

Offa Community Panegyric: Texture of Environment and Aesthetics

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Abstract. This paper analyses Offa Community panegyric usually referred to as Offa Praise Anthem with a close attention to its form and content. As an oral text, the study focuses on the aesthetic thrust and eco-flavour of the praise anthem which define the community's environmental design, agricultural endowment and ethical guide. The objective of the study is to explore the mythic text that rarely combines chants and narratives as rich oral repertoire. Cultural materialism was deployed for the analysis of the anthem. Offa praise anthem was sourced both from oral and written sources. Thus recordings, transcription and translation formed the bulk of materials used as data. The finding of the study is that Offa panegyric is not just rich, mythic and artistic, it constitutes a community's environmental manual, economic and cultural heritage. It is recommended that Offa praise anthem be preserved as an oral monument and as an inspirational guide through translation and memorization.

Keywords: Offa, panegyric, anthem, environment, aesthetics

Introduction

Praise poetry or panegyrics often presents rich aesthetics as part and parcel of a cultural heritage and oral tradition. The term panegyric belongs to a genre of poetry either in oral or written medium. Poetry in itself is the imaginative manipulation of words or language to invoke emotion and meaning through rhythm and sound. Poetry is as old as man dealing with vast universal experiences. The primary and primal use of language could be found in poetic expressions. Panegyrics called 'Oriki in 'Yoruba', izibongo in Zulu and praise poetry in English refers to eulogy, oration and adoration. Its sub-types include elegy, epitaph, ode and pathetic fallacy. The Encyclopedia Britannica defines panegyric as

eulogistic oration or laudatory discourse that ordinarily was a speech delivered of a Greek general assembly(panegyrics), such as the Olympic and pan-Athenic festivals. Speakers frequently took advantage of these occasions, when Greeks of various cities were gathered together, to advocate Hellenic activity. With this end in view and also in order to gratify their audience, they tended to expatiate on the former glories of Greek cities; hence came the encomiastic associations that eventually clung to the term panegyric.

In Yoruba cosmology, the word Oriki is a form of heroic epithets which are verbally chanted or delivered in praise of kings, queens, titled chiefs, aristocrats, princes and princesses, masquerades among other wealthy or powerful individuals that society holds in high esteem. Yoruba also reserve Oriki for popular kingpins who are into shady activities but feared by most people because of their dreadful acts. Also, there is panegyric reserved for gods and goddesses and their priests and priestesses. For instance, ijala, hunter's chant is reserved for ogun (god of iron) and its worshippers. There is panegyrics reserved for Sango (god of thunder and retributive justice) and its worshippers. Olu Obafemi captures the correlation between poetry and songs in this insightful manner:

Poetry is actualized in performance via songs, chants, and music as well recitative forms. The two main aspects of poetry are the esoteric and the popular. The esoteric comprise such forms as the Ifa, an oracular literature associated with Orunmila, the Yoruba god of divination. Ifa divination poetry exists in various principal figures

called Odu, which are articulated by Ifa priests called Babalawo to obtain divine messages. Other forms of oracular poetry include Ofo: incantation, the poetry used in casting magical spells. More popular elements of performed poetry found in the operatic theatre, include the panegyric poetry called Oriki (praise poems). An example is Sango pipe, the praise songs specially reserved for eulogizing Sango, the Yoruba god of thunder, lightning and retributive justice. This form comes commonly through Rara (a slow chant dedicated to Sango). All these elements of poetry, cultic and mundane, feature very prominently in most works. Much of poetry is either sung or chanted to music and drums (2001, p.14).

This study explores the aesthetics of Offa panegyrics defining the life, evolution and topography of a community. The study is a qualitative one centering on content analysis of Offa praise poetry. The poetic form of the praise anthem gives it away as a form of orature or oral tradition. The transcribed version is sourced from a publication by Offa Descendants Union while its oral form is sourced from the music of late Alhaji Odolaye Aremu, a very popular musician from Kwara State which he produced while alive.

