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Yoruba Oriki in English: Rhythm Analysis of Niyi Osundare's 'Harvestcall'

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Abstract

Rhythm is one major component that distinguishes poetry from prose, even in written forms. Being inherently based on rhyme, the indigenous sense and sound of oral poetry may be difficult to convey in written English. This study, therefore, investigated the prosody of Niyi Osundare's "Harvestcall", a praise poem from his international award winning collection based on oral Yoruba Oriki structure but written in English, in order to determine how the blend of phonological features of the two different languages is achieved. A stylistic analysis was carried out on phonological features: stress and syllable counts to identify the rhythmic norm, patterns of the sound units, ensuing structure and the interaction between form and meaning. A Yoruba bard (Ewi expert), accompanied by Bata drums was also engaged to render the verse which was recorded on audio

tape. Results showed that 'the rhythm of 'Harvestcall' is not dependent on metrical-foot repetition but on syntactic juncture and multiple contour patterns. The paper concluded that Osundare's in-depth knowledge of indigenous oral performance norms with the adroit use of lexico-semantic and syntactic features of English have enabled the effective conversion of Yoruba Oriki to written English.

Key words: rhythmic norm, oral poetry, oriki, prosody, stylistics, ascending and descending

Background to the study

Poetic language, especially in its written form, cannot be appreciated if due consideration is not given to the way it would be spoken, that is, its auditory effect. Most features considered to be distinctly poetic on paper are phonological rather than graphological. This means that African poets who try to render their oral traditional poetry in English have the double task of translating indigenous language-based thoughts into English, and at the same time, minding the way it would be spoken or performed without losing its first language phonological flavour. Oriki, Yoruba panegyric poetry, for instance, is an integral part of Yoruba culture and everyday life particularly among the older generation. It is this oral form of poetry, more often associated with women (Barber, 1991) in praise of human beings that Niyi Osundare, a male poet employs in his praise of food crops and agrarian life, using the medium of the English language. Using one of his oriki based poems, 'Harvestcall' as a case study, this paper investigates how the dominating English sound pattern is employed to convey meaning based on Yoruba rhythm, noting that English is a stress-timed language while Yoruba is syllable-timed. 'Harvestcall' is one of eighteen poems in Osundare's *Eye of the Earth*, the collection which talks of the past 'when the earth's head stood on its neck and a hand sprouted but five fingers', won Osundare a Commonwealth Poetry Prize and the poetry prize of the Association of Nigerian Authors: indicating that he must have successfully achieved that feat of

artistically communicating his indigenous sense and sound to a global audience.

Methodology

This stylistic analysis of 'Harvestcall' concentrates on identifying just four fundamental phonological features of its verse: qualities of the rhythmic norm, various patterns of the sound units, the structure that is built up through the basic patterns of those units; and the interaction between form and meaning. The investigation is limited to prosodic features and this paper presents the results of data from the first and last sections only of the poem in order to ensure brevity. Each word in 'Harvestcall' was regarded as a sound unit and the syllable in each one was counted as a beat. The pattern of each sound unit was determined based on the occurrence and sequence of strong and weak syllables and described in terms of contour, speed, and strength. For example, a word like "pestle" is analysed as a sound unit with two beats; a pattern made up of a stressed syllable (/) followed by an unstressed one (x); resulting in a gentle descent contour; regular speed; and solid strength. All linguistic observations are interpreted in terms of their immediate aesthetic effects, as well as manifestation of themes. Considering the importance of oral performance even in written poetry and the specific instructions of the author for the use of bata drums, audio recordings were made of the oral performance of 'Harvestcall' accompanied with the Bata drum. An "Ewi" expert was engaged to render the verse. Ewi is Yoruba sing song poetry, and the expert can be likened to a bard.

