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From minstrelsy to the spoken word poet: Oral tradition and postcolonial Nigeria

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Abstract: This paper attempts to trace the influences, interactions, confluences and developmental trajectories that link the ancient art of oral chants, poetry, minstrelsy, and the contemporary and modernist spoken word versifications in practice today in Nigeria. Audience, form, content, and intent have been pivotal factors in the different epochs that separate the ancient precursors and the present forms in this performance matrix. Through ethnographic and qualitative approaches, and textual analyses, select spoken word poets in contemporaneity have been studied and their verses analyzed for such influences from established traditional forms; validating credence that the ancient forms have built a formidable bulwark of elements and standards that give rise to spoken word poetry fitting for the malaise of the post colony. There has been a dearth of such research scope. Two contemporary spoken word poets with Yoruba (oriki and ijala elements) and Igbo (abụ and mbem factors) nationalities are studied in this paper and a nexus has been established that oral tradition has through adequate metamorphoses, augmented a postcolonial tenor and relevance. This study has elicited the use of the spoken word poet as its theoretical anchor.

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The oral literature of any group of people or community is basically formed and influenced by the experiences of that community just the same way that their literature does. That is, the oral literature of any community contains characteristic indices and elements of that particular community, and will portray and reflect the norms and way of life of that community. From the above, traditional poets who belong to individual communities therefore naturally represent their communities accordingly. These poets, who go by different names, have the responsibility of presenting the beautiful aspects of their cultures and traditional values when they perform publicly. They sometimes are required to perform before royalty in situations, they perform at their very best. The spoken word poets are regarded as the sages of their communities because they speak truth to power.
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1. Introduction: oral tradition and the African oral poet

Tradition, here, is operational in two constructs—on the one hand it refers to the generic structure of an old order of values and practices, and on the other it represents the oral form of verses dating from ancestral times devoid of the written tradition. For the purposes of this discourse, usage(s) will entail constant fluidity and overlapping; occasional specificities guided by immediate contextual leanings. Oral tradition is seen both as information and as a means of communication passed down through generations by word of mouth. It is not written down and includes histories, cultures and cultural traditions, literature, etc., about a people. Also known as oral lore, the knowledge art, ideas, and so on contained therein are mostly transmitted through speech, songs, tales (folktales), chants, verses, prose, etc.

Oral literature from the above exposé refers to the elements of or literary forms that are in the oral mode and are also preserved, transmitted, and performed orally. Performance is seen as an intrinsic index in oral literature. Akporobaro (2006) opines that “[t]he most basic characteristic of oral literature is that it is a performed expression” (4). Finnegan (1970) had earlier established this: “There is no mystery about the first and most basic characteristic of oral literature . . . (it) is by definition dependent on a performer who formulates it in words on a specific occasion—There is no other way in which it can be realized as a literary product” (2). There are other factors that are fundamental features of the oral literary creation which include orality as the mode of communication, artist personality, audience as factor, memory as factor, improvisation, and artistic literary factors (Akporobaro, 3). Oral literature straddles the three major genres of poetry, drama and prose. In their oral form, lyrics, dirges, panegyrics, praise songs and poems, specific function verses, occasional poems, chants, etc., make up the components of oral poetry; while folktales, myths, sagas, legends, etc., in prose patterns form the bulk of oral prose. Performatives such as community theatre, ritual enactments, mimicries, masquerade shows, puppetry, etc., make up for drama. But according to Umeh (1991) “[t]here are however forms like proverbs, riddles and other forms of witty and curt verbal expressions that cannot strictly be classified as poetry or prose since they sometimes combine elements of both” (25).

In the same way literature mirrors the society, the oral literature of any peoples or community is basically formed and influenced by the “nature, circumstances and experiences of that community” (Umeh, 26). Simply put, the oral literature of any community contains characteristic indices and elements of that particular community, and will portray and reflect the nature and way of life of that community. Umeh continues

Thus a community that thrives by farming will have its oral literature largely informed by pastoral and related experiences, while a community that is sustained by fishing will have its oral literature studded with water imagery and experiences. Thus the norms, values and virtues extolled in the oral literature of a community may differ from those extolled in the oral literature of another, depending on the special and unique circumstances of each community. (26)

From the above, traditional poets who belong to individual communities therefore naturally represent their communities accordingly. These poets who go by different names, have varying responsibilities, belong to separable cadres and categories, but converge as custodians and repositories of verbal art and knowledge, abound in the numerous ethnicities in Africa. The issue of poets having varying responsibilities and belonging to separate cadres and categories is because the situations that require poetry to be sung or spoken in the traditional African society or setting are many and different. While some settings are secular others are ritualistic, some others require careful recital of memorized lines, others are impromptu and less restricted; and
again some are the exclusives of royalty. Okpewho (1985) explains further on specifics and situations:

