many other expressive cultural sites, Ifá therefore has numerous testaments to encounters that have changed it.

More significantly, beyond the strictures of ìyẹ̀rẹ̀, the Ifá verses themselves present a performative affordance due to 'the form of *ẹsẹ Ifá* [that] is predominantly poetic' (Abimbola 1976: 31). Indeed, babaláwo could 'specialize in chanting as part of their post-initiation training' (*ibid.*: 20). There are, as such, accomplished poet-babaláwo who choose to be lyrical when rendering the ẹsẹ even in contexts when speech-mode delivery would be fine. All of this points to internal agential fissures within Ifá that make innovations possible. The major way in which the Ifá poetry performance of Ẹlẹ́buìbọn moves away from classical practice can first be noticed in the inversion of the structure described by Ọlátúnjí. In 'Orí ló dá mi', a poetry performance recorded in 1984, for example, Ẹlẹ́buìbọn, while using Ifá songs extensively, deploys Ifá verses more sparingly as he concentrates on the explication of the concept of destiny in Yorùbá thought. In this way, the obligatory elements such as 'ìjúbà' and 'Ifá verse' become optional and yield ground to original text specifically addressed to an audience. Of course, the structure described by Ọlátúnjí speaks only of ìyẹ̀rẹ̀, but I argue later for an equal ìyẹ̀rẹ̀ status for some (if not most) of Ẹlẹ́buìbọn's poetry.

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[12] 'Odù Ifá Ọ̀sẹ́ Àwòko', rendered and explicated by Babalọlá Fátóògùn, 1967, Archive of Sound and Vision, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan.

[13] 'Odù Ifá Òtúá Méjì', rendered and explicated by Babalọlá Fátóògùn, 1966, Archive of Sound and Vision, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan.

[14] 'Ìyẹ̀rẹ̀ Ifa: Ìrosùn Takẹ̀lẹ̀kú', performed and explicated by Babalọlá Fátóògùn, 1969, Archive of Sound and Vision, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan.

Sociality, literacy and the expanding performance circuit

Studies in African traditional performance have long been alert to the mutation of oral forms in response to modern encounters (Anyidoho 1994; Kaschula 1997). Rather than categorize such transitions as formidable modern encounters in which weak old tradition is overwritten by a new one, however, they should be considered natural points in the continua that followed since those forms were invented, long before we made setting such changes down into a business. Karin Barber (2009) explains that transition in the media of African performance is due largely to sociality – sociality as a way of 'belong[ing] to society' in which 'wage labour, urbanization, literacy, the church [and] the school' have become central. Barber's perspective refrains from seeing such transitions entirely 'as being caused by [twentieth-century global] media flows' (*ibid.*: 9). Performance forms that thrived in ancient feudal aristocratic society and engaged that society in different ways responded to the tremor of the new order.

Both Ògúndépò and Ẹlẹ́buìbọn not only respond to the postcolonial condition, but specifically articulate their frustration and disenchantment. The capitalist economy had begun to take firm hold of the urban centres by the second half of the twentieth century to the extent that giftable food items never before exchanged for money were turning up for sale at the market. Roast yam is one such new merchandise that flew in the very face of Yorùbá assumptions about food and commerciality. Awọ́nlọ́jà-bí-ẹ̀sun-iṣu (that-which-is-scarce-in-the-market-like-the-roast-yam) is a well-worn metaphor for rarity, the literal violation of which Ògúndépò would not let slide:

'Awọ́nlọ́jà-bí-ẹ̀sun u-ṣu' làá ti ń gbọ́ rí ń'jọ́ Aláyé ti d'áyé
Ayé ti d'ayé ọ̀làjú, iṣu sísun lẹ̀ nlé s'órí àtẹ
A waa le p'áyé d'ayé ọ̀làjú ká f'ojú egbò tẹlẹ̀?
Ẹ sun'ṣu, sùn'gẹ̀dẹ̀
Ẹ sùn'gbàdo, sùn'nàmá
Ẹ sun kókò, e sùn'gẹ́ lójúu pópó
B'ó wù yín ẹ sun pẹ́pẹ́lùpẹ́, ẹ̀yin lẹ l'oko o yín tí ń joro.

'That-which-is-scarce-in-the-market-like-the-roast-yam' was what we used to know since God made the world
Modern civilization came, now you put out roast yam for sale
Must we on account of civilization tread the floor with an open sore?

You roast yam and roast plantain
You roast maize and roast sweet potato
You roast cocoyam and roast cassava in the open
You may roast the cowpea too if you want, the reduction of your farmland that would follow shall be your problem.[15]

The new condition that throws up odd mercantilism also shakes up the patriarchal comfort zone that the babaláwo poet used to know. Ẹlẹ́buìbọn, in 'Obinrin Iwoyi', agonizes over the new independence that monetary economy has brought for women, who have become obsessed with its acquisition:

Ọ̀kánjúà òhun olè déédé l'ó rí
Panságà òhun àbíkú ọgbọọgba ló se
B'ówó bá tán, panságà a gbọ̀n'dí pẹ́pẹ́ẹ́pé, wọn a sán lọ bí ẹyẹ.

Greed and stealing are two of a kind
The adulteress and a child-born-to-die are one and the same
For when there is no money any more, the adulteress takes flight like a migrating bird.[16]

This elevation of mammon above other values is understood in Ẹlẹ́buìbọn's model as part of the endless tail towed by slave trade and colonization:

Wọ́n ti kó wa l'ógún gbogbo, òyìnbó ti jà wá l'ólè àsà
Lẹ́yìn tí gbogboò'lú ti d'àsìngbà t'á ò leè dá dúró mọ́
Wọ́n wá gb'Olódùmarè[17] lọ́wọ́ ọ wa
Wọ́n gb'ówó lé wa lọ́wọ́, wọ́n s'owó d'ọba fún wa.

