

# **STYLE IN YORUBA DRUM POETRY**

*BY*

**SOTUNSA MOBOLANLE EBUNOLUWA**

**DEPARTMENT OF LANGUAGES & LITERARY STUDIES**

**Babcock University,  
Ilisan-Remo, Ogun State**

Phone: +44 07552524953, +23470 6058 4508.

e-mail: [bolasotunsa@yahoo.com](mailto:bolasotunsa@yahoo.com)

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## **Abstract**

Within the scope of oral literature, there appears to be emphasis on the study of vocal forms of poetry while the instrumental mode is neglected. This study explores the stylistic features of Yoruba drum poetry, which establish it as a unique form of poetry. It reveals that even when the instrumental mode appears to employ any of the existing modes, it does so with a uniqueness of style and delivery not observed in the other modes. The study therefore, proposed that an instrumental mode of poetry should be recognized as a distinct category given its unique medium and peculiar stylistic devices.

The inter-relationship between poetry and music of the talking drum foregrounds the features of Yoruba drum poetry. The talking drum is primarily a musical instrument, although it is an instrument that performs both literary and musical functions. But more importantly, it is for its literary functions that it is designated the talking drum.

Many cultures regard music and poetry as sister arts. This relationship is obvious in African Oral literature where most poems are songs and vice-versa. The talking drum, as a musical instrument typifies adequately the relationship between poetry and music. Besides, the speech mode of the Yoruba talking drum is usually realized as poetry.

The inter-relationship between poetry and music is not peculiar to African literature; it exists even in western literature. According to David Lindley (1990:1004) "That some kind of relationship exists between the arts of music and literature is a proposition unquestioned since classical times."

Our concern in this paper essentially lies in exploring the apparent symbiotic relationship between poetry and music for the realization of a robust aesthetic experience in drum poetry performance.

Just as vocal music is different from spoken poetry, instrumental music is distinguishable from instrumental poetry even if a single instrument is employed for the production of the two. Without this distinction, drumming would seem to comprise of only music. Many scholars regard drumming as essentially music while disregarding its inherent poetic functions. Unarguably,

music is often intertwined with poetry in drumming performance. Nevertheless, recognition of the literary function of the talking drum produces a richer evaluation of the art of the talking drum. Akin Euba (1990) points out the poetic qualities of Yoruba

The following Yoruba drum poetry text begins with the talking drum reciting poetry solo. At the end, the talking drum changes from the speech mode to the song mode. When this happens, other <sup>1</sup>drummers in the ensemble join in the music rhythms. The Yoruba lead drummer usually signals the change from poetry to music by drumming “*oya*’ (come on).

Talking Drum (solo): speech mode.

<i>Oburo omo ekun aaye</i>	Oburo <sup>1</sup> child of the live tiger
<i>Omo oniwo seki ode Agberi</i>	The child of ‘ <i>iwo</i> ’ <sup>2</sup> little yet potent from Agberi <sup>3</sup>
<i>Omo ara pa mi ara lami</i>	The child of thunder’s victim whom Thunder revives
<i>Ara to ni n gbe gba ayun laja</i>	Thunder that asked me to carry calabash of beads from the ceiling
<i>Mo na wo ganna, mo gbe ti iwo</i>	Arm stretched, I carried <i>Iwo</i>
<i>Iwo bu lemi loju, o lo jo nidii</i>	<i>Iwo</i> burst on my face and leaks from the bottom

Talking Drum with other Drums: Song mode

<i>Omo ewe mo o mi</i>	The offspring of leaf keep breathing
<i>Omo ewe mo o mi</i>	The offspring of leaf keep breathing
<i>Oni ni n o ki o ki baba re</i>	Today I shall praise you and chant your father’s praise
<i>Omo ewe mo o mi</i>	The offspring of leaf keep breathing

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<sup>1</sup> Oburo - a specie of alligator pepper  
 Iwo - a medicine gear  
 Agbeni - a village near Ede

The performance of the poem and song above is a single piece. The change from speech mode to music is instantaneous as the poetry smoothly glides into music. The poem is rich in symbols and imagery. ‘*Oburo*’ is a specie of alligator pepper.(*Zanthoxylum senegelense* ) “*Iwo*” is a medicinal leaf while ‘*Ekun aaye*’, is live tiger all of which constitute the characteristics of the poetic personae. “*Oburo*’ and ‘*Iwo*’ signify his efficiency and effectiveness while the image of ‘*ekun aaye*’ is a metaphor of the subject’s strength.

The image of ‘*ewe*’- (leaf) in the song links the speech mode to the song mode. ‘*Omo ewe*’ is an allusive reference to ‘*iwo*’ the medicinal leaf. The entire performance draws on the resources of both poetry and music for a rich performance. The incorporation of music into the poetry imbues the performance with greater aesthetic value, making the performance musical. Nevertheless, it remains undeniably a poetic performance. Several other examples of speech and song occurring in a single context abound in drumming performance.