The analysis covers the laudatory and descriptive lines which codify the identity of Offa as well as the historicized or evolutionary aspects of the praise poetry. The other aspect which the praise poetry is devoted to is the ecological or topographical pictures of Offa Community. As obtainable in oral poetic forms, praise or panegyric poetry is a sub-genre of folk poetry. A distinctive flavour of panegyric is its being embedded in all kinds of oral poetry. Ogunjimi and Na'Allah observe that

Praise poetry is common in African communities. When a child prostrates, kneels or bends to greet his parents in the morning, he or she is greeted with praises. The elder who wants to appreciate the kindness or assistance rendered by a child, chants some praises. The traditional poet who wants patronage and material rewards from members of the community chants praise poetry of those involved.... (Ogunjimi & Na'Allah, 1994, p. 57)

Two major facts are discernible in the exploration of Offa panegyric as cultural artifacts. The praise poetry is representational of the origin and true cultural milieu of the Offa Community in particular and panegyric of the Yoruba folks in general. Secondly, the praise anthem represents the sociological and geographical description and evolution of the Offa people on their journey from the very beginning to the present time; and from being a small settlement to a large town being the second largest town in Kwara State. Above all, the panegyric conveys the journey aptly captured as the evolution of the Offa Community.

Ede okin oloffa mojo
Omo olalomi abisu joko
Ijakadi katakiti loro offa
Ija peki abe owula
Tiko ba se oju ebe ni aale
Ase oju poro ninu oko
Kibase oju oloko, oloko oba lawon
Osogun agunmate, osoju agbele ya arara
Ojoju apobiri kako

Offa Praise Anthem, History and Cultural Matrix

Cultural materialism as propounded by Raymond Williams is a ...a theory of the specificities of material, cultural and literary production within historical materialism. Its details belong to the argument as a whole, but I must say, at this point, that it is, in spite of and even because of the relative unfamiliarity of some of

its element, part of what I at least as the central thinking of Marxism. (Williams, , p.p.5-6)

Simpson (1995) observes that historical semantics “carried great weight for Williams as an analytical tool, from *Culture and Society* onward: he believed the whole social and historical tendencies could be traced through the changing meanings of words.” Williams interrogates culture and folklore as adaptable for literary forms with the extrapolation of Marxism.

Rukhaya (2015) commented that Marxist critics such as Engels “recognized the relative autonomous nature of literature” while according to Raymond Williams Literature gives a voice to the Marxist texture as an ideology as contained in works like *Politics* and *Letters* in 1947 and 1948. Rukhaya (2015) compares cultural materialism with the British New Historicism. Lloyd and Thomas (1995) corroborate Rukhaya’s observation that Williams’s *Culture and Society 1780-1950* looked like a dominant way of reflecting on culture and socio-political theory in Britain. On the whole Williams’s is symbolic of literary theory and to Williams, culture, as a concept, reflects development and contradictory uses, against the capitalist restructuring of the concept of culture. *Culture and Society* are being redefined by industrialization and democratization. The historical account is poetically captured in the Offa Panegyric.

Ile yi ko gba wa,
A ko lo siLofa
Nigbati Ilofa o gba wa,
A ko lo si Ofa Oro
Nigbati Ofa Oro ko gba wa
A ko lo sÓfa ‘Rese+
Nigbati Ofa Irese ko gba wa,
A ko lo si Igbolotu,
Nigba ti Igbolotu ko gba wa
A tun pada si Ofa Eesun,
Nigbati Ofa Eesun ko gba wa mo
Ni awa ko wa si Ofa Arinlolu
Olofa se pele o
Aro ko ya bum un.....(Offa at a Glance, 1970-2009)