Some of these situations are somewhat restricted in the sense that the poet is charged with chanting a specific type of poetry and would need to have undergone a formal training for the purpose. Poets in this category could be found in the royal court of communities ruled by kings, or else attached to wealthy or powerful men in societies dominated by privileged men. (4)

The Mandinka of western Africa have the griot, a traditional royal court poet who while singing the king’s glory, also records in his verses important historical events concerning the royal household. In this vein, the Ashanti of Ghana have the kwadwunfo, Rwanda in central Africa has the umusizi, and among the Zulu of southern Africa, the imbongi does the traditional praise singing for royalty and the affluent (Okpewho 4). Another restricted and specialized category is the ritual, and in it, Okpewho includes “… bonetuuri (speakers) at the Bagre initiation ceremony among the LoDagaa of northern Ghana, and the babalawo (diviners) among the Yoruba of Nigeria” (4–5).

Nearly all types and categories of the traditional African poet require a training of sorts which differs greatly both in duration, pattern, stricture, and so on; dependent largely on whether it is entertainment, ritual, or court related. Poets in the restricted category (mostly ritual, court bards, diviners, etc.) go through a relatively long and formal training period in order to attain maturity in the practice. According to Okpewho,

Some of this training takes place within the family which has traditionally played the artistic role and in which it is understood that a son would succeed his father in the task; in such a situation the young man attends his father very closely from early youth and is instructed as often as necessary on the appropriate idioms of the art as well as the strict processes. (5)

Using the Yoruba ijala chants as an example, Babalola and Uchegbulam Abaloga (1981) helps with this furtherance: “when a child is taught ijala-chanting by his father, it is the child who first shows interest in his father’s ijala performances and thus encourages his father to give him the necessary tuition” (4). Babalola in the above is saying that such responsibilities are not forced; interest is important in art. He further describes the training stages as “… first … a period of merely listening to the ijala chants performed by the teacher in his own house … (and) at every social gathering … (4); the second stage being that of “imitating the teacher word by word as he chants the ijala” (4). The third stage is that where the master orders the pupil to give solo performances of the chants to gatherings he has taken him. This act bolsters the pupil, gives him credence, and validates him as it is a very important promotion (4).

For the court poet or bard, Okpe who comments on a particular issue—that of discretion and finesse—in discharging his duties. This also extends to the diviner or babalawo. Okpewho’s comments follow verbatim after his establishment that a king naturally is glorified with flattering and exaggerated imagery that massage his ego:

If, however, he suffers any failure in war or commits an unwise act of leadership, the court poet takes care to choose words of caution or blame that would not earn him the anger of the king. In the case of the diviner, he requires some imaginative skill to manipulate the recognized verses of his chant around the special problems brought to him by various clients. (5)

The later part of the above quote underscores the need for special delivery skills even beyond the content of a possibly irritable king or a sensitive royalty.

The freelance entertainer category of the oral poet is more widely spread and has relatively more practitioners. Its sub-categories are numerous and have far less strictures compared to the restricted and ritual category. According to Okpewho, the freelance poet’s work is not “tied to such
narrow situations as the king’s court or the diviner’s consultation room” (5). The freelance poet’s stage and audience is mostly among commoners and their gatherings. Therefore, you could find such an oral poet entertaining people whether invited or uninvited in weddings, house-warming parties, naming ceremonies, general get-togethers, etc. Again, funerals are also an excellent stage or arena for an oral poet. He could attend invited or uninvited to such places of mourning to showcase his skills in traditional dirges and elegies. In this sub-category, it is interesting to note that there are examples of professional mourners as oral poets; an example being themenayititi harp players and singers among the Luo of Kenya. Okpewho describes a type of freelance poet who could be handicapped or able-bodied but has to rely solely on his art to eke out a living. He calls this kind, the “wayside musician” and says “the wayside musician has to summon his imagination so as to affect the passer-by with sufficient sympathy or delight” (6); this, most certainly to elicit monetary appreciation. All these were more obtainable in the past than they are presently, as modernity has taken its toll.

