

ORAL POETRY AND LITERATURE IN REV. JOSEPH EREBE'S PRAISE SONGS (EJE NYA OGBO) AMONG THE IGEDE PEOPLE OF BENUE STATE

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Abstract

The paper examines praise songs in general, their features and the types from the point of view of some scholars in literature. It further discusses the artistic/figurative use of language by Erebe who sings not just for leisure and entertainment in themselves, but taking a cue from oral literature, the author/singer uses creative and enriched language to communicate important, eternal truths and information to the society. Joe Erebe's Eje nya ogbo (song of praise) of the Igede extraction extols God using a seemingly simple linguistic repertoire but underneath is rich and mature use of language characterized by highly figurative expressions. The literary features which have been discussed reveal the song, as not merely a commendable work of literature but a rewarding song of praise among the Igede people of Benue State. The paper underscores the fact that the composition of this song is intended as a strong appeal for people to praise God for His innumerable blessings without losing its entertainment and literary purposes. On the premise of the latter (purpose), it is recommended that Erebe's Eje nya ogbo should be adopted by the Benue State ministry of education for the teaching of literature and creativity in primary schools in Igede land and the idea should be embraced by other ethnic groups in their local communities in the country.

Keywords: Literacy, Reading, (Eje Nya Ogbo) Praise Song, Oral Literature, Primary Education.

Introduction

Literacy is the ability to read and write and often, the definition is contextual especially as societal needs and requirements are in a state of flux (Nwagbara, 2011, p.1). This implies that as the nature of learning and societal expectations for education and other needs change, the meaning and definition must change to meet the current realities. Literacy empowers people and teaches self-respect, responsibility, understanding authority, commitment, critical thinking and reflection. Critical thinking and reflection, which are some of the outcomes of reading, are indispensable skills that enable people to succeed in this digital world. In other words, critical reading builds students' capacities to think critically and independently; a requirement for them to contribute meaningfully to the growth and development of their communities and world at large. Some of these skills can as well be acquired through literacy and literature teaching; an aspect of which is oral literature or African literature.

African literature refers to the literature of the African people. The African literature concept includes oral literature. African awareness is all inclusive; thus, her Literature encompasses an artistic use of words not just for the sake of art alone but for aesthetics and teaching. On the contrary, European views of literature often stress a separation of art and content. Without prejudice to the important role of aesthetics in Africa, one should keep in mind that traditionally, Africans do not radically separate art from teaching. Rather than write or sing for beauty in itself, African writers, taking their cue from oral literature, use beauty to help communicate important truths and information to the society. Indeed, an object is considered beautiful because of the truths it reveals and the communities it helps to build.

Praise Song among Africans

The word "Praise" is to promote certain moral or political values in the audience. In other words, its function is didactic (Ode, 1995, p. 3). But it is also known that in oral performance, praise poetry refers to

that highly cadenced outpouring of grandiose epithets or appellations celebratory of a hero, a patron, or any character and event that engages the artist's imagination (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1998, np). Even though it may have praise attributes such as heroism, cunning, hunting skill and so on, the appeal of this form of oral art lies especially in offering the performer an opportunity for verbal showmanship. Ironically, it is in the author's narration of the performance context that one catches a glimpse of this eloquence.

Praise song is one of the most widely used forms of worship; it is a series of laudatory epithets applied to gods, men, animals, plants, and towns that capture the essence of the object being praised (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1998, np). Professional bards may be praise singers to a chief and court historian of their tribe. Examples are chant praise songs such as those of the great Zulu chieftain:

He is Shaka the unshakeable,
 Thunderer-while-sitting, son of Menzi.
 He is the bird that preys on other birds,
 The battle-axe that excels over other battle-axes.
 He is the long-strided pursuer, son of Ndaba,
 Who pursued the sun and the moon.
 He is the great hubbub like the rocks of Nkandla
 Where elephants take shelter
 When the heavens frown... (Ezekiel Mphahlele, in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1998, np).