They have stolen all our heritage, the white man has taken our values from us
After the entire nation had been bonded in slavery and we lost independence
They took away Olódùmarè from us
And gave us money, saying money is our new lord.[18]

As they lyrically respond to the changes that are redefining their world, the poets and their poetry are mutated by these changes. As Western education and literacy attained primacy and became socio-economic capital, the traditional poetry was also inflected. Studies have shown how literacy, especially in indigenous languages using the Latin script, has reshaped production, performance and audience (Kaschula 1997; Nnodim 2006; Okunoye 2010). The very social process of the artist's encounter and mediation of the new expressive means gives culture- and location-specific details to the earlier elaboration on the orality–writing interface. Both Ògúndépò and Ẹlẹ́buìbọn grew up as Western education was being mainstreamed and literacy becoming a privileged means of producing and circulating knowledge and information. Ògúndépò, in fact, had a formal education up to the first year in modern (post-primary) school before leaving for lack of funding. Ògúndépò's disposition to education as instruction in literacy unequivocally admits it as an accessory to the art, a means by which the art ensures retention in a world that has begun to change its voice. All Ògúndépò's performances from the early 1980s to date are scripted. Before this time, 'a ìí kọọ́'lẹ̀. N'ígbà t'áà ńṣe rẹ́kọ́ọ̀dù kéékèèké oníṣẹ̀ẹ́jú méjì àbọ̀, bíi oníṣẹ̀ẹ́jú márùn-ún … Nígbà t'áà ńṣè yẹn, a maa ńrò ò l'órí nítorípé iṣẹ́ ò pọ̀ l'ọ́wọ́ [they were not scripted. When we were making the short two-and-a-half-minute and five-minute records … When we were doing that, we performed from memory because we had just a few performances].' Now, the age-old mode of internalizing lines by rote has become inadequate for the new situation, which requires a poetry that caters to increasing patronage and a variety of unrelated themes and contexts, such as radio and television jingles and promotion, political campaigns, open market advertisements, and so on. The human creative and retentive capacity that the older poet Ògúndare Fọ́yánmu boasts in *Orin Òjòwú* – 'ìran a tèmi ò j'òògùn ù 'sọ̀yè t'ó fi níyè ń'nú [poets of my bloodline need no charms to aid their memory]' – has been strained to the limits and found incapable of servicing the new clientele of the professional poet. Unlike what is more widely observed in the discussion on the writing–orality interface, where the written text stands analogous to writing and a volume of written poetry is considered an alternative to the spoken, writing here is mnemonic. It is a move away from the phase when memory and practice were the poet's only means of keeping performance texts.

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[15] Àlàbí Ògúndépò, *Ènìyàn Sòro*, Afrodisia, 1974.

[16] Ifáyẹmí Ẹlẹ́buìbọn, 'Obìnrin Ìwòýi', 1973 Archive of Sound and Vision, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan.

[17] Yorùbá supreme divinity.

[18] Ifáyẹmi Ẹlẹ́buìbọn, 'Ẹ má P'Àsà Rẹ́', 1973 Archive of Sound and Vision, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan.

The poet's deep apprehension regarding traditional poetry's waning valence and the traditional poet's increasing socio-economic precarity influenced his interaction with the agencies of modern cultural production. At the time when Ògúndépò left Ṣakí for Òṣogbo, where he still lives, the primary education he had received amounted to little or nothing in the semi-urban location. Joining Oyin Adejobi's travelling theatre troupe in Òṣogbo was his entry into modern performance. During this time, he was auditioned for the role of Agúnlẹ́yìnoyè, the court poet in Wole Soyinka's film *Kongi's Harvest*. Ògúndépò saw the first proof of the remunerative prospect of literacy and education on the set of *Kongi's Harvest*, where his daily pay was £3.30, more than thirty times higher than his monthly £3 – whenever the play season was good – with the Oyin Adejobi group of barely educated and outright unlettered actors. Conversely, educated co-actors on the movie set who had worked on productions elsewhere in the world felt that the pay was stingy and called for a boycott. Ògúndépò joined in but refused to leave when the pressure action failed. After the production ended – during which time he enjoyed benefaction from Soyinka and his friend and collaborator Femi Johnson, so that he did not have to feed himself from his pay – the poet stayed at the School of Theatre, University of Ibadan, headed by Soyinka, to study for a certificate.

The background that Yẹmí Ẹlẹ́buìbọn emerged from was uncompromisingly postcolonial in the way in which it elevated the indigenous and resisted conscious incorporation of the exotic. In the early 1950s, when children were being put in school under the Universal Free Education programme of the Western Region government of Obafemi Awolowo, Ẹlẹ́buìbọn senior was approached by the education officials to enlist his little son. The patriarch, turning them down, explained that the boy was already pledged to the babaláwo profession; and when the officials further tried to convince the father that Yẹmí could attend school while still being an Ifá pupil, he walked away, saying 'kìí rí báun mọ́; àwọn tí'án lọ ọ̀ padà [it always turns out to be false in the end; those who went that route never returned]'. The postcolonial consciousness was later to define much of Ẹlẹ́buìbọn's original work. During his pupillage, when educated artists, scholars and impresarios such as Wole Soyinka, Uli Beier and Duro Ladipo started to converge in Òṣogbo at the Mbari Mbayo Club, Yẹmí had begun to distinguish himself as an eloquent child babaláwo poet. Uli Beier was drawn by the boy's performance from the Mbari Mbayo house, right opposite Yẹmí's master's home. Beier befriended the little boy and always wanted him around whenever there was a performance at Mbari Mbayo or to teach them some aspects of Yorùbá culture. Yẹmí would be beaten thoroughly by his master whenever he was found in the company of any Mbari Mbayo artist, or when he cut Ifá learning sessions to sit with children being taught home lessons. Although he had self-taught himself to read and write in Yorùbá in spite of persecution, it was on qualifying as babaláwo that Ẹlẹ́buìbọn learnt basic written and spoken English and written Yorùbá through correspondence courses.[19]

For Ẹlẹ́buìbọn, as for Ògúndépò, writing today has become an accessory to the original texts generated out of the body of Ifá knowledge and expression. For Ẹlẹ́buìbọn particularly, it should be noted that using the medium of writing extends beyond poetry performance to television documentary plays, explanatory prose on Ifá, and feature films.