The glory of the African past is always more appreciated with beautiful instances of her culture; almost always not recorded but remembered, preserved and transmitted through the oral tradition—and sadly so with its debilitating nature and the problem of lack of more permanent and enduring storing means. This is made worse as it fares badly against the multiple and challenging onslaughts of westernization, civilization and their accompanying religions, and naturally calls for a salvation-tinged nostalgia of sorts; steeped in the need for a curative permanency of the transience of oral tradition and in the mild and slight succor of seeing its remnants and vestiges in some modern art forms. In this case of poetry, the concern of this study is not necessarily to investigate a detailed historical trajectory but to point out the links between today’s spoken word form, with its affinity in orality and the verbal form, and its ancient ancestral predecessor of oral traditional chants, poetry, and minstrelsy. Though in a modern and postcolonial setting, the solid house that has been in existence albeit slitted over is largely responsible for the modernist and contextually slanted outcrops and projection of the spoken word sub-genre in poetry.

2. Concepts and literatures
Spoken word is basically a performance; a performance that is word-based. It could entail gesticulations and body movements but is not dependent solely on those, like the pantomime which is without words but with body movements and facial expressions. It is an oral art form that deploys and stretches all the possibilities of wordplay, intonation and speech inflection as aesthetic and functional tools. Though as a term it could refer in a blanket manner to a retinue of verses recited aloud; but in this context it refers only to poetry designed to be performed and not comedy routines, stand-up comedy, solo or mono drama, prose monologues and their ilk. It also through a finer mesh excludes poetry readings which are mere vocalizations of poetry designed originally for print, printed or readable medium. The intrinsic difference here is when one understands that while written poetry has a lot to do with graphology and page aesthetics, spoken word depends more on the aesthetics of sound. From what has been discussed so far in oral literature and poetry, indications that spoken word is not a new form have been salient. However, according to Hollander (1996) “spoken word has existed for many years. Long before writing, through a cycle of practicing, listening and memorizing, each language drew on its resources of sound structure for aural patterns that made spoken poetry very different from ordinary discourse and easier to commit to memory”. (11)

Etheridge Knight goes further by saying that “there were poets long before there were printing presses, poetry is primarily oral utterance, to be said aloud, to be heard” (92–95). Even in the composition of the spoken word, there is a lot of difference when compared to the written form. Akin to oral poetry, the spoken word poet does not have the luxury of going back to the text before delivering the final product; as in cases concerning editing or going over the (written) text again. The oral or spoken word poet no matter the preparation earlier made always thinks on his feet in an impromptu manner. Dandatti Abdulkadir has this to say “In contrast to the poet who writes out his lines or dictates them, the oral poet, as Parry observes, “cannot think without hurry about his
next word, nor change what he has made, before going on to read over what he has just written”. (18)

Uka was quoting Anyidoho as a support to buttress his own points. He consolidates his stance by quoting Anyidoho’s paper “Myth maker and Myth breaker: The Oral Poet as Earwitness”:

... our writers would attempt to explore the possibilities of using the technology of sound as the primary medium of poetic dialogue ... since many of our people do not have eyes to witness the poetry of print but do have ears for the power of the sound and sense of words ... (Uka 58)

The strength of the spoken word (sub-)genre lies in its performance mode because it provides spectacle, alongside supplying the ear pleasurable and meaningful sound—elements greatly played in the print medium. Oral poetry and spoken word are performance acts and are loosely grouped under solo performances since most spoken word and traditional oral poets perform singularly. The fact that it is a performance brings it close to theatre and Louis Catron has this to say: “the solo theatrical form ... is so flexible that it is also called a monologue, a solo play, or a one-person show” (7); and Cairney (2001) lends his voice too: “there are many kinds of solo shows as there are actors and actresses performing them” (6).

It is important to reiterate however that the strength of the traditional oral poet or the modern spoken word poet again lies in the deft manipulations of words and inflections of tone and intonation. The historical movement of poetry in modern Nigeria especially, from the “old order” written, through the experimental and local flavor infused in verses, to the present delight of spoken word could be first gleaned from this exposé by Ezenwa-Ohaeto (1998) as he tries to explain the paradigm shift of Nigerian poetry from the seventies and eighties:

The evolution of modern Nigerian poetry in the seventies and eighties towards a people oriented creativity required the exploration of various creative avenues. Thus, the subsequent desires of the poets to eliminate lexical impediments, unclog poetic syntax and infuse the poems with the oral flavor of the rich and variegated Nigerian cultures, hinged on this conscious reaction to make more people enjoy poetry, despite their occupations, in spite of their preconceived ideas of the poetic craft, and notwithstanding their levels of intellectual sophistication. (11)

While written in the nineties, Ezenwa-Ohaeto’s observation points to a forward moving dynamism which paused long enough in their era to create an impression of apparent permanence. What was not immediately seen or discovered then was that the paradigm shift is a continuum that has berthed on the shores of this present era bearing freight of the traditional oral mode re-jigged in the garb of the spoken word.