Rhythm

Rhythm is characteristic of all normal behaviour including language. In the words of Harding (1976), 'It is from rhythms inherent in the natural speaking of the language that all rhythmical writing begins.' In English speech, rhythm is created by the regular succession of weak and strong stresses, achieved by the alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables. In English as spoken in Nigeria, also known and described as Nigerian English, rhythm is achieved not by strong and

weak stresses but by a regular succession of strong syllables or beats. For this reason, Nigerian English is described as a syllable-timed variety of English (Bamgbose, 1982).

Stress, syllables and beats

Rhythm is a key component of poetry in any language and one of the major distinguishing factors between poetry and prose even in their written forms. The traditional way of analysing the rhythm of English speech is in terms of feet. The English foot typically consists of one stressed syllable (/) and a number of unstressed ones (x). The five common types originating from Latin verse are: iambus (x /) e.g. again, unveil; trochee (/ x) e.g. happy, never; anapaest (x x /) e.g. entertain, hurry up; spondee (/ /) e.g. heartbreak, wine glass; and dactyl (/ x x /) e.g. happiness, orchestra (Pope, 2005). Transferring this classical tradition to English poetry proved problematic for analysis (Chatman, 1970) and was soon discarded in favour of analysis by beats especially in order to scan free verse.

Analysis by beats still accepted the undeniable existence of a basic rhythm in poetry as in music, but allowed greater freedom for metrical analysis than what the Latin standard required. The system of beats regards any foot ending with a stress as a rising beat and any foot ending without stress as a falling beat. Within this more open system, the basic pulse of Osundare's 'Harvestcall' can be fairly easily recognised as a rising beat. This rhythm is in line with the Yoruba syllable structure and intonation pattern which characteristically ends on a rising note. Typically, stresses occur at regular intervals in English and unstressed syllables have to fit in without affecting the basic rhythm. Thus, the more unstressed than stressed syllables in an utterance speed up its locution while fewer will slow it down. Based on this, each sound unit has its own determinable perceptual gestalt, and interpreted character which have been employed in the present analysis.

The terms 'ascending' and 'descending' have been used in a way similar to the traditional concept of 'rising' and 'falling' but different

from it in that no metrical implication is intended in the present analysis. Based on different patterns of sound units comprising stressed and unstressed syllables, the terms ascending and descending are qualified variously in the present paper with adjectives such as 'gentle descending', 'steep descent', undulating, and so on.

While it is often said, and very rightly so, that Nigerian English, like most non-native varieties of English, is filled with equally strong or stressed syllables without due regard for the vowel weakening requirements in English speech (Udofot, 2003), there is still a relatively high compliance with native English stress patterns. Therefore, apart from using the system of beats by counting syllables, the poem was also scanned based on the stress pattern of native English.

'Harvestcall'

The poem is based on Yoruba *oriki* (praise songs) poetry and its musical and oral heritage is reflected in the directions given immediately after the title: 'to be chanted to lively bata music' (*bata* is a traditional type of Yoruba drum). 'Harvestcall' comprises shades and shadows of a remembered landscape. It depicts the typical agrarian setting of most villages and at a deeper level shows how the world was when man was at one with nature. The poem is divided into two major parts: the first three sections being the poet's recollection of a glorious 'time then' when everything had its own season. These parts appeal strongly to our sense of sight through the wealth of images. By evoking a rich and colourful scene, it creates a realistic impression of life amidst plenty. The second part of the poem comprises Section IV only; and the division is indicated by a directive for a change in the accompanying music as the reader is brought abruptly to 'time now'. This section questions where the memorable past vanished to, and why nothing is being done to recreate its ethos. The use of local colour enables Osundare to suggest the universal elements of the experience that concerns him.

As is usual in Osundare's poetry, the language, structure and content of 'Harvestcall' are relatively simple. Osundare, more than any other Nigerian poet, might remind us that Aquinas wrote a treatise on the simplicity of God and that simplicity in its true sense of wholeness, integrity and unity has always been one of the most valued qualities in art and in life. Cox & Dyson (1965) explain that, 'True simplicity isn't lack of complexity, but a harmonious ordering of parts; everything...is balanced and supported.'

