

Exploring Nativism in Ademola Dasyuva's *Songs of Odámólúgbẹ*

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Abstract

Literature, culture, and language are symmetrically interwoven in humanistic studies. Culture and language provide the resources for literary production, which creative writers, especially poets, often explore. Ademola Dasyuva's *Songs of Odámólúgbẹ* (2006) relies heavily on Yoruba cultural lore. This study explicates several nativistic indices featured in the collection of poems to foreground the socio-cultural background and linguistic competence of Dasyuva in Yoruba, despite his Western education in English and literary studies. The research methodology is adopted in this study. It is premised on poetic hermeneutics within the ambits of nativism as a theoretical framework. We discovered that, though a modern African poet who expresses himself in English, proverbs, Yoruba lexemes, code-mixing, folktales, and socio-cultural practices are sufficiently explored in *Songs of Odámólúgbẹ* (2006). These bring the poet's creative ingenuity and literary grandeur to the fore.

Keywords: literature, nativism, *Songs of Odámólúgbẹ*, poetry, Dasyuva, folktales

Introduction

Language, culture, and literature are interconnected. Language is a cultural element meant for communication. It is a unique feature that separates humans from other creatures. Literature cannot be dissociated from language. This is because language is a vital tool for literary expression. In every society, literature plays an important role. Adeyanju (2007:85) corroborates this assertion by seeing literature as a tool that mirrors society. Indeed, Africa had its forms of literature before the introduction of Western education, especially in the art of poetry as one of the literary genres. This is called African oral literature. Onyemelukwe (2004:145) says this type of literature comprises, among others, folklore, poems, riddles, jokes, songs, proverbs, fables, myths, and legends. However, Dasyuva and Jegede (2005) credit the passage of poetry from oral to written form to the contact with Western education and the arrival of printing technology. Modern poets are therefore influenced to adapt features of oral poetry, such as the orality, into written form.

In some African cultures like the Yoruba, poetry is associated with cultural aspects such as traditional religion, ancestral family work/trade, moonlight storytelling/folktales, and traditional beliefs in reincarnation. The preceding explains why songs, incantations and eulogies are seen as genres/forms of poetry. Today, oral literature is much present in Africa. One fact that endures African oral literature across different ages and evolutionary stages is its continuity for survival. In this regard, the efforts of traditional singers called griots transmitting their oratory culture from one generation to another are remarkable. Despite Western education, local poets (griots) are still available and relevant in Africa, especially in Yoruba land, where many families have continued in the ancient tradition. Their presence is usually felt in social functions like burial ceremonies, house dedications, child naming and dedication.

Western education has brought an immeasurable change to African oral literature in that modern poets now employ various indigenous languages and even colonial master's languages, English and French, in documenting oral literature, thereby paving the way for easy accessibility. Hence, the fear of annihilating the African oratory tradition that death could cause has been overcome. In the same vein, efforts of the local poets regarding the perpetuity of oral literature described above have

been complemented by modern poets. Some modern African poets (Anglophone and Francophone) include Wole Soyinka, Okigbo, Gabriel Okara, Augustine Kunene Birago Diop, Niyi Osundare, Sembene Ousmane, Leopold Sédar Senghor, David Diop, Benard Dadié and so on (Dasylyva & Jegede, 2005).

Although Dasylyva is not as renowned as some African or Nigerian poets mentioned above, he has used his poetry collection under study, *Songs of Qdámọ̀lúgbẹ̀* (2006) to prove his literary prowess. Every writer's background, social experiences, and environment significantly influence his thoughts and literary works and, most times, provide clues to understanding the intended meaning (Emama, 2020). Therefore, in *Songs of Qdámọ̀lúgbẹ̀* (2006), Dasylyva explores his cultural background as well as his childhood experiences within the Yoruba society. Hence, we consider the nativism theory suitable for our literary analysis in this article.