The impetus largely causative for the return to orality and locally infused verses seen as unfortunate then and has continually worsened, has remained the downward spiraling and hard-biting economy. According to Ezenwa-Ohaeto, “[t]he economic recession had a great impact on the publishing industry which made it impossible for many of the poets to be read” (12). Fraser (1986) lends a very insightful, if not prophetic voice:

The positive result of these developments was that they thrust the oral transmission of verse, hitherto regarded chiefly as a stand-by into the limelight, and hence procured a much needed rethinking of the way in which highbrow art could learn from the oral tradition. In many cases the consequence was a rediscovery of the immediacy of orality as a means of communication. (314)

Meticulously observed over 30 years, Fraser’s insight today is everything prophecy; as the orality of then has fully blossomed to the spoken word of the present. Nevertheless, the economic impetus
cannot be singled out solely as the major cause or causative factor or even catalyst. A myriad of factors abound. The solid influence and challenge of social media, armed with audiovisual and comfortable on-the-spot appeal and available-anywhere advantage, with an almost endless supply of variety, is formidable enough to distract and sway many from the perceived “tedium” of written poetry. This is where the visually and aurally entertaining and appealing spoken word spectacle comes to the rescue. Currently, according to Wikipedia’s Spoken Word entry, a plethora of spoken word poets are on the scene and are literally seizing the day:

In Nigeria, there are poetry events such as Wordup by i2x Media, The Rendezvous by FOS (Figures Of Speech movement), GrrrAttitude by Graciano Enwerem, SWPC which happens frequently, Rhapsodist, a conference by J19 Poetry and More Life Concert (an annual poetry concert in Port Harcourt) by More Life Poetry. Poets Amakason, Chidinma Rodd Felix Ayuk, Kormbat, Moje, Godzboi, Ifeanyi Agwazia, Chinwendu Nwangwa, Worden Enya, Resame, Efe Paul, Dike Chukwumerije, Graciano Enwerem, OrazKennedy, Fragile MC, Lyrical Pontiff, Irra, Neofloetry, Donna, Kemistree and PoeThick Samurai are all based in Nigeria.

3. Theoretical framework and methodology
The spoken word is the basic tool of all bards, minstrels, troubadours, griots (Mandinka), kwadwunfo (Ashanti), imbongi (Zulu), umusizi (Rwanda), bonetuuri (LoDogao), babalowo (Yoruba), maroka (Hausa), and chanters of the mbem, abu (Igbo), udje (Urhobo) efe, ifa, ijala, oniki (Yoruba) etc; in the traditional oral poetry mode. It also doubles as the term given to the modern oral art form of almost the same basic elements. There are differences between the old traditional form and what is presently obtainable in cases such as the training rigors and regimes or apprenticeship, content, theme and delivery and so on; but again these issues are relative and not hard and fast rules. But there is an important common denominator that binds all—categories, types, old, new, modern—the concept of performance.

The opinion that there is a general lethargy in, and the dearth of versifiers in written poetry (as compared to say, prose or/and drama in Africa and Nigeria especially) could be pejorative but its proponents extol the virtues of performance poetry. Their point is that people appreciate performance poetry more than written poetry. Uka (2018) is of the view that

Anyidoho argues quite simply and straightforwardly that the poet in Africa today published in print lags behind in exposure and popularity of impact upon audiences in an “environment where the dominant mode of communication is oral”. The poet can only be rescued and restored to top place of prominence in the public performance …. (58)

This unique genre of contemporary spoken word poetry has yielded a theory of its own. The nature of performance poetry (in this case, spoken word) as distinct from regular mainstream poetry is unique because of the element of performance—the components of gesticulations and aesthetics of sound. This performance aspect places it in the realm of performance art and theatrics; necessitating theoretical considerations from theatre and performance.

Poetry’s affinities with deep feelings, empathies, and experiences are made more poignant in spoken word’s performance matrix, thereby bringing to mind theatre practitioner Konstantin Stanislavski’s method which prefers experience over representation: “art of experiencing” (contrasting) “art of representation” (Benedetti, 1999, pp. 201–2010). Stanislavski’s system or method simply works on the will of the actor in order to control other emotional processes so as to attain and achieve the desired state of mind of a role or character. This is intrinsically more dynamic, engaging, and genuine than ordinary representational acting. When this is applied as the crux of performance in spoken word, it constitutes the moving visual spectacle of the performance. The other defining aspect of spoken word is phonoaesthetics or the aesthetics of sound. This involves wordplay—intonation and voice inflection—in the recitation of spoken word verses. The major essence of spoken word is sound and its manipulation; its dependence is not on the visual or concrete poetry (graphology), but on the power and range
of voice modulation—assisted to a lesser extent by the accompaniment of gesticulations and theatrics.