(This town could not contain us
We relocated to Ilofa
When we were not satisfied with Ilofa
We moved to Ofa-Oro
When Ofa Oro was not large enough to house us
We left for Ofa Irese
When Ofa-Irese could not contain us
We headed to Igbolotu
Igbolotu was not a befitting town for us
We returned to Ofa-Eesun
When Ofa-Eesun could not meet our requirement
We finally migrated to Ofa-Arinlolu)

The poetic extract further proves the fact that various useful pieces of information inhere in the corpus of Offa praise chant. Since this art volunteers to serve as the data bank of information regarding the origin and of Offa, it is possible for any interested researcher have knowledge of what took place before the founding of Offa. It is important to observe that marks and signposts of Offa would be left in all those areas to which Offa ancestor settled and relocated.

O s'aju ebe, o soju poro ninu oko
 Iba s'aju oloko, I ba la won
 O s'aju Kagun-kakanrun
 O s'aju Agunmona Iófa
 O s'aju Agbele-yarara
 O s'aju Aporubuka'ko
 O s'aju lafakale
 ...

(...
 The Heap of earth was a witness; the furrow was a witness in the farm
 If the farm owner was a witness, he would have settled it
 The-one-that-is-tall-and-reaches-the-sky was a witness
 The –one-that-is-tall-but-not-straight was a witness
 The-dwarf-one-on-the-land witnessed it
 The-one-that-encircles-the-farm was a witness
 The-one-that-spreads-over-the-land witnessed it)

Offa is an ancient town which was founded by Olalomi Olofffa. He was a crown prince from old Oyo and a direct descendant of Oranmiyan who hailed from Ile-Ife around 1395. Offa is the headquarters of Offa Local government Area of Kwara State in the North Central zone of Nigeria. Olalomi Olofffa was a renowned hunter who was reputed for his dexterous use of archers. Offa has the reputation of possessing the planting of sweet potatoes and the tradition of wrestling which has earned the people the cognomen and totem encapsulated by the praise anthem. The praise anthem captures the entertaining, the historicized as well as the ritual content.

Offa o aiye ile Offa o (2ce)
 Iyeru Okin omo abi loffa
 Nile Olalomi
 Olalomi abi' loffa (Offa oooooo)
 The world is your house, Offa ooooo (2x)
 Iyeru Okin, child of he born in Offa
 In Olalom's home
 Olalomi, he that was born in Offa
 In the city of sweet potatoes
 Kukunduku that wield resplendent leaves
 Is the pedigree of sweet potato
 Offa oooooo
 The world is home, Offa oooooooooo)

Ni ilu anama
 Kukunduku sewe geru-geru
 Loriki anama
 Offa o, aiye ile Offa o (p. 4)

In the writings of Olafimihan, Offa, a popular town in Kwara State, sourced her name from the word *ofa* (spear/bow and arrow), as often and fondly used by the founder of the community (Olafimihan, 1948). The primogenitor of Offa was one from Oyo as a direct son of Oranmiyan. Olafimihan in *Iwe Itan Ofa* (Book of History of Ofa, 1948), gave an account that he was a brave hunter, who was hunting with spear. It was his consistent use of bow and arrow that earned him nicknamed "Omo Oba Ologangan. Buttressing the account by Olafimihan, Samuel Johnson in *The History of the Yorubas from the earliest Times to the History of the*

British Protectorate (1924, p. 76) listed the siblings thus: “The following are the king lines in the Oyo province”. 1. In the Ekun Osi or metropolitan province: The Onikoyi of Ikoyi; Olugbon of Igbon; Aresa of Iresa; Ompetu of Ijeru; Olofa of Ofa....”

Other writers who have supported this migratory adventure of the Ollofa include but not limited to Chief S. K. Bakare, a veteran Yoruba teacher and scholar in Yoruba culture, and an indigene of Ilorin, Mr. Ibiyemi, Kabir Yinka. They wrote that Omo Oba Ologangan migrated from the old Oyo.