Praise songs constitute an important form of oral literature. They are composed as praises for those that set forth the ideals of action for themselves and often for traditional chiefs and warriors, and even a very young man it is allowed to create praises of him if he had performed feats of great courage (Ezekiel Mphahlele, in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1998, np). Praise songs are recited in an open space visible to all assembled. The praise singer begins by reciting in a high voice; punctuating the patron's victories in war or other feats or different actions. Praise songs are telegraphic, leaving much to the listener's imagination; their language is poetic, and the sequence of events not

necessarily logical. Metaphor is a key device for suggesting worth (the person reciting might call his patron a ‘ferocious animal’), and poetic license is granted for coining new words. This has meant extending the concept of literary expression to include many unwritten forms and, equally significant, treating their orally performed qualities as crucial to their literary realization. In South African Xhosa praise poetry, for example, the praise singer’s reverberating and unmistakable style inspires listeners through acoustic effects such as rhythms, sonic parallelisms, strained mode of articulation, intonations, and ringing praise names (Opland, 1998, p. 21).

Erebe’s Eje nya ogbo is a perfect example of a praise song among the people of Igede as it has the features or appellations enumerated earlier or better still manifests all of the attributes of a song of praise. However, it should be pointed out that Eje nya ogbo (praise song) is exclusively dedicated to extolling the greatness of the Almighty God whom Erebe refers to in literary sense, metaphorically and hyperbolically, as the One who is ‘Greater than the greatest’. In other words, while other praise songs eulogise heroes, heroines, and leaders both political and traditional, Erebe, being one of the oracles/ministers of God, chooses to praise his creator who alone, according to him, deserves to be praised.

A brief biography of the Artiste

Rev Joseph Erebe (Joe Erebe) was born on June 3rd, 1972 to the family of Mr and Mrs Erebe Oko of Ukpute Itogo in Obi LGA in Benue State. He attended St Mary’s Primary School Otukpo and graduated in 1986. Thereafter, Erebe proceeded to St Francis College Otukpo for his secondary education and graduated in 1992. In 1993, he enrolled for the auxiliary nursing course in 1993 and graduated in 1996 with a Certificate in Auxiliary Nursing. Erebe, a morally upright young man had serious inclination for service to not only humanity but his creator - God. He is also predisposed to the welfare of people and desires that people live an orderly and peaceful life with one another and their God. His passion to serve God and to make people’s lives better saw him go

into full time ministry under Assemblies of God Church and thus went for a diploma in Bible and Theology between 1997 and 1999 and a degree in Christian Education between 2013 and 2016. He got married to Miss Alice on 5th February, 2000 and the marriage is blessed with four God fearing children.

Theoretical Framework

Theory is ostensibly a facilitator of literary criticism, which aims at interpreting and synthesizing ideas and concepts expressed within an aesthetic mode. It also tries to explain the assumptions and values upon which various forms of literary criticism rest (Masinjila, 1992; Tyson, 2006). Consequently, this paper is anchored on the functionalist approach by Émile Durkheim (1858–1917). The theorist believes the society is like a biological organism, with each organ dependent on the others for survival. Functionalism is basic to Durkheim's sociology. Like other functionalists, Durkheim focused on the problem of order and the positive effects of social institutions, explaining their existence in terms of their functionally necessary contributions. Functionalists believe that there are four main basic needs that an individual requires in order to exist in society. They also believe that these four basic needs are essential for maintaining social order. They are: food, shelter, money and clothing. The choice of the functionalist approach is based on the fact that the paper brings out the role played by Erebe's praise songs among the Igede people of Benue State.

The translation of the song elucidates the meaning.

Igede Version

Stanza 1

Keweka yahe rhwe rhwa nyohe; uhe
nyam!

Kewe ka yubwo onahi nyohe; uhwe
nyam!