From the foregoing, the affective and causative practical realities of context and contemporaneity, the preferred mode of visual theatrics, and the defining component of voice modulation, all point to the fact of the unavailability of a tailor-made theoretical framework for interrogations of spoken word performances and texts. Therefore, this research proposes and applies a novel theoretical framework model called “praxi-phonoaesthetics”. The praxis (practice; practical) suffix covers contextual utilitarian dynamics of the text (tensions and problematic as subject matter), the whole theatrical performance matrix, and the persuasive/affective lexes in the content; while the phonoaesthetics aspect takes care of the beauty of sound (delivery), flow and cadence, and rhyme and rhythm. The most effective application of this theoretical framework would entail a good mesh of message and delivery vis-à-vis audience response (that is, in live situations) which would make for the real estimate or critique in the Arnoldian touchstone sense.

3.1. Methodology
The methodology is basically ethnographic and qualitative. Observations of live and recorded performances (in Abuja, Nigeria) are coupled with physical, interpersonal, and email (written questionnaire) interviews of the two spoken word poets which were carried out by the researchers. The ethnographic method is best suited for a spoken word performance as it is observational and also gives the researcher a hands-on, live witness perspective of audience reaction and response. The two poets studied are popular and come from Nigerian regions with robust histories of still surviving practices of minstrelsy. Audio-visual copies of the performances and the printed texts of the poems which were supplied to the researchers (on request) by the artists were collected for analyses. It is noteworthy that this article takes care of the fact that no existing research exists that traces the connection and transition from ancestral oralties of performance to the contemporary spoken word form of rendition while retaining traces of artistic debt and influences to traditional minstrelsy; simultaneously showcasing revealing interviews and analyses of performers and performance texts interrogating a postcolony such as Nigeria.

4. Analysis

4.1. Spoken word poets, their poems and the discourse
Two artistes in Nigeria’s spoken word genre are up here for this discussion who have been interviewed for the purposes of this research. They are well known and are popular in their own rights and have quite a large followership. They ply their trade with conviction and passion and hail from two different regions in Nigeria—Eastern and Western. They were observed and we found their art appealing and interesting especially due to their delivery and topical contents of national and contemporary interest. What follows is the result of the interviews and analysis of selected poems; with praxis aspect looking at the themes and subject matters, language usage, performance and theatrics, while rhyme, rhythm, cadence and the voice inflections in delivery and rendition under phonoaesthetics; hence, the framework of “praxi-phonoaesthetics”.

Dike Chukwumerije is a spoken word poet. He is from the Eastern region of Nigeria. He is 39 years old and has an LLM in Law and says his role models in poetry remain his brother, Che, and a friend, Dominic Onesi. His greatest influence is Maya Angelou whom he maintains enthralls him with her conversational way of delivering poetry. But on the wider canvas, Patty Obasi, a Nigerian gospelcum social commentary crooner whose career has spanned over 40 years, and the legendary Bob Marley remain his influences generally.
Chukwumerije (2019) admits that some of his verses are directly influenced by traditional forms but the product and influence(s) depend on his subject-matter and the sources he wants to tap from. When asked what ethnicity’s traditional forms influence his art, he answers thus:

It may be debatable to refer to ‘nigerianese’ as a traditional culture. By this I mean the linguistic colloquialisms that have evolved over time in our streets, from the blending of English with our local languages. But this sub-culture also influences my poetry as well.

When asked how strictly or otherwise he patterns his lines as regards prosodic elements of stanza, rhyme, and rhythm, he admits that there is rarely a conscious patterning after traditional or any forms at all. But on the issue of what propels his verses, his convictions, what subjects he prefers to treat, he maintains that his poems are mostly didactic and he admits this much:

My poetry is mostly didactic. This is loosely influenced by the storytelling culture of the Igbos (sic); where stories always had a moral point. So, I do not really subscribe to the “art for art’s sake” school of thought.I have done panegyric poetry a few times, in honor of people I feel are worthy of it, typically at their demise. And in those instances I have drawn very heavily from traditional elegies and dirges I have listened to at Igbo burials over the years. When I do satire it is not consciously influenced by any traditional forms, except perhaps in the way I use language.