The Ollofa then first settled at River Maiko near Ilofa before he moved to Offa Oro very close to the Nupe. The incessant clash with Nupe made him shift base and further settled in Offa Irese. Offa Irese was not far from Igbaja (Igbaja is popularly known with the appellation of “Irese”, hence, it is called *ile onirese* i.e. the home of Irese. He later relocated to Offa Ikose, near the present day Ilemona. He eventually settled permanently in the present day Offa Eesun near Ira. This historical trajectory has been captured in poetic form of the praise anthem.

excerpt

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The above captures the historical background of Offa as a home and settlement of a people. Also captured is the food heritage of the people of Offa- the sweet potatoes. This particular food item is both for cash and food crop. Sweet potatoes are to the natives of Offa as Irish potatoes are to the people of plateau state- the Birom folks. Significantly and popularly too, the people of Offa reserve a panegyric cum myth for sweet potatoes in the texture of orature and popular culture.

The other popular item which bears another popular praise anthem for the people of Offa in the refrain ‘*Ijakadi loro Offa*’ wrestling is the custom in Offa).

Iyeru okin Oloffa moja
 Olofa omo laare
 Olalomi omo Abisu jooko
 Ijakadi l' ooro toffa
 Ija kan, ija kan ti won ja l'Ofa nile Olalomi nijosi
 O soju ebe, o soju poro ninu oko
 Iba soju oloko, I ba la won

(...
 One popular fight, one popular fight that held in Ofa, home of Olalomi
 The Heap of earth was a witness; the furrow was a witness in the farm
 If the farm owner was a witness, he would have settled it

Oloffa loni omele, gbengbeleku larayoku san
 Iyeru Okin Olofa abidiyomeni
 Omo Olalomi
 Omo adjulasu
 Laaare, buuure
 Okan o gbodo jukan l'Ofa
 Iyeru boka-an jukan
 Ogun oba ni I ko won roro
 Nile Olalomi
 Omo abasujooko
 Ijakadi loro t'Ofa.
 (*Oriki nile Yoruba, Osunbuyide, 2014*)

(Iyeru Okin Olofa he whose buttock melts on the mat
 Child of Olalomi
 Child of he who closes eyes as he cuts yam
 Cut-it-fairly, divide-it-fairly
 One must not bigger than the other in Ofa
 Iyeru if one is bigger than the other
 It is the war of the king that enslaves them
 In the home of Olalomi
 One who shares an appellation with yam
 Wrestling is the custom of Ofa.)

(The excerpt above defines the ancient institutional framework of the Offa Community). The traditional wrestling which dated back to the beginning of time of the founding of Offa often resonates on a number of community issues, the hierarchy of leadership and administration;

The agronomy or agro economic practices refer to the people of Offa. The value system pertaining to the system of justice, equity and fair play; and above all, the cultural identity of the Offa people.

Offa, the traditional headquarters of the Ibolo dialect of the Yoruba speaking people of Kwara State was first settled around 1415. The settlements are in Offatedo of Osun, Iyana Offa in Oyo State, Offa in Cote d'Ivoire and Offa Igbo-Idun. The focal point of study is the Offa in Kwara State. It was formerly an integral part of Oyun Local Government Area before being carved out as an independent local government. It is the home of the legendary Moremi who

was responsible for the defeat of marauders in frequent raid of Ile-Ife, the cradle of the Yoruba race.

Offa panegyric is a rich genre of orature. By its content and form, it fulfils the inherent features of cultural materialism as propounded by Raymond William, hence its study enhances cultural studies. In other words, the application of the tenets of cultural materialism would help shed light on the utilitarian value and formalistic elements of the praise poetry as popular culture and literary supplement.

The panegyric is largely sociological in scope but formalistic in lines. The study focuses on the artistic value of the panegyric but not without a recourse to the content. Offa panegyric is partly mythic and partly literary or artistic. While the word materialism means anything physical in terms of material wealth or satisfying the mind, it affects values and objects which may be cognitive, affective and in the psycho motor domain or the consumable or profitable. The cultural implication of materialism is the intellectual perspective of cultural values. This is concerned with the intangible intellectual heritage which the UNESCO now harvests for inscription from place to place. William calls attention to the utility of culture, lore, mores, proverbs, myths, folktales, legend and folklore among others.