Critique, licence and performance in the teeth of power

The robust authorial insertion of the poet persona in the production and performance through such means as writing and technology has radically changed the forms in some ways. Being demographically specific to hunters, a social class that is traditionally associated with contestation and trespass, ìjálá has many components that are agonistic, ranging from unabashed sexualized abuse and humorous innuendos to the combative exchange among poets to prove lyrical superiority. While they have performed in the courts of aristocrats, praising monarchs, chieftains and the rich, the ìjálá poets have also critically turned on this same class that often patronizes them. Ìjálá poets ordinarily belong in the class of artists traditionally guaranteed cover from persecution for any offence their work might give, because 'Ọba 'ìí p'ọ̀kọrin [King does not kill the poet]' (Olajubu 1978; Ọlátúnjí 1979; Okunoye 2010). Ọlátúnjí, however, qualifies this licence, noting that 'in spite of the oral poet's freedom to comment on the community, there is enough evidence to show that he can get into trouble with political leaders or powerful people within the society'. Specifically, he points out an instance when 'an ìjálá artist … was arrested by the police and had to pay a heavy fine' (Ọlátúnjí 1979: 196) and another in which 'the [military] governor ordered [ìjálá poet Owolabi Aremu] to be sent out as a rebel and … for three months after the incident council officials at Àkẹ̀sán were still after him' (*ibid.*: 198). But Ọlátúnjí's reference is in fact to the traditional poet in the modern state and economy that promise him material ascendancy through professionalization but take his licence away by law. An incident concerning Ògúndare Fọ́yánmu, Ògúndépò's contemporary mentioned in Ọlátúnjí's article as being 'very close to Ọba Ọládùńnńi Oyèéwùmí Ajagungbadé III', the Ṣọ̀ún of Ògbómọ̀ṣọ́ (Ọlátúnjí 1979: 193), a prominent Yorùbá monarch, would illustrate this perilous situation of the artist.

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[19] 'Iforowero pelu Araba Ifayemi Ẹlẹ́buìbọn ni Ilu Oshogbo' (Conversation with Araba Ifayemi Ẹlẹ́buìbọn in Òṣogbo), NigbatiTV, 2021, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-FpdVNjIrhk&t=732s>.

In 1989, at the commissioning of the electrification of Gambari, a community under a local government headquartered in Ògbómọ̀ṣọ́, there were prominent traditional rulers in attendance with the military governor, Sasaeniyan Oresanya. Subtextual to that gathering and event is a simmering rivalry and bickering among the traditional rulers, some of whom draw their claim to prominence and seniority from not just historical but mythical past: Ṣọ̀ún, Olúgbọ́n, Arẹ̀sà, Òǹpetu, etc.[20] All the traditional rulers seemed to be pitted against the Ṣọ̀ún, who now enjoys modern ascendancy with the urbanization of his domain. According to Ṣayọ̀ Àlàgbé, a journalist and the foremost biographer of Fọ́yánmu, when Fọ́yánmu started to perform at that event, 'ẹlẹ́gùn ú gbà á [the spirit (muse) possessed him]' and he turned on his patron, blaming him for intransigence: 'Ògbómọ̀ṣọ́ kan náà ni gbogbo wa / E sọ fún Ṣọ̀ún Oyèéwùmí kó yéé l'agídí mọ́ [We all are of Ògbómọ̀ṣọ́ / Tell Ṣọ̀ún Oyèéwùmí to eschew stubbornness].'[21] At that point, the enraged Ṣọ̀ún motioned Fọ́yánmu to stop and was later joined by the military governor. But the 'possessed' poet waved them off with 'N ó wìí, Ọba ìí p'ọ̀kọrin / Ohùn l'Ọba á sé [Let me speak for the King does not kill the poet / Only the voice can the King mute]', finalizing the verse with a musical *coup de grâce*:

Lead: Ọ̀rọ̀ ńlá fẹ́ẹ̀ dé ná
Ọ̀rọ̀ ńlá fẹ́ẹ̀ dé ná
Kékeré o lọ gbọ́ hun nì

Chorus: Ọ̀rọ̀ ńlá fẹ́ẹ̀ dé ná

Lead: More is to come
More is to come
What you just heard is the tip of the iceberg

Chorus: More is to come.

The military governor, angered by the poet's conduct, banned him for six months. There is, however, a noteworthy clause in the lyrical retort of the poet to his patron's caution. 'Ohùn l'Ọba á sé [Only the voice can the King mute]' seems to apprehend that the poet's immunity might not be absolute after all. As literally denoted in the first line, the ancient protection might have related only to the poet's life, not his practice.

There is a noticeable downplay of the ìjálá agonistic temper in the work of Àlàbí Ògúndépò, especially post-1970s. A relative pacifist and urbane disposition is required by a new clientele that the poet now services. Persuasion, not necessarily reproach, would work better on the radio listeners whom Ògúndépò cautions against speeding or child labour. While mild censures are addressed to anonymous archetypes like the corrupt, the disorderly and sex offenders, confrontations with specific referents such as those that always animate ìjálá and other traditional forms are avoided. The oaths, body-shaming and other expletives that you find in Ògúndépò's work up to the late 1970s and in most of Fọ́yánmu's work are the sensational spice of the classical ìjálá. But that agonistic temper is now toned down; Ògúndépò would especially caution that performances that are intensely critical of the political establishment in the time of crisis could worsen that crisis. Recalling Fọ́yánmu's ordeal with hindsight, Ògúndépò reaffirmed:

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[20] Rulers of the Yorùbá ancient towns of Ògbómọ̀ṣọ́, Ilé-Igbọn, Ìresà and Ìjeru respectively.

[21] Interview with Ṣayọ̀ Àlàgbé, University of Ibadan, 17 August 2022.

> Ìdí tiẹ̀ nìyẹn t'ó fi yẹ kí ǹkan máa ní àkọ́ọ́lẹ̀. Tí ǹkan ò bá l'ákọ́ọ́lẹ̀, t'éèyàn bá l'òhun d'ójú agbo pé ohun tó bá sá ti bọ́ s'óhun lẹ́nu náà lòhun ọ́ maa sọ, èèyàn ó d'ọ̀tá ẹlòmíì.
>
> That's the very reason things [performances] ought to be scripted. If they are not scripted and you enter the arena to say whatever lines come spontaneously to your mind, you end up making enemies.[22]

Today, the poet, therefore, has a new task of reining in the ancient demon of performative spontaneity through such means as writing, which allows for pre-performance reflection and eliminates unintended *lèse-majesté*.