Chukwumerije believes he owes African tradition a lot. He admits the culture and ways of his people manifest in his spoken word art. He admits he owes his use of language to African tradition. He also says: “I write and perform mainly in English, but always flavored primarily with ‘nigerianese’ and many times with Igbo words or translated idiomatic expressions”. About his gestures and body movements while performing especially, according to him when conveying aggression or bravado, he admits: “could be directly drawn from watching men or masquerades dance in the village”. At this point, it is pertinent to note that the masquerade in Igbo traditional culture has been proven to be an ancestral solo performer; hence, Chike Okoye (2018) asserts in “The Igbo Mask as Solo Performer” that “The Igbo masquerade tradition ranks high, genuine, and primordial in the solo performance sub-genre of traditional drama” (47). Furthermore in the body movement gleaned from the Igbo mask tradition, Okoye (2014) in The Mmonwu Theatre: Igbo Poetry of the Spirits says this:

The kinetics … that accompany the drama, the emphatic movements to and fro, the forward dashes and abrupt stops, the affirmative nods and disagreeing shakes of the head, the dignified slow spins, the dance steps and the mainstream chants … are part of the masks’ dance drama. (5)

These prove his leanings on and borrowings from the traditional wellspring of oral art and performance. Next is his “The Revolution has no Tribe” and an attendant analysis:

Do you not know that poverty is not an Ijaw man?

He will not spare the rest of us and afflict only the Ishan

He will step over the river and come across the border

So, when the drums sound let everybody answer

Do you not know that corruption is not from Nekede?

He will not hear that Ife had no dealings with Modakeke

He will wake up all of our children at might with hunger
So, when the drums sound, let everybody answer

Do you not know that HIV/AIDS is not Kanuri?

He will not select his victims and kill only the Fulani

He will set the land ablaze from the delta to the sahara

So, when the drums sound, let everybody answer

Do you not know that our enemies have no face?

They are indigenes no state, they come from no place

And, if this boat capsizes every one of us will go under

So, when the drums sound, let everybody answer

Do not say, “I am an iroko”, when the forest is burning

Do not say, “I am an obeche”, when the forest is burning

Our differences will not prevent us from perishing together

So, when the drums sound, let everybody answer

In groups of four couplets per stanza, the above features a repetitive formula of a question, two statements and a request that calls citizens to responsible action: “So, when the drums sound let/everybody answer”. These five stanzas take up the issues and societal malaises of poverty, corruption, HIV/AIDS, enemies, and implied apathy, respectively; as the first four stanzas repeat the same patterns. The last stanza features two admonitory “Do not say” constructs instead of a single question as in the previous stanzas. He stylistically end-rhymes indigenous Nigerian ethnic and town affiliations in lines 2, 4, 10, 12, 18, 20 (Ijaw, Ishan, Nekede, Modakeke, Kanuri, Fulani) across stanzas 1–3. The last stanza features native Nigerian flora: iroko and obeche trees as images of sturdy strength in his persuasions against apathy. The repetitive formulas of his lines are apt as they provide emphasis and rhythm; while the ominousness of the refrain “So, when the drums sound let/everybody answer” underscores the poignancy of the message. The whole poem is about the need for collective positive action in order to push and put forward a better polity in the nation space of Nigeria. He achieves this with a nice blend of imagery, euphony, inclusiveness, simple diction and visual gesticulations that accentuate the pungency of his call to action.

Deji Ige is also 39 years of age and is from the Western region of Nigeria. A spoken word poet of renown, he is a corporate communicator professionally and has degrees in Philosophy, Journalism and Media Arts. He agrees without equivocation that he is influenced in his verses by traditional forms and does not hesitate to mention his ethnicity, Yoruba, as the one whose traditional forms influence him. But on how closely or not he patterns his lines and verses consciously on traditional forms, he does not admit he does so. He maintains that he does not pattern his verses after the prosodic elements of Yoruba traditional oral poetry. However, on the issue of his drive, subject-matter, message vis-à-vis the traditional forms known for panegyrics, didacticism, satire, etc., he hinges his drive on morality and the moral burden. He believes a poet should be a watchdog and a prophet of sorts for the society. The poet, for him should also be a mouth piece for the masses. He believes in the “calling” of a poet:
Another drive I have is the calling of a poet which wouldn’t let me rest unless I put words and words running around my mind into a cohesive piece, write them down and put them out for public consumption.

For thematic concerns, Ige believes that themes and subject matters that can trigger ideological revolution(s) and reorientations are the best and should be treated as important and sent to the people. He also believes it is his duty to “expose societal ills/inadequacies and instruct on possible corrections”. He does not exclude elements of his roots and culture. He says “I also write and speak about things of pride in my society; the culture, heritage, past and present exploits”. His purpose is to make the audience think more deeply and reflect positively about those “important subjects lost in the noise of the society or its busy streets”. On his conformity or not to the traditional forms, he says

I conform to the traditional forms to the extent that they serve the purpose to which they are being used; but I modify or deviate from them when necessary, especially when doing a fusion of Yoruba and English languages.