. What then are the stylistic features of drum poetry, which must be considered in a literary evaluation of a drum performance? In view of its linguistic value, drum poetry is membrionic verbal communication. It is verbal communication in the sense that the poetry can be analyzed linguistically. However it possesses its own unique style, and can be differentiated from other forms of poetry, vocal or written. Although drum poetry texts have a verbal basis, its evaluation is based on all the stylistic and aesthetic features employed

in its performance and not simply on the text alone. It is the sum of the literary devices, the performance techniques and the kinesis utilized in the performance of drum poetry that establishes it as a unique form of poetry in its own right.

By virtue of its own distinct quality of production, drum poetry possesses special characteristics that engender its artistic value. It is significant that with or without an understanding of the drum language, people can enjoy the aesthetics of the art because of the rhythmic and harmonious arrangement of the sounds and the music incorporated into it. The esoteric nature of drum poetry deepens its aesthetic value such that only those acquainted with it understand its language and are able to derive special pleasure from the art of decoding its messages.

Similarly, members of the audience who do not understand drum language are often fascinated by its esoteric value and learn the art of decoding drum language through sustained exposure to the performance.

Another aesthetic quality of drum poetry is its musicality. The exact manner of production of the drum speech is different from that of the human voice when made to speak same text in the speech mode. The talking drum brings out clearly lyricism or rhythm in human speech. Akin Euba (1990:194) expresses a similar view by pointing out that *iyaaalu* distorts speech rhythm in response to the demands of music.

Drum ‘utterances’ and actual human speech are slightly different especially when made independent of each other. Yet this minute discrepancy

characterizes the drum speech's uniqueness both in style and substance. Whenever the drum imitates the speech pattern, the consonants and vowels glide. There is no sharp cut as we have in vocal speech mode. The membronic speech mode is indeed very similar to the vocal-chant mode. In both cases, orthographic and lexico-semantic rules take new dimensions such that only discerning ears can hear intelligibly. The following drum poetry text serves as illustration:

*Omo ekun naa da?*           Where is the leopard's offspring?  
*Omo ekun naa ree.?*       Here is the leopard's offspring?

In the above text, the drum version employs vowel harmony. Instead of rendering '*omo ekun na da?*' The drum version harmonizes /o/ that is / :/and /e/ that is /e/ such that what is actually produced becomes '*omekun na da?*' '*omekun na re*'. In addition, in the drum version, gliding of vowels takes place. For instance, '*naa*' glides into the next word whereas no such glide or vowel doubling occurs in the human speech mode.

It is apparent that in drum speech there is a conscious digression from the norm of orthographic rules to achieve a rhythmic effect, which is close to music. The variation in pitch, pauses, and vowel clustering and gliding as well as rhythmic elongation, distinguishes drum speech from actual speech and endows it with a unique style of its own. Attempts by the drum, to render utterances in speech mode, normally end up as a near chant mode. Herein lies one for the drum speech's uniqueness.

In addition, very often, repetition is employed to enhance the musicality of the drum texts.

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|---|---|---|
| A | <i>O ti w 'o wo lo (2ce)</i><br><i>Omo 'looku da?</i><br><i>O ti w 'owo lo</i>                                  | He's gone in search of money (2ce)<br>where is the offspring of the deceased?<br>He's gone in search of money                                       |
| B | <i>Ogun o ko wa ri (2ce)</i><br><i>Ara Ibadan o seru</i><br><i>enikookan</i><br><i>Ogun o ko wa ri</i>          | We were never war captives (2ce)<br>Ibadan dwellers are no slaves to<br>anybody<br>We were never war captives                                       |
| C | <i>Igba oro kii fo (2ce)</i><br><br><i>Eni to ran mo lewon</i><br><i>Ko ma safira</i><br><i>Igba oro kii fo</i> | The gourd of wickedness never<br>breaks<br><br>He who sends a child to prison<br>should not stay relaxed<br>The gourd of wickedness never<br>Breaks |

Furthermore, in many drum texts, the consequent phrases are repeated twice before the antecedent phrase is stated and finally the consequent phrase is repeated. From the poetic dimension, the repetition underscores the importance of these lines as the key messages in each of the text. Since repetition is used for emphasis, the messages in these lines are driven home. The repetition also extends the performance.

Furthermore, each of the texts can be repeated several times since they are generally short. When this is done, as often is the case, the poetry is transformed into a song. The tonal quality of the Yoruba language especially lends itself to the easy adaptation of speech to song and poetry to music.



The timber of the drum sound, which produces resounding echoes, which characterize the membronic form of communication, further enhances the musicality of drum poetry.

