



Poets as Historians: The Case of Oriki among the Ijebu People of South Western Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of poets as historians within the Yoruba society using the Ijebuland as case study. The data on which this paper is based is Oriki among the Ijebu people of South-western Nigeria, using Marxist theory as the theoretical base. The primary data were drawn from oral performance of *Oriki* from selected Ijebu towns namely Ijebu –Ode, Omu, Ikorodu, Aiyeye, Idowa, Imodi, Ijebu-Igbo; selected obas; some warlords and some notable personalities of Ijebuland. The secondary data were the gramophone records, waxed by Ijebu speakers and non-Ijebu speakers, written records, as well as library and archival documentations from the Universities in the Southwestern part of Nigeria. The study reveals that poets are historians and the Ijebu, a people hitherto believed not to have *Oriki* indeed have. The study throws more light on the history of the origin of the Ijebu people, the people are a Yoruba people and that the Ijebu people are linked with Ife. It also proves that the Ijebu people are connected to the larger Yoruba race and that the Ijebu are still a people despite their presence in more than one state and towns. The Ijebu people also have their own warlords like other Yoruba people. The study reveals that there is connection between the Ijebu people and the remaining Yoruba society from the Ijebu praise poetry studied. Through the *oriki* of Ijebu people, we can locate their source, origin and points of migration to their present location. The study contributes to the development of Yoruba literature in that it has added to our corpus of *Oriki*. This work would be of immense value to scholars of not only literary study but also other fields such as history, linguistics, sociology, anthropology, ethnography and cultural study.

INTRODUCTION

All over the world, poets are the voice of the people. Poets in a society help to speak out problems of the society through composed poems on political, economic, religious concerns and so on. They are the raconteurs and chroniclers of events in the society. The Yoruba world is not different. In preliterate days, in Yorubaland, poets performed the same functions that the

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press, radio and publication perform in literate societies. They did not only report and comment on current affairs but also criticised policies of governments in power and channelled public opinion on various subjects affecting the society (Akinyemi 1993: 28-36). The repertoire of poets in any society serve as social and historical reference for people who owns the poetry. This paper examines the role of poets as historians within the Yoruba society using the medium of oriki in Ijebuland as case study. The data for this paper is based therefore on Oriki (a very important Yoruba verbal art) among the Ijebu people of South western Nigeria. The Ijebu people are part of the Yoruba people living in the Southwestern part of Yorubaland to the coast. They are prominently occupying parts of Ogun and Lagos states of Nigeria. The Ijebuland is bounded on the North by the Ibadan land, on the East by the Ondo land, on the West by the Egba land and in the South by the lagoon.

Oriki as Yoruba Literature

Oriki, a literary genre among the Yoruba is not only significant but central to the composition and performance of all other genres. According to Olujinmi (2008: 177) the literary artist is a watchdog of the society be it modern or traditional poet, dramatist, novelist. Also as observed by Olatunji (1974: 7) a literary artist is a fearless commentator on social and political developments and tendencies in his society. Olajubu (1987: 23) describes the poet as the repository of the collective wisdom and of the social, economic, moral and ethical norms of the society. Hence, the literary artist plays a multifarious role in the society, beholding the society from different perspectives.

Oriki in a sense is literature because it is produced by people living together, as a structure of alphabets or words and idea which is shared and understood by members of a society. Therefore literature and sociology complement each other in our understanding of society. Hence sociology of literature sees the relationship between Oriki Ijebu/Yoruba and the Yoruba society as one of constraint interaction and that each one affects, and, is affected by the other.

Poets as Historians

Hence, as a literary artist a poet is someone that has the ability to voice out his or her feelings or thought. All over the world, poets are the voice of the people. They are the raconteurs and chroniclers of events in the society. The Yoruba world is not different. Akinyemi (1991: 142-151). In the preliterate days in Yorubaland, poets perform the same functions that the press, radio and publication perform in literate societies nowadays. They did not only report and comment on current affairs but also criticised policies of governments in power and harness and channel public opinion on various subjects affecting the society. Being the voice of the people in those days in Yorubaland, they were responsible to the society for their act was considered

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a social responsibility. Hence, poets were never arrested (unlike now) because:

Oba ki i mu okorin (the king does not arrest a bard).

Poets record not only the events taking place in the community. They also often attempt a philosophical analysis of these events. Consequently, the Yoruba people, like other people elsewhere, use them as standard of references. Yoruba elders, according to Asiwaju (1975: 205-206) generally cite them like customary proverbs as testimonies to relevant issues in discussions, requiring the force of authority. Poets are in their composition primarily contemporary in significance. They assume immense value for the historian in subsequent years when they become the major means for gaining insights into causes and courses of events relative to the society at the times in and for which the songs had been composed. In this way, according to Olabimtan (1984: 59-67), the professional historian with a good grasp of the local language can make use of the songs in a manner similar to his use of old newspapers stocked in modern archives.

And since the poets are the singers and chanters of oriki, their compositions are/were essentially on virtually everything in the society. As raconteurs and recorders of the people's history therefore, their pronouncement and references to historical events is legion, as exemplified in the excerpts oriki of the Ijebu people below.