Onu nyam ka ya mi ka (2times)

Ahieruerwa nyohe oluhye Olohihi
nyamOlume..... (2times)

English Version (Translated)

Stanza 1

Come and see the mercies of God
upon my life, (2 times)

My mouth cannot express it, (2
times)

The mercies of God upon my life
are so great,

Anu runye wari
 Kaaye ahiowawa a nyohe (2times)
 Oye obi omeme nya aluji nyam;
 riang ododu uhwe nyam (2times)

Chorus:

Ori ki inyo nyam mi linu ino
 Onwam oje ohe obe ka (Chorus)
 Angi ituka ole ka oye ohi hi lam ale

Stanza 2

Inyionyam mi linu, mi linu ale (2 times)
 Onwany ome johe obe kaaa.... (2 times)
 Anu kewe ale; kahiyonu dwule ale
 Ka whuo whua kwuye; oyoyi ajwa aluji
 Uka muka kahi whuo whua kwuye
 Uka aluji me kika wo leko; iwuru ka chaya
 Ah kai yonu dawule; ahi ka whuo whua dawule
 Ohi ngituka hahi; Onu nyahi ka mi ki (2 times)
 Mlinginhye laka; mlobe olounu kaji(2 times)
 Ohe lekwa ohe adam(2times)
 Obe lobe; mlogewu otuka
 Ori koyilahi nyang; ehwu nyang ka kpelehu (2 times)

You run to see the blessings of God,
 You run to see the mercy of God,
 He turned the conspiracy of enemies to nothing on account of my life,

Chorus:

If my body is made of only mouths, it will not be enough to use in thanking him,
 If my body is full of mouths; it's full of mouths (2times)
 It is insufficient for me to thank GOD
 (Repeated in a different tunes)

Stanza 2

You should come let us join our voices
 Let us lift him up; So as to shame the devil
 Anytime we lift him up;
 When the enemy thought of hearing the cry of death
 There will be shouts of joy
 We shall join our voices and lift him up
 He did great things for us; our mouths cannot express it
 I have nothing; only verbal thanks
 God Well done; God well done
 Thanks (3 times)
 I have a Great warrior
 When he takes the front; the war will be sweet (2 times)
 Your laughter will be laughter.

The chorus comes**Stanza 3**

Ugwulo yeke; owanyi nwa ale nyohe
 ka (2 times)
 Okpubegi enumu ejei iwuru kpehe
 Uguho nyi Jericho, olohihi nyang ka
 kpubeji;
 Ale, lenyi nyongolam oheeeee...
 Ori k'ohe awuru ehi olegwu nyang
 kaye ale
 Ingile irah aluji uhwe olili nyang ale;
 ino aka whou whuo kwueye (2
 times)
 Inu akaje umume nyohe adam
 Ino akaje uya ole o'ma hang
 Anika nune; ohe jun lang
 Ohekwuro nyang ; Ohe kpolunni
 A chahi luturu ;A hwuny nyang ye
 Onahi nyohe ;Ochewu yeng dada
 Anu kewe me; Kahi whou whoa
 kwuhye(2 times)
 Ohiringinyila holihu nyam; Onu
 nyam ka ya miko

The chorus comes in here**Stanza 4**

Oyupu jeje ham;Aluji ye ma
 Oyehu hulo ham ; Aluji ye ma
 Odewu yem dada; Aluji nye pepe

The chorus comes in here**Stanza 3**

The wall said; it can't withstand
 God, (2 times)
 It fell in those days; there was
 shout of joy.
 The wall of Jericho in your life;
 shall crumble today,
 Today in the name of my (owner)
 God.
 If God opens your spiritual eyes to
 see today; what are the intentions
 of your enemies against you.
 You would lift Him up (2 times)
 You will know the greatness of
 God.
 You will know the battles he
 fought for you.
 You went to sleep; God watches
 over it,
 Your office; God watches over you,
 You wake up in the morning; you
 see your body,
 My God's mercy; built a protection
 around you,
 You come let us lift Him up.
 He did great things for us; my
 mouth cannot express them.

The chorus comes in here**Stanza 4**

He gives me knowledge; enemies
 saw in envy.