Another feature of Yoruba drum poetry is its performance. Watching the drummer as he engages his drum with the drum-stick (or spike leather in case of *bata*-drum) evokes in the audience a great deal of aesthetic pleasure. The drum beats and other acrobatic displays of the drummer synchronize and enhance in no small measure the aesthetic quality of the entire performance. The emotional excitement of both the drummer and the audience is consequently raised.

The aesthetic pleasure, which the gestures and kinesis of the drummer arouse in the audience during performance sessions, is better experienced than explained.

Dancing, another performative art goes hand in hand with drum poetry performance. Very often drummers and dancers share a close affinity during the performance for a good dancer serves as a source of inspiration to the drummer. The good dancer indirectly challenges the drummers to perform excellently. A good drummer makes a similar impact on the dancer, often; he encourages the dancer with his aggravated body movements.

Moreover, the drum itself is an artistic object. Drums come in different shapes and sizes. The type of sound(s) it is expected to produce usually determines the shape as well as size of a drum. In addition, elaborate drawings and carvings are made on the drum. It may also be decorated with shells or

brass. The decorations on the drum add additional aesthetic value to it and enhance the performance in the fashion that costume enhances a play.

Furthermore, the distinctive discourse of drum poetry forms part of its stylistic features. By discourse, we mean a systematically organized mode of talking.

Drum poetry texts are often drawn from the traditional lore like proverbs, praise chants, witty sayings, and maxims among others. The talking drummer, often, does not relay his messages in plain language. For instance, if a Yoruba talking drummer wishes to greet a person through the use of his drum, he does not simply say “*E k’aaro*” (good morning). He would rather make an elaborate salutation, which includes reciting the individual’s ‘*oriki*’ or lineage poetry. when saluting an individual named Gbeminiyi Akintunde a talking drummer using the drum states:

*Emo jiire lopoo ile*

The rabbit wakes up with fortune in its house

*Afe jiire nisa ‘le*

The bush-rat wakes up with fortune in its house underground

*Gbeminiyi omo Akintunde*

Gbeminiyi, child of Akintunde

*Oo jiire bi o?*

Hope you woke up with luck?

Song mode:

*Abuse buse omo Akintunde*

All is well then, child of Akintunde

*Abuse buse ee*

All is well.

The above salutation is obviously poetic. The evocation of the imagery of the rabbit and the bush rat waking with fortune (or luck) leads to the rhetorical

question “*Gbeminiyi* child of *Akintunde*, hope you certainly woke up with fortune (luck)? Implicitly, *Gbeminiyi*’s waking with fortune or luck is leveled metaphorically with that of the rabbit and bush rat. Again, the conclusion “if you woke up with fortune or luck then all is well” in the Yoruba language employs the use of pun and alliteration in ‘*abuse buse*’. The poem then glides into music with the repetition of ‘*abuse buse*’.

The discourse of drum poetry is not limited to verbal texts alone. It includes stylistic elements such as dance rhythms and onomatopoeic sounds. Olaniyan(1993:60).

From our discussion so far, it is apparent that drum poetry has its own distinctive features and style. Style can be explained as a set of characteristics of approach or treatment that gives a work its identity. An analogy is appropriate here in making our point lucid.

There are different methods of cooking rice. Jollof rice is different from fried rice just as both differ from a plate of white rice and stew. Although the main food material being cooked is rice, different processes are involved in the cooking. In addition, the ingredients used in the cooking of the various forms may differ. These factors necessarily make the taste of jollof rice different from that of fried rice or plain rice and stew. People have preference for different types of rice with each unique taste fore-grounded by the different cooking procedures. Similarly, while the various forms of poetry share many features, each form has its own distinctive style.

Some features of drum poetry as an instrumental form of poetry, that we have identified so far, establish it as a unique form of poetry. In the first place, the drum is a membrionic media that broadcasts aural signal. As a surrogate language, drum poetry also possesses a distinct quality of sound. Drum poetry is at the same time highly melodious as a result of the variation in pitch, tone, vowels which is employed in its performance. The use of musical and compositional techniques in the performance endows drum poetry with an aesthetic quality even without a verbal interpretation. Drum poetry also involves other performing media such as music, dance and drama in its performance. In addition, the artistic form of the drum as an object contributes to its aesthetic effect. Moreover, Yoruba drum poetry possesses its own discourse, which constitutes the drum lore. Finally, gesture and other forms of kinesis of the drummer inevitably increase the aesthetic value of drum poetry.

In view of the features of drum poetry identified here, it will be ludicrous to continue to ignore the significance and uniqueness of the art of the talking drummer. Drum poetry by virtue of its distinct style should earn recognition as a unique form of poetry by critics of indigenous literature, oral literature in particular.

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