However, exorcizing contestation and aggression from ìjálá can hardly be total, especially as politicians contesting for different offices are now a major section of the poet's clientele. As in the traditional praise in many of the Yorùbá poetic forms, the subject of a political campaign is highlighted as an antithesis of a real or imagined opponent. In the Osun State 2003 governorship election campaign record for Ọlágúnsóyè Oyinlọlá, the candidate who would later win the election, Ògúndépò calls out the opponent incumbent governor noted for frugality as 'ọmọ ahun [the stingy one]', contra Ọlágúnsóyè, the prince of Òkukù, an 'ọmọ àjíféẹrúkẹ [he who grew up being pampered by slaves]'. Similarly, in the performance for Akin Ògúnbiyi, the Accord Party candidate in the Osun State 2022 governorship election, 'B'ẹ́ẹ bá gb'*olódo* l'ááyè, áá bà'lúúẹ [Let in the *unintelligent one* and he will ruin the whole state]' is widely considered to be directed at an opposition candidate who was said to have no university education and was involved in a certificate scandal. So, in the testy political campaign climate of Nigeria, where the safety of lives, especially partisan ones, are not sure, Ògúndépò always leaves town before the release of a campaign record:

> Ọjọ́ tí kinní yẹn ọ́ bá jáde s'íta báyìí, n ń sálọ sí Ṣakí ni. S'ẹ́ẹ mọ̀ pé ìkà l'àwọn olósèlú. Wọ́n lè p'ààyàn.
>
> The very day the record is to be released, I always flee to Ṣakí [my home town]. You know the politicians are evil. They could kill.[23]

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[22] *Ibid.*

[23] Interview with Àlàbí Ògúndépò, Àgùnbẹléwò, Ọ̀ṣogbo, 28 June 2021.

Compared to ìjálá, there is an interesting obverse dimension of transition in Ifá poetry such as that performed by Ẹlẹ́buìbọn; Ifá poetry heads in the direction from which ìjálá is apparently departing. One major feature of Ifá poetry, especially as ìyẹ̀rẹ̀, is its reconditeness. Ọlátúnjí (1972) notes that the expressive otherness or 'quaintness' is what the secular audience finds attractive in ìyẹ̀rẹ̀. As such, two layers of audience are created: the smaller specialist audience of babaláwo who co-perform and police conformity with their 'yesses' and 'nos', and the larger non-babaláwo audience who just listen as entertainment. The participatory and assimilative limitations that come with this are relatively contrasted in ìjálá's more accessible language and predictable musical formula, which encourage participation. Today, the ìjálá as performed by Ògúndépò has complicated lyrical composition by writing into the performance more dense and original elements, especially complex musical elements that discourage participation. Conversely, the poetry of Ẹlẹ́buìbọn mainly speaks to the modern secular audience that the classical Ifá poetry hardly addresses directly. However, the most radical of the obverse patterns in the dimension of transition can be seen where Ifá poetry now acquires a critical and agonistic temperament that ìjálá has begun to de-emphasize.

The contexts of ìyẹ̀rẹ̀ and the social location of its performance agents naturally predispose the form to a placid temperament. Ọlátúnjí (1972: 71–2) informs that ìyẹ̀rẹ̀ always privileges narratives that end positively, even as the Ifá corpus has a huge body of tragic narratives that warn against evil and disobedience. Being healers of somatic, psychological and social maladies, the public performative face of the babaláwo is that of peace and calm; the verses redacted for ìyẹ̀rẹ̀ performance are therefore made to reinforce those optics. As noted earlier, the decolonial consciousness impressed from Ẹlẹ́buìbọn's professional nursery has continued to define his poetry; and this orientation has infused the emerging poetry with so much contestation hitherto unknown to the form. The familiar context justifying Ẹlẹ́buìbọn's disposition is the overwhelming onslaught, by colonization, on the culture of which Ifá and its priest are cardinal components; the reflections of today's babaláwo, represented by Ẹlẹ́buìbọn, come from a place of intense anxiety about the unrelenting breaching of the foundation of the culture of which they are an important unit, by formidable modern institutions of religion, education and state. The postcolonial critical accent arises from the poet's defiance of colonial hegemonic assumptions and the hollowness of these assumptions. All of Ẹlẹ́buìbọn's postcolonial theses are premised on the idea that a pristine African order preceded transatlantic, trans-Saharan and colonial encounters. Speaking largely to a pan-Yorùbá public convened by the nationalist exigency of the mid-twentieth century and kept intact today due to the ethnic dimension of modern Nigerian politics (Barber 1997; 2009; Nnodim 2006), Ẹlẹ́buìbọn sets a beginning when 'jẹ́ẹ́jẹ̀ẹ̀jẹ́ là ń ṣeré e wa n'ílẹ̀ Yorùbá [we were going about our business in peace in Yorùbáland]'.[24] The chaos following that order comprised the moments of slavery, slave trade and colonization, when 'àwọn èèyàn funfun t'òkèèrè dé, [tí] wọ́n l'áwọn ó là wá lójú [white people arrived from far away, saying they wanted to civilize us]'. In the end, however, 'a lajú-lajú, ojú u wa 'ò sì rína . . . / Àwa fẹ́ máa kọ́ ìṣe ẹnifunfun, ẹnifunfun 'ò sì fẹ́ràn a wa/ Ẹni tí wọn ọ̀ tà l'ẹ́rú ni wọn ń wá [We became "civilized" but very ignorant . . . / We aspire to be like the white people, but the white people do not love us/ They are only looking for who to enslave].'

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[24] Taken from 'Ayé di Jágbá-n-rúdu' (World is in chaos).