Ige believes he owes a lot to African tradition and culture especially in his art. He sincerely calls it his duty to preserve, propagate, exploit, and ultimately promote the culture and tradition and their elements through his spoken word form.

Dike Chukwumerije’s and Deji Ige’s poems, one apiece, selected for analysis in this space, contain most elements that link them to the oral poetry traditions known to regions of Nigeria. Chukwumerije admitted mostly to being influenced by his Igbo culture and the same goes with Ige. Both in their poems—Olufunmilayo by Ige and Nna Anyi, Is it True? by Chukwumerije, there are stanzas rendered in Yoruba and Igbo, respectively. Ige’s piece is in the praise mode of his native Yoruba oriki for his object/subject of admiration, Olufunmilaya; and he said he acknowledged the debt he owed his culture and tradition especially linguistically before plunging into Yoruba lines. He says “with the eloquence of the tongue of my forefathers, I sing your praises again today”, and this heralds the next lines rendered in his mother tongue. In his other poem titled “A United Nigeria”, he does what most patriotic Nigerians do—to call for unity and hope; especially in the present dismal times. In his “I Will Tell My Fortune”, he is most gesticulant, agitated and active as he proclaims the essence of a Nigerian and African who has suffered the destabilizing effects of colonialism. He is most defiant and with a lot of body movement calls for the emancipation of the African from the criminally minded oppressors. “I Shall Stand to Defend Her Honour” sees Ige infuse yet again his lines with rhythmical Yoruba utterances as he pledges to defend Nigeria’s pride and dignity while praising her beauty in oriki and ijala fashion. His blending of local Nigerian words from across the ethnicities are also a beauty to hear and behold:

Naaninaaninaani, omooolola n naaniola

omoasegtia n naanieepoigi

omo were na baba babaoun run me bugi je.

On a needle or thread I shall stand to defend her honour

I will make weary every adversary lest they tarry

my songs of revelation I will sing in elation

and in swift succession
my affection I will profess in exaltation

Our fences I will mend to the end

and from my end, this land of honour I will tend.

These are my words, words unscripted

thought unguided, my creed to her

in rain or pain, every letter I will remember

in gag or chain, every syllable I will mumble.

What binds me to her is stronger than knot

not the name we still can’t comprehend

not the pledge we have failed to memorize

neither the anthem we have turned to lullaby

nor the flag we have refused to honour.

What binds me to her is stronger than bond

not the oil that blinds our sight

not the bridge across Niger promised to mend our fences

neither the pieces of land around Niger

nor the vision of her colonial masters that blessed the union

or the intention of the madam that named the baby Niger-Area.

Rather, what binds me to her is in my veins and marrow

the blood we shed for her freedom

on this land that has refused to be shared

It’s in the texture of my skin and the fabric on it

call it black, say it white

what binds me to her is a puzzle, in the fine stripes of Ange

call it price, name it prize

what binds me to her is my pride

in the majesty of AsoOke
the prominence of Isi Agu
and the dignity in their stitches.
It's in the East, in the West
in the North, in the South and the middle of her belt.
It's in the sound of their music and the beat of my heart
the eloquence of Gangan … hail the talking drum!
the audacity of Agogo
what binds me to her is in the rhythm of Ekwe
and the rhymes of Kakaki.
It's in the slow wind of Swange and the delicacy of Genge.
It's in the women and their virtue
their strength and their curves
the beauty of their names and the magnificence of their essence.
Moremi ajasoro, moyikaotun a, asorodayo
Moremi ajasoro; eleyinjue, arewaabinrin
e ma ba mi ki Moremi temi.
Ah! It's in the chants and the colours in the culture of her people.