Nativism and African Literary Writings

This work relies on the use of the theory of nativism. According to Olaniyan and Quayson (2007:192), nativism as a theory is seen as the "proposition that one's world-view and all its many components be anchored in and determined and guided by fidelity to the dictates of one's culture." It encourages a return to indigenous African traditions to recover from the aftermath of colonisation and Westernisation. Similarly, Adeyemi (2017:29) opines that the theory of nativism calls for cultural revival, especially the cultural values that can help society to move forward. In every society, language remains an essential element of culture. Thus, language acquisition has become a natural phenomenon among human beings. In other words, one of the features of nativist theory is the belief that every child has an inbuilt capacity to learn his native language quickly. This article intends to apply the theory of nativism to explore some cultural elements in some of Dasylyva's poems in *Songs of Qdámọ̀lúgbẹ̀* (2006), thereby foregrounding the poet's level of proficiency in his native culture and language.

Poetic Obeisance and Tribute

Dasylyva, through careful use of words and literary devices in his poems, is seen as an "Ọmọ ọ̀dọ̀ àgbà" (an elder's child) who is deeply rooted in his ethnic culture. In Yoruba land, respect for elders is highly cherished. This socio-cultural value reflects in the poetic persona, as demonstrated in some of Dasylyva's poems. In any society, respect is one of the moral values needed for developing and promoting peace. Thus, respect is expected to be reciprocal. From this perspective, both the Yoruba tradition and the biblical principle agree on respecting elders by young ones (children), which attracts prosperity and longevity on earth as divine rewards.

Parents have a massive responsibility in training their children to have regard, not only for people older than them but for everybody in the society irrespective of age strata, sex or social disparity. For instance, Dasylyva pays tribute to some renowned poets in "My hoe nips at mother earth". He mentions revered names like Wole Soyinka, Niyi Osundare, and Adebayo Faleti. (*Songs of Qdámọ̀lúgbẹ̀*, pp 28-29). In the poet's words:

A child that leaves early to wash his hands sits with elders:
One evening, Oja-Logunja, Ogunba, Oba Areje, Agbada, Isola, Olatunji,
Osundare, Omamoc, Okafor, Okinba, Higo, Irele. e—e-e

Darah and Ibitokun had invited me to a dinner in Baba Faleti's
House; there, **the saying of our elders had tasted like pounded yam.** (*Songs of Qdámọ̀lúgbẹ̀*, p.29, (the bolding is mine).

In the last stanza above, the poet affirms elders' exalted positions in every society and how they inspire the young generation. Wisdom of the elders and guidance are savour to a productive lifestyle among the young ones. As a result, elders are always expected to live by example and distance themselves from all sorts of unwholesome acts capable of tarnishing their image and societal positions.

Paremiological of *Songs of Qdámólúgbẹ*

Use of proverbs among Africans cannot be underestimated. The Yoruba attach importance to using proverbs and maxims in conversations and human interactions. Onyemelukwe (2004:41) defines a proverb as "a popular expression which succinctly conveys truth and wisdom with a view to teaching, praising, commending, advising, correcting, indicting, warning, rebuking or castigating a person; denounce, reprimand or condemn an undesirable act or behaviour or a vice." Although elders commonly use proverbs, this does not mean that every older person can speak, understand, and interpret proverbs. To be sound in proverbial art, one must be close to elders with proverbial knowledge. Proverbs are linguistic ingredients which enhance a clearer understanding of tense discussions. Proverbs are usually semantically epigrammatic. They are keys that unravel complex issues. Proverbs are, at times, employed to drive home points. This informs the axiomatic description of proverbs among the Yoruba as "Òwe lẹsin ọrọ, ọrọ lẹsin òwe, tọrọ bá sọ̀nù, òwe làáfíwá a." (Proverb is a horse on which the word rides. If a word gets lost, a proverb is used to navigate it). Some of the proverbs used in this collection of poems have Yoruba provenance, which Dasylyva translates into English. For example, the following proverbs are extracted from *Songs of Qdámólúgbẹ*:

- A child that learns early to wash his hands sits with elders (p.29)
(Qmọ́dẹ́ tó bá mọ́wọ́ wẹ̀, yóò bágbà jẹun).
A young chameleon has given birth to an offspring... (p.30)
(Alágbẹmọ, ti bímọ rẹ sílẹ́ tán, àímọjójó kù sọwọ ọmọ, Alágbẹmọ).