For Ẹlẹ́buìbọn, the encounters of both the slave trade and colonization retain their chokehold on the African mind even up to the new century. All the manifestations of the new cultural orientation – which Western education, religion and other institutions that came with colonization brought – not only negate the indigenous ways, but are totally inadequate. For example:

Ẹ̀yin ò ri b'áyé ṣe dà l'óde òní?
Gbogbo ọmọge ní í tí ńwọlé ọkọ wọn
Ìyàwó ojú ọ̀nà ń se'bẹ̀ l'ọ́dọ̀ ọkọ ọ rẹ
Bẹ́ẹ̀ni kò ì wọ'lé tí wọ́n ti ń ta'mi oge
Tí wọ́n bá fẹ́ aya s'ọ́nà tí ò tètè lóyún
Wéréwéré ni wọn ó pa'rú aya ọ̀hún tì
Oyún ni wọ́n fi ń ṣè'yàwó
Ẹyí tí ò tètè l'óyún yíó gba'lẹ̀ mîì lọ ni.

Can you see what the world has become today?
All the maidens now boldly enter the houses of their future husband
A betrothed woman now makes food for her man
And actually, even before marriage, they make love
A betrothed woman who is slow to get pregnant
Such a woman is rejected immediately
It's now pregnancy before marriage
Any one who is slow to get pregnant they reject and send away.

Even themes that are not primarily ideological are also underlain with postcolonial accent. In December 2001, Bọ́lá Ìgè, Yorùbá nationalist and politician, was murdered in his home in Ibadan while serving as Nigeria's Attorney-General and Minister of Justice. Ẹlẹ́buìbọn's 'Tribute to Bọ́lá Ìgè', a dirge for the nationalist, is partly an apostrophic inquisition of dead Ìgè for becoming 'less conscious' later in life. The 'loss of consciousness' spoken of here refers to the politician's commitment to Christianity, which naturally meant less involvement in Yorùbá traditional matters that could involve rites and other things considered unacceptable by the church. Invoking his hardly known Christian forename, the poet queries:

Jèémîìsì Ajibọ́lá Ìgè, kílódé t'óo fi j'awà á lẹ̀ gan-an?
Kílódé tí mùṣèmúṣè rẹ ò dápé mọ́?
Nígbàtí wọ́n fi ń ṣí ọ ní fìlà, kílódé t'óò leè fura?

James Ajibola Ìgè, why did you let down your guard?
Why were you no longer active?
When they removed your cap, why did you not read the sign?

Ìgè's lack of vigilance is then placed in the broad context of cultural imperialism within which indigenous knowledge has now been discounted. Because 'ìṣe oníṣe là ń se/ Bẹ́ẹ̀ni, ìwà oníwà ni à ń wù [We copied the actions of foreigners/ And yes, we copied the culture of foreigners]' and 'A gb'òmìnira òṣèlú, a'ò l'ómìnira àṣà [We are politically independent but not culturally independent]', the nation has become too emasculated to solve and punish the murder of one of its eminent citizens. More culturally rooted investigation and prosecution involving 'ìmùlẹ̀pa [ritual drinking of the *earth solution*]' would have revealed and punished the killer, contrary to 'gbogbo ìwádìí ìgbàlódé [tí] ń f'orí sánpán [all the modern investigation that always leads to a dead end]'.

Using the existing taxonomy, the poetry of Ẹlẹ́buìbọn would not count as ìyẹ̀rẹ̀; the poet, in fact, always signs himself off with the byline 'èmi Àyìndé ló sọ bẹ́ẹ̀ l'éwì [I, Àyìndé, am who's been speaking in ewì]', adopting the broad generic identifier. In particular, the poetry's overwhelming subjectivity and inventiveness preclude such classification, especially as we have been told that ẹsẹ Ifá is the staple of ìyẹ̀rẹ̀. However, a broader consideration of the definition of ìyẹ̀rẹ̀ will make such classification at best qualified or tentative. In the Ifá narratives themselves, ìyẹ̀rẹ̀ are mentioned as original spontaneous poetic utterances in very intense situations such as of joy, fulfilment, danger, despondency, loss and so on. In a narrative under odù 'Èjì Ogbè', Ọlọ́fin, the main character, was excited on vanquishing his enemies: 'l'Ọlọ́fin bá ń jó, ní ń bá ń yọ̀; ìyẹ̀rẹ̀ ní ńfí ńsunkún'ùpín, ẹkún Olúfẹ̀, aìí sun ú si'é [and Ọlọ́fin danced happily; he sings his fate in ìyẹ̀rẹ̀, that song of the Ife Lord that no one chants in vain]'.[25] A story in odù Ọ̀sáàgúnlèjà describes a hunter running for his life, with a raging shapeshifting buffalo in pursuit. The hunter had earlier married and betrayed the animal-turned-beautiful woman. The vengeful animal, having decimated the hunter's entire family, sparing only her own children, now has her quarry holed up in a place where she can gore him: 'l'ọde bá bẹ̀rẹ̀ síí f'ìyẹ̀rẹ̀ s'ohùn arò [so the hunter raises a sonorous ìyẹ̀rẹ̀ of lamentation]', begging for his life and reminding the animal of the good times they spent together as husband and wife.[26]

Many of the situations that Ẹlẹ́buìbọn responds to poetically are as intense and their contexts of equally numinous nature as those ancient ìyẹ̀rẹ̀-inspiring moments. The ambience in which the death of Bọ́lá Ìgè unfolds to the babaláwo is surreal:

Ilẹ̀ ẹ́ mì
Àrá sán ní ojú ọ̀sán
Ilẹ̀ mọ́ l'óru

The earth trembled
There was a thunderstorm in clear broad daylight
The day broke in the middle of the night.

Most significantly, there is what could be called *broadcast value* in the conceptualization of the originary ìyẹ̀rẹ̀ that prefigures the contemporary media. In odu Ifá 'Ogbè Alárá', a pupil of Ọ̀rúnmìlà (the primordial archetype babaláwo and personification of

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[25] 'Odu Ifa: Otua Fuun', rendered and explicated by Babalọlá Fátóògùn, 1968, Archive of Sound and Vision, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan.

[26] R. G. Armstrong, 'Interview [with Ifáyẹmí Ẹlẹ́buìbọn]: Ifá and Ifá divination', 1 June 1976, Archive of Sound and Vision, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan.