In order to emphasize the steadfastness muted in 4, the internal rhymes of “weary, every, adversary, tarry, revelation, elation, in lines 5 and 6 are applied. More end-rhymes occur in lines 7 and 8, and 9 and 10. The second stanza of 7 lines showcase the steadfastness in defending honour, while the third stanza portrays the acceptance of the poet’s mission and content with further commitment. In lines 15–19, he pits his unwavering bond to her (Nigeria) against the other “plastic” and shallow constructs of national loyalty such as the pledge, name, anthem, and flag. Repetitions are also applied for emphasis. A similar structure is also evident in lines 20–25 as feeble constructs such as oil, Niger Bridge, colonial vision, etc., are pit against the poet’s unwavering bond and loyalty to the country. In lines 26–36, he changes syntactic tack while reaffirming his deep-rooted affinity and loyalty; using the anatomical allusion and imagery of blood, veins, skin, marrow (26–29). He equates the bond to the puzzling but beautiful stripes of the Ange cloth and the invaluable majesty and prominence of other cultural fabrics: Aso Oke, and Isi Agu, respectively. Again, here and through most of the poem, the repetitive trope is functionally present. Lines 37–44 showcase his love, welcoming spread, heritage for all things Nigerian, this time in the ethnically unique and varying musical instruments. He balances the syntax of the listing by mentioning the special qualities of the instruments, rhythmically: “eloquence of Gangan … audacity of Agogo … rhythm of Ekwe … ”, etc.; while lines 45–47 cap it up by the poet visualize Nigeria in her women—in the virtues of their beauteous looks and formidable strength of character and other admirable qualities. The native Yoruba opening sets the poem’s tone of entitlement and pride, and is translated thus: “Cherish, cherish, cherish, the child/of the wealthy
cherishes wealth/the offspring of firewood seller/cherishes the tree bark; the offspring/of a lunatic brags that even his/grandfather can bite a tree”; while the corresponding vernacular ending performs a balancing act. It translates thus: “Moremi Ajasoro! I tilt to the right in/homage, Moremi Ajasoro! A beautiful/lady with big eyeballs, help me greet/my very own Moremi—in line with the female mystique ending.

Chukwumerije’s “The Revolution Has no Tribe” as seen earlier, is always a beauty to experience as the deft weave of Nigeria’s ethnicities and images of her flora are blended to drive home the cause that the revolution belongs to all and will spare no one—therefore all must join to change the nation for good. The poem’s five stanzas are replete in their first and last lines with the formulaic repetitions popular with the traditional oral form. His repetitious formula is so effective that by the second stanza the audience has joined in the repetitive chorus—all in the fashion of the village square bard and raconteur. In his “Okwesilieze”, he brings up the somber and sobering image of Africa and her subjects, reeling from both affected and inflicted psychological injuries that have left her debilitated and too lethargic to act. It ends in a sad but solemn call to action for a better and positive future. “NnaAnyi, Is it True?” is his elegiac panegyric in memory of literary legend, Chinua Achebe on his demise. In typical local fashion, he asks in helpless disbelief if the sad news of his death is indeed true. He laces the poem with praise epithets rendered in Igbo for Achebe, calling him enyi (elephant), Nnukwu mmuo (the great mask), ugon'abo (the double strength eagle), Dike kaliowu (the brave one greater than death), etc. All these are very typical of a house of mourning where a brave and very influential person had died and men wall his praises and exploits in sadness and nostalgia.

It is important to note here that the researcher’s assessment of the stage performances of these spoken word poets and their pieces place them above average. They are deftly done and powerfully moving—the theatrics of their gesticulations, corresponding body movements, proper voice inflections, audience control and awareness, audience response and appreciation, are all top-notch.

Both poets, true to their responses in the interview have clung to their traditional roots in their compositions and renditions; giving their poems the real traditional verse elements and therefore making better their modernist and post colonial projections which are befitting cultural productions of a solid ancestral base.

5. Conclusion
Oral tradition has always been an indispensable index of ancient cultures that have no written record or writing system. It serves for them purposes of transmission and preservation of art, values, norms, practices, customs, literature, and so on. Most of these especially the literatures of myths, sagas, legends, anecdotes, folktales, chants, poems, etc., are put in song mode and committed to memory. The accumulated riches and art of a people are in this way preserved and handed down to succeeding generations. However, not all personages have this responsibility as their priority. Ancient institutions of bards, minstrels, griots, poets, diviners, chanters, genealogists, etc., are laden with the onerous tasks of versification, preservation and transmission. These custodians are found in many cultures and ethnicities in Africa.

Traditional oral poets armed with their skills, reigned in their days but waned drastically in importance and stature in the face of the onslaught of colonization and modernism. However, vestiges of their art remained; and these rediscovered, have given modern poets of the written tradition source materials and techniques with which to enhance their art. One of the significant points of this journey of rediscovery and recourse featured economic reasons and the need to break away from the seemingly moribund clutches of drab constructs of European influenced poeticisms. Rediscovered local and traditional flavor reignited the spark in local Nigerian poetry when it was infused in the versifications. Fast forward to the present age—with the audiovisual appeal of social media and electronic media generally, spoken word treats
and spectacles, leaning back fully to the traditional oral art of poetry have once again re-engaged audiences with message-laden and scintillating performances. This paper traces and shows that these endearing constructs and projections of today, flourishing as they are, owe their bases and roots to the solid foundations of yore, of our ancestors; to the house that tradition has built.

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