From the first excerpt above, the poet intends to show how the Yoruba highly reckon with discipline and diligence. Children are morally expected to learn fast from moral principles imparted to them by their parents and elders in society. From a cultural point of view, children do not usually eat with older people in Yoruba culture. This is because elders are meant to be accorded due respect by young ones considering their various years of experiences in life, both good and bad. Therefore, the proverb deduces that every child who learns fast from his elders wins due recognition from them. Similarly, Dasylyva uses the second proverb to juxtapose the first. The cultural and moral meaning it portrays is that every child who refuses to learn from the elders in society should be ready to bear the consequences of his behaviours.

It has been noted with keen interest that aside from the famous and generally known proverbs and idioms used by Dasylyva in some of the poems, the poet creatively employs his own "self-coined" proverbs. For example, in "Helotry", the following proverbial sayings are identified:

A person who wants to run from home
Complains: "a snake has entered the house." (*Songs of Qdámólúgbẹ*, p. 67)

When a race gets very hot,
no woman holds her breasts." (*Songs of Qdámólúgbẹ*, p. 68)

Dasylyva is a poet who uses his poems to promote Yoruba culture. Corroborating the nativisation of African creative writing, Ademuyiwa (2010:533) opines that a good understanding of one's culture

is necessary for a positive societal influence. Perhaps, this is what prompts Dasylya to palm wine over foreign liquor in this collection. He personifies palm wine and lauds its therapeutic potency to cure ailments like malaria. In “I sat myself careless”, the poet, through the persona, presents palm wine as a comforter and a veritable companion when someone is in a traumatic condition. In such a situation, Dasylya regards it (palm wine) as an elixir to psychic ache, which tames rash decisions that could lead to regression and irreparable loss like death. Thus, for an individual to be productive in society, he/she has to be mentally, emotionally and psychologically stable. The antidotal mood which the intake of palm wine makes possible is captured in the lines below:

Then I
Reached for the key to
The “kirikiri” of my **shacked soul**

Granting a governor’s **amnesty**,
I let-fly my winged soul

In search of the tappers
And the dangling gourds.

Then you came...
With your nectar of joy and
Queenly splendour! (*Songs of Ọdámọ̀lúgbẹ*, p.43).

These lines reveal that Dasylya is connected to his Yoruba traditional root. The poet goes further on page 102 to dedicate a whole poem to describing and singing the praise of this unique ancestral drink called “ẹmu” (palm wine). Palm wine has great value and importance in Yoruba society. Palm wine is considered the source of life, which gives courage to people with feeble minds in times of need. The poet wishes this natural drink to survive for a long time to render its life-saving assistance to humanity. This is what he implies in “To ẹmu”:

This drink, spirit of our fathers, **to your health**,
Your spirit, regal drink, **my breath**,
You lease life to those
Helpless, reclined to a close;

O, wine faithfully palmed,
May I not be dammed----
Your vehicle of the oppressed,
Transporting men, caressed,
Over pampered hands, beyond the gates
Of this earth-bound frame---- (*Songs of Ọdámọ̀lúgbẹ*, p. 102).

However, the poet issues a stern warning over the abuse of palm wine and other drinks that could intoxicate. In the last stanza above, the poet makes us understand that excessive consumption of palm wine could lead an individual to a severe disaster, such as an accident and even death.

Childhood Memories of Folktales in *Songs of Ọdámọ̀lúgbẹ*

“Helotry” and “Elephant and Tortoise” are skillfully written by Dasylya through storytelling art. The poet uses the two poems to bring his childhood memories back to life. Aside from moral

consciousness development, storytelling aims at building confidence in children. The childhood experience usually has a lot of impact on him in adulthood. That is why the Yoruba people believe in the proper upbringing of children to make them better people in society.

For this reason, the inculcation of moral values in little ones through moonlight stories becomes necessary. Thus, elders in society are once again considered experts. From their wealth of experiences, they create time to interact with the children through folktales to prepare them for adulthood. No wonder the Senegalese writer Amadou Hampâté Bâ believes a library burns down whenever an elder dies in Africa. In the poem titled "Helotry", Dasylyva presents a storyteller having an interaction with some children as follows:

"Children," said he (storyteller), of what use is a story,
Unless it is an armoury that enriches the mind,
Unless my children, it kicks awake sedated giants
In us, kick-starts our lethargic conscience, ...unless...?" (*Songs of Ọdámọ̀lúgbẹ̀*, p.62).