Ifá), looks after his master's home in the latter's absence. Faced with a knotty problem presented by the master's wives which requires a solution beyond his experience, the apprentice removes himself to a high mountain close by, as if to access a good 'signal': 'ló wá m'ẹ́kún ó fi d'ígbe, ó mú ìyẹ̀rẹ̀ ó fi s'ohùn arò [and he raised his voice as if in a cry and sang ìyẹ̀rẹ̀ in lamentation]' in communication with his master miles away. Ẹlẹ́buìbọn, in a further clarification of this particular moment, noted that:

> ìyẹ̀rẹ̀ tí àwọn aráa'jọ́hun ńdá, ó dàbí ìgbà tí èèyàn ń fi ẹ̀rọ ìbánisọ̀rọ̀ t'á ńpè ní *telephone* lóde òní sọ̀rọ̀. Wọn a máa fi p'èèỳan, wọn a máa fi dárò, wọn a máa fi p'òwe
>
> the ìyẹ̀rẹ̀ employed by the people of old is similar to the telephone communication of today. They employed it to summon people, as a lamentation and as figural utterances.[27]

The mythopoetic representation of the moment Bọ́lá Ìgè breathed his last recalls this kind of transmission:

> Ìlú u London ni mo wà
> Ẹyẹ kan fò lérémi-lérémi, ó gba'pá ọ̀tún ù mi lọ
> Ẹyẹ kan fò bàgẹ̀-bàgẹ̀, ó tún gb'apá òsì i mi bọ̀
> Mo l' 'Ẹ́yẹ, kí lódé?' Ẹyẹ 'ò dá mi lóhùn, ẹyẹ ò yéé ké.
>
> While I was in London
> One bird flew out on my right
> Another flew in on my left
> 'Birds, what augury is this?' I asked, but the birds neither answered nor ceased their cry.[28]

At daybreak, Ẹlẹ́buìbọn got his answer from a more mundane medium of transmission: Ìgè's death was announced on the television. In addition, the very modern affordance of transmitting the babaláwo's subjective reflections across space – and indeed time – via television, radio and other electronic media today has also returned the form to a context analogous to its ancient beginning.

Invariably, creative personalization of the nuances and content of Ifá has always been part of performance of the babaláwo. The 1971 Ifá pípè session for the newly installed monarch referenced above bears this out. The new Aláàfin is inserted as a character into the narrative about a certain Ọlọmọ Àjàǹgàtièlè, who excels in spite of contrary forces. In that performance, the babaláwo chorus after their leader that, in the same fashion as Àjàǹgàtièlè:

> Ọmọ kékeré ló ńi k'ọ́ba ọ́ má leè se *ti'ẹ*
> *Olúwaarẹ* ni ò ní r'ójú se *ti'ẹ*
> . . .

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[27] Ifáyẹmí Ẹlẹ́buìbọn, 'Ifá divination, rituals and prayers in traditional healing', 1987, Archive of Sound and Vision, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan.

[28] Ifáyẹmí Ẹlẹ́buìbọn, 'Tribute to Bọ́lá Ìgè', 2002.

> Àgbàlagbà ló ní k’ọ́ba ọ́ má leè se *ti’ẹ*
> Èèyàn kúkúrú ló ní k’ọ́ba ọ́ má leè se *ti’ẹ*
> Èeỳàn gúngùn ló ní k’ọ́ba ọ́ má leè se *ti’ẹ*
> *Olúwaarẹ* ní ò níí r’ójú se *ti’ẹ*.
>
> Be they the young who seek to undermine the king
> May they be undermined instead
> . . .
> Be they the old who want to undermine the king
> Be it a short fellow who wants to undermine the king
> Be it a tall fellow who wants to undermine the king
> May they be undermined instead.

The poetic reflections of Ẹlẹ́buìbọn are no less personal sometimes. In ‘Èpè Ẹnu u Wọn’, unnamed personal adversaries of the poet are put in a similar mythical context as the class of characters who ‘may want to undermine the king’. Addressing the enemy, Ẹlẹbuìbọn denounces:

> Àràbà ò wó mọ́ ojú t’èké
> Bẹ́ẹ̀ni, àbíkú t’ẹ́ẹ sọ pé yíó kùú kò kú mọ́, ojú t’*ẹnì* tí ń gbẹ́’lẹ̀
> Sebí mo ti kú’kú *ẹlẹ́ẹ̀kàn* ná
> *Oríwo* gbígbẹ kìí kú’kú ẹlẹ́ẹ̀kejì
> Ìyá à’kookò t’ẹ́ẹ sọ pé wọn ti sẹ́ ègún lé l’órí
> Ìgbà t’ó lóyún u *ti’ẹ*, ó sì fi bí tibi-tire.
>
> The àràbà[29] tree has not fallen, shame on hypocrites
> The child-born-to-die whose death you foretold did not die anymore, the gravedigger has been put to shame
> Remember I died once already
> The dry skull does not die a second death
> The mother-wolf you said has been cursed with barrenness
> Became pregnant and was delivered safely in the end.

But beyond placing events and characters in contexts of unmistakable Ifá mythical narrative affinity and overall tonal register, specific lexical tonal nuances anchor Ẹlẹ́buìbọn’s poetry more firmly to the Ifá expressive tradition. Just as in the 1971 example above – and most other instances – where known words are tonally defamiliarized (so that ‘ti’ẹ̀’ as used in secular contexts becomes ‘t’iẹ’, and ‘olúwaarẹ̀’ becomes ‘olúwaarẹ’), Ẹlẹ́buìbọn, as seen in the above verse, defamiliarizes ‘ẹni’ as ‘ẹnì’, ‘ẹlẹ́ẹ̀kan’ as ‘ẹlẹ́ẹ̀kàn’, ‘orí’ as ‘oríwo’, and ‘ti’ẹ̀’ as ‘ti’ẹ’.

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[29] *Ceiba pentandra* or silk-cotton tree/kapok.