Prosodic analysis

Table 1 presents a breakdown of the pattern and number of units according to beats available in 'Harvestcall'.

Table 1: Approximate number of units in 'Harvestcall' based on number of syllables

Number of beats (syllables)	Number of units
1	23
2	37
3	45
4	47
5	20
6	4

Table 1 reveals that the range between the frequencies of the various beats is minimal. From this, one can safely conclude that the poem has a polyrhythmic pattern very much like the rhythmic nature of *oriki* or *ijala* poetry. The only absolutely deviant pattern is the 6-beat phrase which significantly, in all cases, comprises the single Yoruba word, *iyanfoworogi*. Table 1 also shows that though different rhythmic patterns are present in 'Harvestcall'; the norm is a variation between 3 and 4 beats. In other words, the basic length of the phrases or sound

units is usually three or four syllables. This predominant norm is quite appropriate for the theme and mood of the poem.

Trisyllabic meters are commonly thought lively and suitable for light-hearted subjects, while four syllabic meters usually call for a brisk cantering tempo. The first three sections of 'Harvestcall' particularly abound with these two types of beat and apart from conveying cheerfulness and merriment of the harvest period, they suit adequately the directive of the author for lively' music given at the beginning of the poem. In the fourth section where the tempo is solemn, the predominant pattern changes from 3 and 4 beats to 1 and 2 beat rhythms; a clear reflection of the elegiac mood of the poem at this stage. The speed and flow of the lines are regulated by interweaving and grouping the dominant types and by using the subdominants for variation. Rhythmic patterns in 'Harvestcall' however play more than structural roles as the ensuing discussion of the first and last sections will reveal.

Section I contains a eulogy of the village called Iyanfoworogi and of yam itself. Like most Yoruba praise-songs, it starts with the less unique details of the subject. The first line begins on a normal descending contour which is also paced and solid. The unit is immediately followed by the six syllable Yoruba word, iyanfoworogi. It is appropriate to note that this polysyllabic structure is a derived complex word made up five morphemes: iyan+fi+owo+ro+igi. The complex nature of the word combined with its length slows down the speed of the unit; mirroring the gradual beginning of the poet's journey into the past. Intensity is built up in the next line with the single stress unit //where//. The reader's attention is now focused on the attribute of the village called Iyanfoworogi. The third line with more unstressed than stressed syllables now quickens the speed of the chant and this is carried over into the fourth line:

1. This is // iyanfoworogi //
2. where // garnished in green //
3. pounded yam // rested its // feted arms

4. on the back // of stooping stakes

The poet appears to be warming up to his subject, his memory is getting sharper. The slow paced refrain of line 1 occurs again and one gets an impression of the speaker reconfirming the accuracy of his recollection of the past. At the same time, the six-beat structure keeps the rhythm from gaining momentum, holding us back because there is more to come; remember, the less unique appellations come first. The seventh line ends with an ascending and paced rhythm and signals a break in the chant. At this stage, the drums will probably have a chance to beat more freely. The break also signals a change in the content. The previous segment contained a picture of yam in the farm and of it being dug up from the ground. On another level, we get the impression of the poet trying to recollect more accurately, the next stage of the harvest.

The stanza continues in a gentle ascent and descent rhythm both interweaving naturally in a story-telling manner until the tenth line:

10. waged // a noisy war // against the knife //

At this point, the poet begins to present the more unique and weighty qualities of the subject. Traditionally, at this point in oriki poetry, the rhythm gains momentum and the drums will throb louder and faster (see Beier, 1956 for more on Yoruba praise songs). As we enter lines 14 to 17, there is a significant change in rhythm aided by the parallel repetition of structures, imagery, alliteration and assonance:

14. the pestle // fights // the mortar

15. The mortar // fights // the pestle

16. A dough // of contention // smooths down //

17. The rugged // anger // of hunger

There is an undulating contour alternating with a pointed rise in lines 14 and 15. The poet is now talking about the yam-pounding stage in the preparation of 'iyan'. Ordinarily, one would expect an alternation

of ascending and descending sound units iconically representing the pounding action but Osundare does something different. The final and most essential part in the preparation of pounded yam is the kneading of the yam dough with the pestle against the mortar to make it stick together properly and give it a lump-free texture/consistency. This is the action/motion which lines 14 and 15 represent.