Offa panegyrics is rich in myth, mores, legend and folklore. It encompasses the sociological, historical as well as the mythic. Its analysis reveals the utilitarian value of art or artistic enterprise, such as the poetic, the dramatic, and the narrative. However, the panegyric in terms of performances, is more of chant or recitation than narration. But when performed, it impacts on dramatization. Thus, the panegyric myth, legend, folklore, and history, it combines a graphic painting of the physical landscape of the community. Bayo Ogunjimi observes that the praise poetry and journey artifice are mutually bounded, systematically and aesthetically wielded together. He goes further that in the re-organization and harmonization of a people's universe like that of Offa, journey artifice is a vital aesthetic force. Being formulated an aesthetic African Orature has a story imperative and the process of harmonization and transition.

Topography, Agro- Aesthetic and Value System

The richness of Offa Community praise poetry lies in its encompassing aesthetics cutting across the topography, the farming system or farm products as well as the value system. The panegyric is like a manual which could be deciphered from historical- cum mythic materials and the socio- economic cum the process of racial justice.

The topography of Offa is laced with the evolution of the Community. Offa started as a small settlement but it has evolved from a small settlement to a city harboring quite a number of higher institutions in and around it. A question to be asked is how did the community start before leaping into this city status? The panegyric captures it and here in an excerpt.

From the above, Offa as a community is blessed with water. That is the community does not suffer drought. But from the myth of how river now flows and serves Offa people i.e with good water for all kinds of activities, the then Oloffa was wise in his decision. Each of the streams had offered to transform itself into a big river of the king would adhere to his instruction. The first one had requested for a ram to be offered to it in order to transform into a sea. The second stream had requested for a river elephant (hippopotamus) for it to transform into a marina. The third one had requested for a cock in order to transform itself to Agunkoko which is less in volume of water than the sea and marina. As contained in the song of Odolaye Aremu in his album entitled "Olowe Mowe"

The then Oloffa, the monarch had acceded to the request of the third stream buy offering it a cock and the stream transformed itself into a river called Agunkoko. It is this river that provides water to the rising population and descendants of Offa Community in the present time. However, the monarch had discarded the other two requests not because it was difficult to find

their requests, but because, the king knew with a river like the sea and marina in and around his territory, there would be a small portion to build houses. He foresaw that Offa population would be growing and spreading over the surface.

The second myth is about the communal traditional wrestling that once took place between the monarch, Oloffo and his chosen lieutenant, High Chief Eesa. The epic encounter has since been captured in this panegyric texture.

Omo odi meta ara tinbe ni Offa odi iwaju ni ti olusan:
odi ti ehin Olumorin ; odi ti aarin gbungbun ni ti olugbanse omo Aiyedun
Omo odo meta aara tinbe ni Offa.
Okan ni ki won o pa Agbo bologo boo un ki oun di Osa'
Okan ni ki won opa Erinla
Bo oun ki yio di okun
Eketa ni ki won o pa Akuko Adie gagara
bi Oun oni di Agun loko ni offa .

The choice of the primogeniture of the Offa descendants was cautious and sagacious as reflected in the peaceful and prosperous nature of Offa township in the present day Nigeria.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, the paper has discussed Offa history, myth and evolution. The focal point of scholarship has been the praise anthem of Offa. The praise anthem passes for a cultural material with its rich texture and multi-genric resourcefulness. The praise anthem is rich in the performative, the narrative as well as the dramatic comprising both the drama and the poem. The wrestling as well as the recitative poetry or chant which are inherent in the historical or mythic texture of the Offa praise anthem are the unified aesthetic flavour of the praise anthem, it goes by the title Oriki and Itan of Offa.

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