The Yoruba People Intra-relationship with Ijebu

The Yoruba people are in Nigerian states like Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Oyo, Osun, Ekiti, parts of Kwara and Kogi States. They are also in the diaspora in neighbouring countries like Benin Republic, Togo and some West African countries along the coast. They are also in Brazil and elsewhere all over the world. Historically, Ile-Ife is the Yoruba centre of civilization and it is from there that the Yoruba got spread all over the world. Atanda (2007:1-14) The Ijebu, a dialect of the Yoruba are related to the other Yoruba people despite the fact that they do not speak in the Oyo/Yoruba tongue which is nearest to the Standard Yoruba and the differences in the various dialects of the Yoruba people notwithstanding. The following excerpts from the Oriki of Aiyeye town, according to poets at the Aiyeye Palace serve as a confirmation of the claim:

Omo Ilaje maro Ode
A-d' Ado maa k'Ewii
O-k'Ooni galegale
Ara Iwo r'aawa
A ii j'iwowo
Ikole r'aawa
A ii j'eron ako
Omo Olowu oduru
Omo A-ji-f'epe-sire

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Omo olobi wowo-tiwo
Omo olobi wowo-tiwo
Omo A-dara k'a-ni
Agbede susu n'ono Ire
Omo A-duro gb'ofa naya
E e gba t'ee neyin ojo ni
Omo Olofija
Omo Akitiolu
Omo Uselu Karaloye

Offspring of Ilaje from Ode
Offspring of the visitor at Ado -
Who needs not pay homage to the Ewi
One who greets the Ooni familiarly
Because we are related to Iwo
We as such abhor eating of porridge
Because we are of Ikole origin
We therefore abhor eating of male cattle
Offspring of Olowu-oduru
who specializes in the making of potent curses
Offspring of Olobi wowotiwo
Offspring of Olobi wowotiwo
Offspring of Adara-k'a-ni
The great smith from Ire town
Offspring of the brave A-duro-gbofa-naya
Whoever behaves otherwise is a coward
Offspring of Olofija
Offspring of Akitiolu
Offspring of Uselu Karaloye

The above shows the Yoruba people inter-relationship and movement from one location to the other. While some *oriki* lines above show that some Ijebu people migrated from Ilaje via Ode-omi, some say the Ijebu people are related to the Ekiti, needless to talk about Ife. Some lines say the Ijebu people are related to Iwo and Ikole towns. Further on inter-relation, research shows that there are seven settlements of the Owu people in Ijebuland namely: Agbole Olowu in Ijebu-Igbo town, Owu-iji in Okun-Owa, Ido-Owu in Ayepe town, Owu-Atan and Oke-Olowu in Ijebu North-East, Owu-Ikija in Ijebu-East and Owu Ikosi near Agbowa Ikosi in Lagos State. The Aba Aiyepe people are said to relate also to the Egba people by the same poets:

Egba Mogun

Egungun (masquerade), one of the divinities of the Yoruba symbolises their belief in the spirit of their dead ancestors who come back to life annually to bless them. The Ologbin-in lineage is one of the earliest lineages of the Yoruba people, essentially of the Oyo-Yoruba stock, reputed for the Egungun worship and great magical feat. It is believed that Egungun cult got dispersed to the other Yoruba people through the Ologbin-in lineage

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(Olajubu 1972: 1-2). One is not surprised therefore that Madam Esufunke Esaogbin, foremost Egungun/Sango worshipper in Ijebu Igbo is said to be related to the Ologbin-in lineage of the Oyo people by Baba Segi-neyin-efon, a poet at the Orimolusi Palace Ijebu-Igbo as follows:

Yeye Esufunke Esaogbin
Eegun ree natode orun
Esaogbin ara Ogbojo

(Our) mother Esufunke
You're born a masquerade
Esaogbin offspring of Ogbojo
In or 7k8 lines like:
{m[Olobi wowotiwo
Offspring of Olobi wowotiwo

Which the Ijebu people (above) are known as is peculiar to the Ijesa people. Definitely, there is a relationship, and the Ire ancestry link. Also is the oriki line:

Omo A-duro gbo'fz n'aya
Offspring of A-duro gb'ofa n'aya

Which is from the Oriki Omu Ijebu by the poets at the Olomu Palace sounds like that of On7koyi lineage. We should note that:

{m[Olofija Akitiolu
Offspring of Olofija Akitiolu

of the same Omu town is a known lineage among a large homestead in Iseyin town. From the Oriki of the Uselu royal lineage of Imodi town, according to the poets at the Olumodi's palace

{m[Uselu Karaloye
Offspring of Uselu Karaloye

Shows the Ijebu people as related to the Benin people because Uselu is a royal quarter in Benin where the oba – elect is made to rule as the Eda-Iken of Uselu in Benin for few days before ascending the throne as the Oba of Benin. This is affirmative of the Ife link.