On a more profound level, this rhythmic balance through inversion is suggestive of the balance in nature generally, as well as the cyclic movement of the seasons and everything going and coming. The undulating contours also support the idea of graceful movement in the action of the pounders who are traditionally women. Some onomatopoeic words would probably have been used in a Yoruba rendition. Osundare himself attests that in reading this part of the poem, he often imagines the shoulders and body swaying along with the chant. With the single occurrence of a normal fall contour in line 17, there is another break and we are eased into the third phase of the praise of yam.

Unlike the previous two segments, this third one begins on an ascending rhythm and steadily becomes more and more erratic. The units are at once ascending steeply and descending steeply, accelerating at a point, and decelerating sharply at another. This part of the poem actually posed the most problems in the determining the placement of unit boundaries. In line 26 and 27 for instance:

26. where // a tempting yam // sauntered

27. out // of the selling tray

Before this point, the normal pattern had been to place a natural boundary at the end of each line, no matter the number of groups. Here, however, a boundary after 'sauntered' will make the next line meaningless; the boundary must occur after 'out' thereby joining it with 'sauntered'. Analysis by feet would have failed to show up this observation which is an example of enjambment – a setting up of tension between the expected pattern and that which actually occurs; a

sort of play between grammar and metre. It could be regarded as the equivalent of syncopation in music, one of the purposes of which is to avoid dullness in rhythm.

The erratic nature of the segment is semantically paralleled to its content which is likewise not as focused as the two earlier parts of the poem. The imagery becomes mixed and one may wonder what went wrong at this stage of the artist's creation. Possibly, the journey into the past has stirred up painful memories. As the images of the past are reconstructed, they make ecstatic on the one hand and melancholy on the other. Albeit irregular, the architectural arrangement of the verses still displays an awareness of organised patterning. The final lines display a very appropriate pattern to close the section with:

29. of instant // suitors //

Since the unstressed syllables occurring at the end of the two units give it a falling rhythm, the speed is neither fast nor slow, but medium-paced and the music will probably ease off in preparation for the next section.

Section IV of 'Harvestcall' also marks the second portion of the poem. Here the author calls for a change in tempo from lively to solemn. This is indicative of a change of mood and legitimately we expect a change in the rhythmic norm from an excited high and vigorous pitch to a deep one. This tendency is, however, discouraged by a number of effects. The first line of the section has the verb 'are' deliberately written in bold print in the published text for extra emphasis. To render the line effectively will involve a relatively weak stressing of the other words, particularly those preceding it:

56. But where **are** they?//

A rising pitch after '**are**' is subtly but skilfully maintained by the sentence type which is interrogative. The *ewi* expert rendered this same line on a particularly very high pitch. According to him, this rhythmic device is used in Yoruba when delivering a solemn or elegiac chant such as *orin aro* (lamentation song). He explained

further that not only does this form of rendition gain the immediate attention of the audience, it arrests them and they are left with a shrill and ringing tone. This is another instance where Osundare has creatively borrowed the indigenous pattern in structuring his *oriki* poem in English.