The above excerpt also indicates the purposefulness of storytelling among elders in society towards the mental development of the young ones. Dasylyva demonstrates how storytellers often employ indirect questioning to awaken children's curiosity. He calls "Children" regularly in the course of his storytelling in order to carry them along actively. As a result, he (the storyteller) denies them the chance to slumber while telling his tales.

Moreover, Dasylyva derives pleasure in employing lexis from various Nigerian languages in his works. The poet deliberately employs such lexico-semantic code-mixing as a trademark of the originality of his literary works. He borrows some vocabulary from Yoruba and Hausa, two of Nigeria's three major languages, and reflects them either in the title or content of his poems. Examples of such Yoruba words used include Àyàn (drummer), ajá (dog), ẹmu (palm wine), àdá (cutlass), àdín (perm kernel oil), àṣẹ (amen), agbádá (parachute-like men's dress style), mojò (penis), àgbàdò (maize), è̀wò (taboo), sìgìdì (metaphysical human-like wood), yẹ̀yẹ̀ (worthless/nonsense); while Hausa words used by the poet are: Khai (You), Sabo (new), jero (guinea corn), and baba (millet), almageris/almajeris (Islamic education learners) and akamu (pap). This particular feature makes Dasylyva a poet who uses his literary works to promote African culture.

Given this, every writer must arm himself with sufficient information, wisdom and vocabulary to make a case on any social issue simply and understandably. Just like Tayo Olafioye in *The Parliament of Idiots* (2002), Dasylyva, through some poems in *Songs of Ọdámọ̀lúgbẹ̀*, has proven himself a poet par excellence who is very patriotic to Nigeria, his country and Africa, his continent. The poet is disturbed by unspeakable woes that have befallen and are currently befalling his country and the entire black continent regarding slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism.

The above is evidenced in part two of the Songs of Obai poetry collection. Dasylyva chooses to represent Nigeria/Africa with "Obai" personified as "mother" (p.42) or "queen" (p.48). She (Nigeria/Africa) is a country/continent richly blessed with human and natural resources. Unfortunately, the poet is perturbed that the resources available are not judiciously utilised to benefit her citizens, especially the masses. He laments the critical socio-political issues bedeviling Nigeria and the retardation she suffers. For instance, in "To me the Lord offered a scroll" (p. 49), epileptic power supply, oil spillage in the South-South region and abandonment of crops like cocoa and groundnuts for the emergence of crude oil are mentioned. In the same vein, Dasylyva is

melancholic about issues bothering as embezzlement, insecurity, military interference in government, privatisation without due process, and injustice. He blames these social hindrances on the lack of love and political will of various political leaders, both in the past and present.

The poet does not hesitate to tag political leaders with names such as Scavengers (p53), bandits, Area Boys, teddy-wolves and vagabonds (pp54-55). Interestingly, all these derogatory names perfectly describe Nigerian leaders. As **scavengers**, they often scout for political positions for self-benefits to the detriment of the masses; **teddy-wolves** describe their inability to perform and deliver dividends of democracy to the public; **vagabonds** as people who do not only move from one political party to another but who also incessantly go abroad for various reasons: medical treatment, political asylum and smuggling of looted public funds to foreign banks. Nigerian politicians are true "politricksters" who only hide behind fake campaign promises and political agendas to lure the electorates into voting for them to actualise their political dreams for selfish gain.

To get a permanent cure for the sick nation, the poet is very optimistic and calls for collaboration to fight common enemies of progress. The excerpts below reflect Dasylya's mood:

“She is sick, I’m afraid”

This usurper, a brute, stole
My crown, devastated my Kingdom and
My Queen ravished, desecrated!
This decadent stronghold of managements
Patriots must blow up and down. (*Songs of Odámọ̀lúgbẹ̀*, pp 51-52).

