ORAL POETRY IN SAM UKALA'S ODOUR OF JUSTICE
AND FEMI OSOFISAN'S WOMEN OF OWU

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Abstract
Nigerian, and indeed African, Literature is still traditionally based and it derives its strength from tribal sources. Nigerian playwrights, especially Sam Ukala and Femi Osofisan write from their ethnic backgrounds. They borrow from the rich Nigerian oral literature, especially oral poetry to create new visions of life. This study attempts to explicate the aspects of oral poetry incorporated in Odour of Justice and Women of Owu and show that even up till the new millennium, Nigerian writers continue to look inwards to preserve their culture.

Introduction
Oral poetry is one of the forms of oral literature which playwrights often adapt in their plays. Femi Osofisan and Sam Ukala are among such writers who incorporate this genre of oral literature into their works. In her discussion of the various features of oral literature that qualify as poetry, Ruth Finnegan (1970) mentions the following: panegyric poems, elegiac poems, religious poems, lyric, special purpose poetry (which includes war, hunting and work poems), topical and political songs, children's songs and rhymes. Kofi Awoonor (1975:78-79), in his own typology for oral poetry, relied heavily on voice performance. He classifies oral poetry into: occupational poetry (which includes hunters' chant, e.g Ijala, fishermen's and farmers' songs), cult poetry (which includes religious, medicinal and oracular poems, e.g incantation), social poetry which includes dirge, work songs, children's songs, praise songs, love and war songs) and drum poetry.

Isidore Okpewho (1992) draws attention to the limits of the approaches by scholars like William Bascom, Dan Ben-Amos, Kofi Awoonor, Ruth Finnegan, Adeboye Babalola, and Olatunde Olatunji. He simplifies the classification categories and identifies two broad groupings of songs and chants. His collapse of the genres of oral poetic forms into songs and chants is tenable because, at a closer look, the classifications by other scholars are mainly songs and chants or recitation and their different types. Examples of songs include dirge, song of praise, song of abuse, and other types. Chants or recitations include incantation, praise poems and others. Consequently, we shall look at the adaptation of songs and chants by Femi Osofisan and Sam Ukala in their Women of Owu and Odour of Justice respectively.

Songs in the Plays
1) Dirge
A dirge is a slow, sad song or piece of music sometimes played because someone has died. It usually portends sorrow and lamentation. A dirge belongs to a group of poems known as elegiac poetry. In a dirge, according to Finnegan (1970:154), the deceased is the focal point. He/she (the deceased) may be addressed, his individual qualities described, or he/she may be identified with one or several ancestors.

Okpewho (1992:156) explains that in African, as in many other traditional societies, elaborate ceremonies surround the occasion of death, and in these, a variety of funeral songs and chants are performed. He reveals that the dirges are often performed by skilled and more or less professional performers. Furthermore, he says that in many African communities, funeral ceremonies are all the more elaborate if the deceased is an aged man or
As the stage direction states, as soon as they enter the palace grounds, the young men break into a more militant dirge, take possession of the entire palace, cutting down branches and pulling up weeds, climbing shrubs, peering, searching hidden corners and then they burst into another dirge:

Nwannem-o
Nwannem-o
Ana macho
Nwannem-o

My brother-o
My brother-o
I'm searching for
My brother-o (134)

They repeat this for some time and change to a faster tempo with which they return to the frontage of the palace where the rest of the people have been clapping and dancing to their song:

Cho cho cho
Anyi achoya
Anyi afuro ya
Chonu ya
Anyi achoya
Anyi afuro ya
Cho cho cho

Searched, searched
We searched for him
We couldn't find him
Search for him
We searched for him
We couldn't find him
Searched, searched (134-135)

Ofume. According to the stage direction, Blackout: A dirge rises, performed solely with ekpiri, the local trumpet cut of a horn-like gourd. The rhythm is sustained throughout the scene... Next to one of the benches stands Umogwum in black... At the centre of the crowd are Ukeke, exotically costumed and made up, four energetic young men bearing Ofume's coffin...

Ukala's adaptation of dirges into his play is one way in which he has incorporated an oral literary element into his work. The dramatic import of this is the suspense, and sorrow state the dirges plunge the readers and audience into. Ukala has, through the dirges, preserved oral tradition.

Osifisan, like Ukala, fuses dirges into his play, Women of Owu. The play recounts the tragedy that befalls the Owu people when the allied forces of the armies of Ijebu and Ife descended on the village to kill, maim and destroy everything in Owu land, including human beings. Owu is reduced to a complete rubble and set on fire. From the beginning to the end of the play, the characters burst into dirges, to lament the tragic condition witnessed by the Owu people at a particular point in time. Before the play begins proper, the chorus of women, sing the dirge: "Atupa gbepo nle felepo" which means "Lamp, yield your oil to the oil seller":

Irawo, wo, orun oran
Osupa a fan moo
Ale le le?
Alejo o de loganjo oru

The stars refused to light
The moon's refused to light
A stranger's come in the dead of night
Works Cited