Oyubo nyam ale le: Aluyi nye pepe	He gave me laughter; enemies saw
Ilahu okawa we; Ahi ka hulahu	in envy.
chama	He fought my battles; enemies
	scattered.
Odewu yem dada eeeeh	The wilderness of suffering; He
	will be with me.
	The wilderness of suffering; He
	fought for me.
	The wilderness of sickness; He
(Note: translation of the last part of	secured me with his hand of
this stanza is incomplete -	mercy.
intentional)	I am free today, (2 times)
	I'll lift up his name.

It is noteworthy to state that the language of the translated version is a direct interpretation without embellishment so as not to alter the meaning of the song or impede the understanding of the reader. A segmented translation of all stanzas in the song was deliberately eschewed for want of time and space. One anticipated merit of this is that the flow, synchronization and unity created in the song may be lost or segmented if it was done the other way. This perhaps is because even though the song is poetic and has been analysed as such, the original aim of the artiste was that it is a song and should carry all the features of a song and be sung.

Content Analysis

The praise song - Eje nya ogbo - is a purely Christian song in which Erebe extols the Almighty God by pointing out some of His attributes and the various ways in which the Lord has helped, protected and led him in life. The artiste, with his co-signers, vocally, musically and using aesthetics of language, presents a world in which there is frequent occurrence of death, sorrow, agony and other spiritual attacks and emphasizes the need not only to thank God but to praise, glorify and uplift the name of God always for His mercy, compassion, provision and protection. Erebe expresses optimism for those who

continually express gratitude to God on a daily basis and opines that anything contrary, spells doom to an individual and by extension the community. The song writer paints a picture of protection and provision as visible as if they are objects his listeners could touch and feel. The author then adjures the listeners to 'run and see' the good works of God upon his (singer's) life. This earnest appeal is copiously captured in the following lines:

Keweka yahe rhwe rhwa nyohe;
uhe nyam.

Come and see the mercies of God
upon my life

Anu runye wari Kaaye ahiowawa a
nyohe

You run and see the blessings of
God Upon my life.

Erebe's reason for repetition in the praise song is primarily to draw attention to the urgency of this message and to lay emphasis on the solemn command the singer wants to convey to his listener. This trend of repetition of some lines pervades the whole song. The repetition is also meant to create symphony, blend the drumbeats with the song thus bringing out not only sonority and symphony but also the rhythm of the drums and the voices.

Diction/Language

The diction of this song is simple. On the face value, an Igede man listening to the words of the song may conclude the language is simple whereas, Erebe creatively compressed a lot of meanings in a few words such that an average listener must read between the lines to get the underlying meaning. The song depends on the use of appropriate biblical references and attributes of God for its effectiveness. The use of quite appropriate images helps in the expression of not only praise but of worship unburdening the singers' hit. Some of the vocal images expressed in the song are:

Keweka yahe rhwe rhwa nyohe;
uhe nyam.

Anu runye wari Kaaye ahiowawa a
nyohe

Come and see the mercies of God
upon my life

You run and see the blessings of
God Upon my life.

A pictorial “blessings” and mercies of God are projected in the above rendition. The whole of the chorus reveals the graphic image of a human body made of mouths all over that Erebe says are insufficient to thank God. These are captured in these lines:

Ori ki inyo nyam mi linu ino

If my body is made of only
mouths,

Onwam oje ohe obe ka (Chorus)

it will not be enough to use in
thanking him.

Angi ituka ole ka oye ohi hi lam
ale.

If my body is full of mouths; it’s
full of mouths

Another striking feature of the language is the fact that utterance or rendition in the Igede language translates to a short one in English. For this reason, the first stanza or verse of the song runs through many lines in Igede while the same is short when translated to English. For instance,

Ori ki inyio nyam mi linu ino.