Putting the poetry where the money is: performance at the economic turn

The twentieth and twenty-first centuries' economies have shaped the transformation of performance practice. Apart from exploiting new means of performance such as the audio media of vinyl and cassette, and the filmic medium using mainly VHS (Barber 1997; 2009), in the 1980s and 1990s, when governments had a firm and near-monopolistic control over the institutions of information and social services, traditional poetry formed part of the content of radio and television broadcasts as well as outdoor promotional communications by government agencies. Àlàbí Ògúndépò's pacificist admonition noted earlier, broadcast on radio in Yorùbá-speaking parts of Nigeria in the tense post-12 June 1993 election period, was commissioned by the National Orientation Agency. Ẹlẹ́buìbọn also had a widely broadcast radio performance chanted as ìyẹ̀rẹ̀, complete with 'yesses' and chorus ending, counselling students against examination malpractices. But beyond offering a direct material benefit, the media also fixed the artists as unignorable everyday features as their performances signed the beginning and end of important broadcasts such as news bulletins and public service announcements.

The gradual failure of the public sector in Nigeria and the kind of private sector economy it threw up at the turn of the century have determined the ways in which traditional poetry has reinvented itself. As governments become increasingly less responsible, people also start to exploit various private alternatives to hitherto exclusive services such as health, education, security and information. There are, of course, different genres of these alternatives depending on the socio-economic class of their clients. Performance in general has become the persuasive front of these emerging alternatives. Specifically, traditional forms have begun to appropriate the resources of ìpolówó, Yorùbá art of commercial advertisements and promotions. Niyi Osundare likens ìpolówó to 'modern day advertising, [which] grew out of the incessant human economic cycle of demand, production, and supply', but clarifies that, 'unlike overcommercialized and overbureaucratized modern advertising … ìpolówó, in the traditional setting, is a face-to-face, street-to-street activity which is carried out in anticipation of an immediate response' (Osundare 1991: 63). Ìpolówó, in sum, consists of poetry, music, dance, etc. intended to persuade or draw clients to merchandise or a service; the peculiarity of the ìpolówó business–client relation is the investment of the business with the voice and person of the performer; he relates performatively and in real time with the clients. However, the ìpolówó's audience is largely imaginatively homogenized as a demography united by patronage. This apparently challenges Karin Barber's understanding of 'publics' – 'an indefinitely extensive collectivity made up of equivalent, anonymous units' (Barber 2009: 9) – contra audience, as being coterminous with colonial modernity. The traditional ìpolówó, irrespective of the parallel verbal and physical exchange between performer and clients, is rooted in the visualization of its audience as a mass that buys.

For the traditional Yorùbá poet, the new economy is one in which reliance on official patronage and record sales is precarious; governments now have little or no use for poetry, and record companies are cutthroat exploiters.[30] Classical Yorùbá poetic forms have now inserted themselves in the space that casual, fluid and unorthodox ìpolówó used to occupy alone. Today, in popular Nigerian markets such as Bódìjà and Gbági in Ìbàdàn or Ìgbọ̀nà and Owódé in Òṣogbo or Tẹ́júosó in Lagos, Ògúndépò's or Kola Akintayo's ìjálá or Ẹlẹ́buìbọn's Ifá chants blare from electronic public address units across a very large space, competing with multiple human-voiced ìpolówó to draw attention to a set of herbal medicines, a private school currently admitting new students, or a company that secures your life and property better than the Nigeria police. Apart from the new audiences that the performances now address, the forms themselves have had to admit transformation as they attune to the present context.

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[30] Interview with Àlàbí Ogúndépò, Ajáwùú, Ọ̀ṣogbo, 30 November 2002.

Major Yorùbá poetic forms are differentiable by voice quality and modulation. Babalola (1966) and Ọlátúnjí (1979) observe that a kind of tonal softness is peculiar to ìjálá. Babalola's field observation and information reveal that the sound of ìjálá 'must approach [be similar to] good singing' (Babalola 1966: 53). Specifically, 'the voice must not be forced, the vocal organ must not be overworked; the ìjálá-chanter should perform with a relaxed effort' (*ibid.*: 58). At the point that persuasion becomes Ògúndépò's major performative intent – alerting the listener to a news bulletin that is better than any ever broadcast on radio, or warning against violent protest and war, for instance – his voice starts to acquire increasing stridency and decibels. This jarring stridency has attained a new level unknown to ìjálá, with electronic amplification and occasional strategic echoes that overwhelm nearby voices.

The economy in which the poet now finds himself also requires some ideological reassessment to align the art with the market and the world. While barely holding onto the idealness of the 'good old days', the poet resignedly shows a keen understanding of the new condition in the ways he sometimes exploits the challenges of the industrial urban for commercial persuasion. Ògúndépò dwells on various challenges that the twenty-first-century Nigerian person contends with; describing a new condition that produces work-related stress in one instance, for which he would recommend Omo Osun Herbal Mixture, he says with a sigh:

Ilé ayé yìí ti d'ibùgbé ìlàkàkà
Àtibù'kèlè ò tún gb'ojúbọ̀rọ̀ mọ́
Sáré-n-bájà lókù, ayé d'ayé e bóojí-o-jími
Ìgbòkègbodò ọmọ èèyàn ń peléke ni kò dínkù.

The world has become a place of intense labour
To feed is no more an easy task
It's now down to survival of the fittest, a world of early bird catches the worm
Humans' toil keeps growing, no reprieve.