“Compatriots arise!”

Compatriots arise, arrest
These meadows with predator's crown
Which brought the Bible and the Qu'ran
But they turned both garments
Into commerce and sacramental ornaments.

Mother Obai, do you ask why we're up in arms?
When true justice, equity are never a right,
But murdered media, imposed starvation, a right?
Now we insist: patriotic and purposeful leadership
Must pilot to the Promised Land this colossal Stateship! (*Songs of Odámọ̀lúgbẹ̀*,
pp.54-55)

One deduces, from the above quotes, that patriotism and purposeful leadership are interrelated. The former is an engine that drives the latter. A leader can only be ready to be used positively for his country's and followers' progress when he is patriotic. Despite the woes, Dasylya is empathic towards his natal land and calls for collective efforts to salvage the country from ruin. In "The carrion", the poet indicates further that all has never been well in Nigeria. Nigeria is synonymous with penury. This socio-economic challenge is worsened by unpatriotic attitudes developed by Nigerians towards Nigerian-made products. Nigerian markets are flooded with foreign goods

imported from various countries, making the country suffer a considerable setback. Dasylyva thinks the key to solving all these problems is in the hands of the Nigerian populace. He calls for revolution, not through civil war or violence, but through the ballots to weed out all selfish leaders. The poet challenges the masses to be awake from their age-long slumber and take their destiny into their own hands by stopping trading their children's future for a few naira notes from predatory politicians during elections. He fears that if nothing is urgently done to curtail the ongoing pathetic situation, the country may soon witness another military intervention that will truncate the inactive democratic system practised since 1999. This is what is implied in:

Awake from sleep our nation bemoaned,
In penury and poverty shall but wade,...

Awake, compatriots from juggerbeds
Or the Arm forever may reign
Arise compatriots reject the shreds,
That gown and spade may know no pain.

Arise, compatriots, unbind the shackles,
We do ourselves a favour so bright,
Should we resist the hounds with tact,
Or chaos and carnage shall come to berth. (*Songs of Ọdámọ̀lúgbẹ*, p.105 (bolding is ours))

Furthermore, "If the gods must be!" is a long historical incantatory poem which further brings Dasylyva's passion for culture to the fore. The poet explicates the mythical itinerary of the Yoruba revered gods, their exploits and the escapade of some, culminating in epic deeds. In this sense, Dasylyva poetises Yoruba native lore about the rescuing prowess of Ọ̀gún and Sàngó and the predicament of the Nigerian masses. These powerful gods are reminded of their epochal might, which should be dispensed to rescue the Nigerian masses from the shackles of oppression perpetuated by "Vain men" (p.37) who arrogate power to themselves unleash terror on the masses. To spur the gods into action, as a griot, Dasylyva invokes their spirit through the panegyric of alluding to and affirming legendary achievements in the time past. According to the poet, Ọ̀gún and Sàngó are capable of rescuing the masses from the grip of the "children off bastards chose to Run the homestead aground" (p.37). The chosen children of the bastards running the homestead, as implied in this context, refer to the elected politicians plundering the land and subjecting the masses to penury.

Conclusion

Ademola Dasylyva is a distinguished poet among Nigerian poets. The fact that his poetry collection, *Songs of Ọdámọ̀lúgbẹ* (2006), won the ANA/Cadbury poetry prize in 2006 is a testimonial. As it has been observed in this work, Dasylyva has proven beyond reasonable doubt that he is a typical Yoruba man who is well-groomed in the culture and tradition of his people. This fact influenced his writing style as a modern poet. His choice of infusing some African words, especially from his Yoruba language, in the titles and body of his works is deliberate. It proves that Dasylyva is passionate about his Yoruba culture as a means of identity. Despite his professorial attainment in the academic world through the teaching of literature in English expression, Dasylyva is very proud of his Yoruba identity in particular and of the African race in general. In this direction, he believes in using poetry as an effective medium to propagate his culture. The adaptation of mythological stories with songs by the poet spices up his poems and, at the same time, foregrounds the poet's

versatility. Dasylyva has not failed to use his poetic prowess to expose the quotidian ills ravaging Nigerian society.

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