Meaning: If my body is made of
only mouths,

A good number of the sentences are short and repeated. The diction of the song is simple as daily expressions predominate the song. This enhances the verbal rendition and increases the musicality of this song of eulogy to a great deity, in this case, the living and eternal God. A number of words or phrases are stereotyped as in: “Ohe obe; ahi owawa nya Ohe” and “onahi nya Ohe”, these translate respectively to: “thank God; blessing of God; mercy of God”. All these words have religious ethos and the fundamental values of the personality of God that exemplify the religious belief of the composer. This is not only meant to emphasis the theme of the song but to also create the necessary rhythm that is expected of any song.

The conspicuous repetition reveals the refrain and symphony that normally characterize a melodious song. Erebe exploits this device to his advantage, as it is observed that repetition occurs regularly in every stanza of the song under study. In addition to creating symphony, it enhances the synchronisation of the musical instruments with the melodious voices of the singers. Besides, the use of metaphor enhances the beauty of the language and reinforces the reality of the message. Erebe's metaphorical reference to the wall of Jericho in one's life implying the problem in one's life is very apt. Other uses of metaphor include: "ugbileji nya akama" – the wilderness of suffering – "ugbileji nya eduru" – the wilderness of sickness – etc. which help to accentuate the message.

In the sense of literature, Erebe says "onu nyam ka ya mika" implying 'his mouth cannot express...' in line 2 stanza 1. This is a hyperbole. This deliberate exaggeration is meant to heighten the unlimited and incomparable providence of God to mankind. Apart from repetition, the use of epithet is the most predominant linguistic device employed by Erebe in "eje nya ogbo" in which the artiste/singer uses different descriptive word or phrases as substitutes for the names of God as illustrated by these lines/words among others: "Ongo dewu nyam". Meaning: He that fights my battles.

Furthermore, the arrangement/organisation of the lines of this praise song is deliberately arrayed in well-defined stanzas which make it a semblance of 16th century English poems.

Theme

The song (Eje nya ogbo) could be considered more as a wakeup call to humanity especially those who harbour ingratitude. It is a strong appeal to people to always give thanks to God; make attitude of appreciation, adoration and worship of God a lifestyle. In this serious appeal, Erebe opens the eyes of his listeners to the innumerable ways the Lord blesses, protects and provides for them. God's provision (breath, food) and protection from enemies' conspiracies against people are but a few of the innumerable blessings of God an individual enjoys.

It is for this reason Erebe adjures his listeners to be continually and eternally grateful to the Creator- God.

Educational Implications of Erebe’ Songs on the Teaching of Literature-in-English to an Igede Child

The National Policy on Education (2013, p.8) prescribes the use of mother tongues/languages of local communities for teaching in primary schools. The document states that government will see to it or ensure that “the medium of instruction in the primary school is the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community for the first three years in monolingual communities. During this period, English shall be taught as a subject” If the goal of the national policy on education is to be realized, especially as it affects the teaching of literature-in-English at this level, then oral literature of local communities such as the ones of Erebe and others must be judiciously, qualitatively and quantitatively deployed by teachers of the subject in the primary schools in Igede Community. This can be done by carefully documenting the lyrics of Erebe’s praise and others that are also rich in literature and translating them to English Language and taught in schools. The strategy should be replicated by other ethnic groups in their communities across the country because their deployment in primary schools will not only stimulate the interest of children in the literature of their local communities but also develop their creativity and critical thinking capacities while at the same time accomplishing one of the national educational goals in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Erebe's praise song Eje nya ogbo in Igede (Benue State, Nigeria) or praise poetry, though broad in its examination of the features of traditional oral art of the community, actually portrays specific Igede oral performance and performers. Erebe's work bridges the gap between a purely traditional Igede dirge and a Christian praise song by attempting to identify several cultural markers existing in the songs while pursuing a rigorous sonority of the song, paying critical attention to the appealing command of the song within an oral performance

mode. His being an Igede native and a minister in God's vineyard definitely has served him well in this project as he has not only done a musical piece but has also communicated his intended message as engrafted in this musical artistry. Erebe's Eje nya ogbo is not only a successful musical rendition but also a beautiful work of art/literature whose lyrics can be documented and used to teach literature-in-English at the formative years of the Igede child.

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