The analysis of the previous section not reported in the present paper before the instruction for change in music actually showed that the audience was left in a dream-like state to embark on its own private journey into the beautiful past. All of a sudden, the shrill, wailing voice of Section IV startles the audience out of its reverie and confronts it with the ugliness of the present. A haunting rhythm is achieved with the question 'Where are they?' becoming a refrain after every two lines:

56. // but where **are** they //
57. where // are they gone //
58. aroso // feregede // otili // pakala
59. which beckoned // lustily // to the reaping // basket
60. where // are they //
61. the yam pyramids // which challenged // the sun //
62. // in busy barns //
63. Where // are they //
64. the pumpkins // which caressed // earthbreast
65. like mammary // burdens //
66. where // are they //
67. the pods // which sweetened // harvest air //
68. with the clatter // of dispersing seeds //
69. where are they // where are they gone //

The lines between the refrains contain references to images of the glorious past. The rhetorical questions with unstressed syllables occurring in unit-final positions create a simple descending contour and a constrained voice which effectively jerks the audience back to the present. The motion of this sea-sawing rhythm produces an effect of turbulence as if the poet is trying to shake an answer out of the

listeners. The rhythm is comparable to the sound of a bell, tolling relentlessly, haunting and penetrating the innermost parts of the audience's consciousness: urging people to wake up, get up and do something.

Line 69 is a collapse of the first two lines in the section, that is, lines 56 and 57. The arrangement of stressed and unstressed syllables differ in the last line, with more stressed syllables creating a slower pace and suggesting a further change in the poet's emotional state. There is a change from aggression to a calm and meditative mood; indicating a reconciliation or resignation of self to the state of things.

As the poet becomes aware of hope in the future, the predominant rising 3-beat and 4-beat rhythms of the earlier sections return in the next five lines:

- 70. Un // countable seeds // lie sleeping //
- 71. in the womb // of the earth //
- 72. un // countable seeds //
- 73. awaiting // the quickening tap //
- 74. of our waking // finger //

In a very creative way, these lines rhythmically bind Section IV to the three prior sections of the poem by returning to the dominant pace, thus achieving a coherent framework even though the subject matter appears greatly different. Osundare himself in the preface to the collection states that 'in the intricate dialectics of human living, looking back is looking forward...'

The last two lines of 'Harvestcall' appear to be the most significantly stressed:

- 75. with our earth // so warm
- 76. how // can our hearth // be so cold?//

Almost all the words in the lines 75 and 76 receive stress: being all monosyllabic. This results in very high-level-contour sound units not found anywhere else in the preceding sections. Since all the syllables

are stressed, the speed is very slow and the intensity of the lines very strong. It is as if Osundare has left the most powerful aspects of his message to the very last minute. Again, this is another borrowed element from Yoruba oral tradition. Elders in Yoruba land are known for seemingly beating about the bush before getting into the heart of their discourse. This is done particularly when there is something negative to be said, thus making the listener feel comfortable. At times, the long preamble cushions the effect of the shocking message but at other times, its purpose is to make the blow stronger and more painful. From all indications, Osundare has aimed for the latter effect and the audience is left with the feeling of condemnation for its lack of care for the environment.

The motifs of childhood, independence and nostalgia run through 'Harvestcall' as Osundare reflects on the depreciating state of the earth. There is evidence of the influence of the traditional folk literature of the Yoruba all through the poem. The dramatic tone and polyrhythmic but coherent nature of his poetry is very much a reflection of this inheritance.

Conclusion

From the scope of this paper, Osundare has successfully employed the English language to perform the Yoruba traditional genre of *oriki*. By blending dominant patterns with subordinate ones, Osundare displays a technique similar to the isosyllabic poet's use of iambic feet mixed with other types. Both are characterised by the avoidance of monotonous sound, the control of speed and smoothness and the use of counterpoint. Osundare's rhythm is not dependent on metrical-foot repetition but on syntactic juncture and multiple contour patterns. The rhythms are varied yet regular; the variations are functional; they dramatize, signal closure and relieve monotony. The influence of Osundare's mixed background, that is, his cultural heritage of Yoruba oral traditional modes and his experience as a literary critic and teacher of English, is evidenced in his poems and may be one of the major sources of his success as an artist with international recognition.

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