Ìjálá – and, indeed, Ifá poetry, including ese Ifá – manifests some of the patriarchal orientation of the feudal society in which it evolved and has been continuously transformed. It has been observed that ìjálá in particular centres masculinity because *male* hunters dominate its agency (Ògúnsina 1996). Many of Ògúndare Fọ́yánmu's poetic censures of social ills, such as adultery, dirtiness and jealousy, that are gender-atypical are addressed to female personae. As the patriarchal order that the ìjálá services and supports very slowly yields to a new world where women are beginning to push back at the various walls used to contain them, ìjálá sometimes reacts by showing a hostile anxiety towards this change. An early poetry album by Ògúndépò, *Ọ̀rọ̀ Obìnrin Ìwòyí* (Women of Today) (1977),[31] sanctions matchmaking by parents (even as he points out that monetary gains should not be the sole determinant), and reproaches female daring and independence expressed through cosmetic enhancement, sexual licence and interpersonal relations. The very toxic animosity in Ògúndépò's reaction is expressed *ad hominem* via slurs, body shaming, malediction and other forms of aggression: 'Olóríburúkú ìyàwó tọ́ já ọmọ rẹ̀ ẹ́ lẹ̀ tí ń se wúńdíá ká [Ill-fated woman who left her child at home to go out as if she were a maiden]'; 'Dẹ̀ẹ̀rẹ̀dẹẹrẹ ètè bíi kòbókò [Lips prominently extended like the horsewhip]'; and 'B'éèyàn báá r'ọ́mọ lẹ́yìn ejò lo le fi bímọ … ègún kọ́, èpè kọ́, o ò ní l'áàrọ̀ [Only if it were possible to see the snake nurse its broods will you have a child of your own … I curse you not, but you will never have a child to replace you].' I cite this as a high point in the lyrical reflexes occasioned by the social transition of the time. In Ògúndépò's early performance, *Ọ̀rọ̀ Obìnrin Ìwòyí* [Women of Today], recorded some four years after Ẹlẹ́buìbọn's similarly titled performance cited earlier, there is an androcentric figuring of gender and sex that precludes women from sexually expressive behaviour. There is a fictive personal experience in which an independent Western-educated female character named Suzie wants a relationship with the character Ògúndépò. For the local Yorùbá poet, this honest passion of a starstruck young woman who dares to choose her man is strange: 'O ò ri i pé'bi t'áyé ń lọ wọ̀nyí ǹkan ni / Obìnrin-bìnrìn ní ń f'ẹnu ara a rẹ̀ ẹ́ p'èèyàn! [See how odd the world is turning out / A mere woman now woos a man with her own mouth!].' Like his contemporary Ẹlẹ́buìbọn, Ògúndépò blames Western education for the 'weird' boldness and independence acquired by women, and so vows in the classical ìjálá musical closing:

Lead: N ò le s'àgbèrè, n ò le f'ákadá

Chorus: Òpònú u Suzie ó gbélé e wọn

Lead: I'll neither fornicate nor marry an educated woman

Chorus: Let the foolish Suzie stay away

About fifty years later, it has become less reprehensible for a woman to not only choose her man, but to satisfy herself sexually via interpersonal or automated means. The morality of *Ọ̀rọ̀ Obìnrin Ìwòyí* that pathologizes a woman's desire for and right to good sex and reproductive decisions is not so valid any more. The social compass moves gradually from demanding that a *good* woman numbs her passion to a par with her man's to a converse requirement that a man must satisfy his woman. In the alternative health sector that has emerged since the new millennium, there is, therefore, an emphasis on sexuality and reproductive health. In Àlàbí Ògúndépò's advertisement for Cassia Herbal, an alternative medicine brand, the poet now admits that ‘obìnrin ò sì níí f’ara mọ́ k’ẹ́nu ó jẹun k’isàlẹ̀ ọ́ gbààwẹ̀ [a woman will not have you just give her food but deny her sex]’ and ‘Bí’ọ̀ bá sí ìbálòpọ̀ tó já gaara, ìfẹ ó yòrò [In the absence of good sex, love withers].’ While introducing Man Booster, a sex-enhancement formula from Dr Alayo Herbs, Ògúndépò prioritizes orgasm as he declares that the man is obliged to ‘t’àtẹ̀kanlẹ̀ k’óo ju jíà kó kù rìrì [fire the engine and engage its gear until it shudders]’. What is more, today, a woman’s sin of leaving the tender child at home to pursue other matters aside from motherhood – censured in *Ọ̀rọ̀ Obìnrin Ìwòyí* – is now normalized as Ògúndépò proclaims in strident ìjálá from a horn speaker mounted on a school bus that she can now leave her one-year-old at the crèche run by Modupe Olu Group of Schools.

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[31] See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kO_BFPcFrrU>.

Conclusion

The indigenous Yorùbá poetry tradition has always been in a state of flux, with content and form being shaped by exigent factors at every historical moment. The poetics that scholarship on the forms of poetry describes are therefore inevitably thwarted at every turn when such imperatives as sociality and economy demand performative reviews from performance agents. Transition in the structure and content of these forms has sometimes been explained in terms of a different generic category evolving from the old ones. Speaking specifically of ìjálá and Ifá poetry, generalizing them as ewì muddles the prospect of differentiating the transition of these indigenous forms from that of the modern form of the same name (ewì).

The ìjálá practice of Àlàbí Ògúndépò instantiates one pattern of transition in which performance gradually yields ground from affirming conservative patriarchal and communal values to sometimes admitting the ascendancy of the modern or often affirming it outright. Caught in a new situation that mainstreams literacy, monetary economy and other cultures, Àlàbí Ògúndépò has evolved a fully professional practice from an ìjálá tradition that had only begun to become semi-professional, creating in the process a more specialized type from which the previously participating audience has now been banished to the sidelines. The value that accrues from the creative outcome – an ìjálá made solely by Ògúndépò – is paid for by a new clientele: government, entrepreneur, politician, etc.

While equally affected by the same factors, Ifá poetry reacts differently. The sacred location of Ifá – as a practice of healing and spirituality – seems to have tempered the extent to which its poetry internalizes modernity. Indeed, the putative fixity of sacred texts has led early studies to overlook the presence of verifiable creative mutations in the Ifá corpus. As performed by Yẹmí Ẹlẹ́buìbọn, Ifá poetry, while exploiting the affordances of literacy and electronic media, continues to avow the indigenous African even as the ground increasingly gives way from under it. More than when there was little or no apprehension of acculturation, the agency of the babaláwo performer now intervenes prominently to contend with ideological consequences that come with being modern.

In spite of poetics, traditional Yorùbá poetry has more prospect for licence than has been acknowledged. There have always been vents for innovative breaches, even in performance traditions thought to be secured by sacred sanction. Beyond what is perpetuated by age-old routine, performers have attuned their practice to the colonial and postcolonial cultural, social and economic transition, a condition that strains their arts sometimes almost to the point of profane reversal. In addition to thematizing the anxiety of that transition, performers of indigenous forms such as ìjálá and Ifá poetry have continually reinvented their practice and content to adjust to or contend with this condition. The forms are genres in transition, not fixed forms from which modern types have evolved. Sometimes unified and sometimes uncoordinated, the performance texts are a transcript of the various encounters that society has experienced, that have reshaped it and from which poetic agency is not insulated.

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