

Incantation as a Means of Communication in Yorùbá Land: ‘Eégún Aláré’ as a Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Yorùbá oral literature is of three categories namely chant, song and recitation. This paper, therefore, focused on incantation as a means of communication among the masquerades in Yorùbá land with its data drawn from “Eégún Aláré”, a Yorùbá novel. Incantation is a combination of carefully arranged speeches or words in a poetic form and its use makes things work miraculously as the users wish or words that make human wishes come to reality with immediate effect. Before Christianity and Islam gained prominence in the Yorùbá society, Alárinjò masquerades were among the well known traditional public entertainers and that during performances, incantation was often used to know who is who among the masquerades. However, Christianity and Islam have made the use of incantation, as a means of communication during masquerade performances, a thing of the past and what used to be a family profession in the past is no longer so because members of the Òjẹ families who were in charge of this cultural profession in the past have now been converted to either Christianity or Islam or have been negatively influenced by Western education. This study nullifies the communication chain as the person to whom incantation is directed does not need to understand the language of the person that uses the incantation as the feed back would be the effect of the incantation in positive or negative form. The essence of this paper is to promote Yoruba oral literature through formal documentation of incantation as a Yoruba linguistic verbal art.

INTRODUCTION

In Yorùbá society, Òsanyin (deity) is presumed to be the god of medicine. Hence he is regarded as the father of herbalists. Òsanyin communicates with both animate and inanimate creatures by means of incantation. Incantation can be defined as a combination of carefully arranged speeches or words in a poetic form created by our ancestors in order to communicate and make things work quickly as they wish. Incantation may also be regarded as words that make human wishes come to reality with immediate effect. The Yorùbá people believe that there are two types of incantation namely *ofò rere* (good incantation) and *ofò búburú* (bad incantation). Both are useful in one way or the other for human existence. In order to render any type of effective incantation, personal names of both living and non-living things are not only essential but inescapable. An example of incantation is presented below:

The Òsanyin deity’s eulogy shown below confirms that he is the god of medicine among all the Yorùbá gods.

Òsanyin Eulogy

Òsanyin ewèlè

Alùpèsè bákú jà

Ó síşò àrùn lára òkùnrùn

Ewé lówò

Ewé lènu 5
A bí gbogbo ara kiki oògùn
Kò sóhun tó o lee şe
A lè pa lè jí
A lè jí lè pa
Ó fòògùn bákú jà 10
Ó bù mu, ó bù wẹ
Ó bù mu, ó bù sarí
Kò lóúnjẹ méjì bí ò sataare
O sọ igba ewé dọkan
Gbogbo ara kiki oògùn 15
Òkùnrin alá tíí figbó ò lẹ fòògùn
Òkùnrin a fewé şeun gbogbo tó wù ú
Baba àwọn işegùn

(Agbájé 1993:32-33)

Translation

Òsanyin the great,
Who beats Ipese drum to fight death,
He removes the dress of disease from the sickler,
Leafes in hand
Leafes in mouth
His body is full of medicine
There is noting he cannot do,
He can kill and revive

He can revive and kill
 He fights death with medicine
 He drinks, he baths
 He drinks, he pours on the head,
 He has no other food than alligator pepper
 He makes two hundred leaves become one
 His body is full of medicine
 The great man that leaves bushes for medicine,
 The man that uses leaves to do whatever he likes
 The father of herbalists.

From the above eulogy it can be submitted that the Ọsanyin deity can be seen as the alpha and omega of Yorùbá traditional medicine and that this god can manipulate herbs to perform both negative and positive functions. For example, information in lines 3, 7, 10 and 18 shows the deity's Trado-medical obligations to human beings.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

There exist a number of scholastic contributions on African oral literature among which is masquerade chant. Among valuable contributions on oral literature are the ones of Ogundokun (2017), Kayode ((2017), Elegba (2018), Akinbode (2018), Adeyinka and Adegbolu (2018) and Bamgbose (2017). While this research work is on the use of incantation as a veritable means of communication during rendition of masquerade chants, Ogundokun (2017) discussed lamentation as literary devise and pointed out its recurring decimal in African literary creations across generations from its inception, pre colonial and post colonial periods especially in Nigeria. Kayode (2017) also commented on the negative influence of Western and Arabic education on the preservation of Yoruba traditions especially oral literature and performance. In his words,

“the domination imposed by a foreign minority, racially and materially inferior authochotonous majority, in the name of dogmatically asserted racial superiority”.