The Poets and the Origin of Ijebu People, Towns and Thrones

According to Babalola (1967 and 2000) *Oriki* among the Yoruba people always bother on history and ancestral biographical sketches of a race, founders of the various towns and allusion to their rulers and nobles. An instance of this is the excerpt below, according to the poets at the Awujale's

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palace and the poets at the Ayangbunrin’s palace at Ikorodu, is the meaning of the word ‘‘Ijebu’’ and the same forms part of the Oriki of the Awujale and the Ayangbunrin, and it is also the common Oriki of invariably all the Ijebu people:

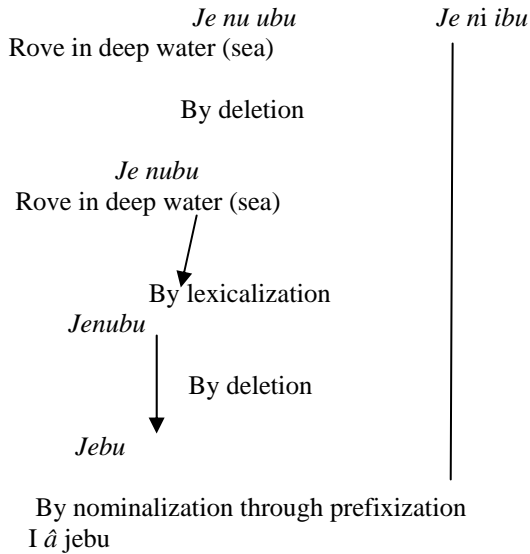
Oni mi je nubu omo Oluwari
 Omo Ajebu josa de *v0 – bini
 Omo Asale-gege boonii noobinren
 A-b’aya-kunle-tititi

Rovers of the deep sea, offspring of Oluwari
 Rovers of deep waters as far as Igbobini
 Whose forebear indulged concubines as if not
 married
 Whereas his home is full of women

In addition, the above gives the etymology of the word ‘‘Ijebu’’ as:

- a) *Je nubu* i.e. *Je â bu ä Jebu*
- b) *I â jebu ä Ijebu*

which is better explained morphologically as follows:
 d i a l e c t a l



I is an agentive from ‘eni ti o’ or ‘awon ti won’ n *je ni ibu*
 That is the source/meaning of the word ‘‘Ijebu’’ is ‘‘the people who rove/swim (*Je*) in the sea (*nubu*). A legend says that the whole Ijebuland , from the beginning, was water-logged and mostly riverine and the people could reach their neighbours like the Igbobinni people only through the

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waterways. A time came when the service of a very powerful Babalawo (called Oniseemu Atikori) was sought. Oniseemu performed some wonder - rituals all over Ijebuland. he later sacrificed himself by sitting on a ritual mat which he spread on the lagoon at Ijebu -Ode and was swept away into the Atlantic ocean along with the lagoon thus draining the area of water. The remaining part of Ijebuland, still with many water deposit is known as the Jjebu waterside till today. Also, according to poets at the Oba's palace Makun omi, the *oriki* lines below:

Omo Makun-omi Osobiya
Osobiya nita Ajano
Omo Aso
Omo Agbono
Omo Ogidon oloko Makun

Offspring of Makun-omi
Offspring of Osobiya the prince of Ita Ajano
Offspring of Aso
Offspring of Agbono Ogidon
The founding father of Makun

tell the origin of Makun-omi, a coastal town of the Ijebu people. Makun-omi was said to have been founded by Osobiya, a prince who descended from Ajano, the 19th Awujale of Ijebu-Ode. According to poets at Ewusi's palace at Sagamu, Sagamu town's origin is:



{m[Koyelu
{m[Egberen
Omo Aseweleri
Omo Kakabijawuta
Omo Oba Aladewusi

Offspring of Koyelu
Offspring of Egberen
Offspring of Aseweleri
Offspring of Kakabijawuta
Offspring of Oba Aladewusi

The above *oriki* lines traces the origin of *Sagamu* town to Koyelu, a migratory leader of Remo. War-lords like Aseweleri and Egberen emerged. The *oriki* lines trace the history to {ba Aladewusi as one of the earliest Remo Obas.

Findings

This paper shows that oral poetry, especially *oriki* is a relatively good source of history. Using data from *oriki* among the Ijebu people, this research was able to educate us on some aspects of Ijebu people's origin history and other

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sundry matters. Also, It proves that the Ijebu people are linked with Ife. The meaning of the word Ijebu hitherto unknown is made known to us. It shows that the Ijebu people are connected to the larger Yoruba race. It proves that the Ijebu people are still a race and a dialect of Yoruba despite their presence in more than one state and towns. It is internecine war that dispersed them. The Ijebu people also have their own warlords like other Yoruba people. Some of their war veterans were Abija: Abija-parako, Kalejaye, Aseweleri and Kiyeri Orunsi. It is observed that most of the said historical events are normally presented in skeletal forms because of the fact that most of the historical allusions in the oriki (like every other poetry) may not be detailed, only the culturally informed members of the community can competently en flesh the skeletal information.

CONCLUSION

We are able to see in this paper that oral poetry especially oriki is a good source of history. This paper was able to give references to origin history of the Ijebu people of Yorubaland and further illuminated their hitherto known history. Hence, non-Standard Yoruba speaking area is a vital area and good source that scholars should endeavour to delve into and should not stay away or refuse to carry out research among them.

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