In his submission, Elegba (2018) considered oral literature as means of conflict resolution. This assertion was proved in some of the masquerade performances in the analyzed book in this study *Eegun Alare*. Though there were tests of mystical powers Ojelarinnaka was finally rescued from been swept into the river when he magically turned into a python. In a related study, Akinbode (2018) worked on hunter dirges (ijala) as a means of Yoruba communication. In his presentation, he made the following statements:

Iremoje is a medium of expression to explicate the complex faces of language as a stylistic phenomenon in Yoruba communication process. The hunters use different stylistic devices that quests for ensuring better understanding of their genre while performing the hunter dirge. pp (124).

The masquerade chant and performance is embedded with praise singing of individuals and groups eulogy (oriki) that attracts the audience attention in oral poetry described in Adeyinka and Adegbolu (2018) as:

attributes, epithets or appellations, a collection of pithy, epithet or elaborated statements which are addressed to a subject.

Bamgbose (2017) believes that we need language to promote peoples cultural heritage.

“apart from being an essential part of people’s heritage, language and oral tradition are markers of identity in the sense that they represent what is peculiar to the people concerned and culture (pp191).

Some writers have written on incantation in Yorùbá land. For example, Adéoyè (1969) examined incantation as one of the genres of Yorùbá oral literature. Ọlábímtán (1971) worked on *Ọfò* and *Àyájó*; two categories of Yorùbá Traditional incantatory poetry. Fábùnmi (1972) compiled a collection of some incantation in Yorùbá land. Ọlábímtán (1974) considered symbolism in Yorùbá Traditional incantatory poetry. Ọlátúnjí (1984) focused incantation as an important aspect of Yorùbá oral literature and also classified Yorùbá oral literature into three categories namely chant, song and recitation. According to him, incantation comes under recitation. Another writer is Buckley (1986) who elaborated on Yorùbá medicine generally but without special reference to incantation (see also Agbájé, 1989; Agbájé, 1993). Rájí (1991) too makes a collection of *Ìjìnlẹ̀ ọfò*, *ògèdè* and *àásán* (different types of incantation) but he does not discuss the functions of any of them. In addition, none of these writers attempted to discuss incantation as a means of communication in Yorùbá land. In this paper, we focus on incantation as a means of communication in Yorùbá land. The data used were drawn from “*Eégún Alaré*”, a Yorùbá novel written by Láuwayi Ọgúnńíran (1972).

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The text *Eegun Alare* was published in 1972 by Lawuyi Ogunniran as a Yoruba prose that presented the art of traditional performance of Yoruba people of Nigeria masquerade. It is a text that three main chapters that presented three contests involving the pairs of Ojelarinnaka and Dasofunjo, Ojelade and Ojelarinnaka and Ojelade as new Masquerade cult. The text was concluded with explanations on some used Yoruba words considered difficult to understand if not properly explained to readers.

In this work, incantation as a means of communication in Yorùbá land is discussed. The data are taken from a Yorùbá novel titled *Eégún Alaré* written by Ọláuwayi Ọgúnńíran (1972 pages 20, 24, 68, 72). In the novel the characters used incantation as a means of communication between them. For instance, in Data 1, incantation was used by Ọjẹ Larinnaka in the novel to free his chained son Ọjẹlade from python back to human being.

Data 1

Ọjẹ Lárinnàkà

Ohun tí a wí fògbó, ọgbó gbó
 Ohun tí a wí fògbà, ọgbà gbà
 Àşẹ tí Akíntólú bá pa fúnlẹ̀ nilẹ̀ gbó
 Ọjẹládé paradà o dèniyàn
 Àşẹ kí ó rí bẹ̀ẹ̀
 Torí péwéréwéré làşẹ ipin ní múg bá

Wàràsèsà làṣe ọna mēse
 Ọ̀jẹ̀ládé gbéra ñlẹ̀ o dide, ọjọ́ ñ lọ
 (Oguniran, 1972: 20)

Translation

What we tell ogbó that ogbó heard
 What we tell ogbà that ogbà accepts
 The command that Akintólú tells the earth that it hears
 Ọ̀jẹ̀ládé transform to human
 So shall it be
 Because with immediate effect that the command
 of ipin catches the calabash
 Without delay the command of the road holds the leg
 Ọ̀jẹ̀ládé rise up, the terms is far spent.

The above incantation shows a positive assertion and a positive assertion in Yorùbá incantation means things should be done the way they should be done according to our forefathers and Ọ̀sanyin the god of medicine. The above incantation performed the function Ọ̀jẹ̀ Lárinká wanted it to perform by transforming his son from python back to human being. This incident confirms the super power of incantation as a means of communication in Yorùbá society.

Another occasion where incantation was used as a means of communication was the time Ọ̀jẹ̀ládé refused to pay homage to his audience. Instead, he recited the incantation below to silence them. The incantation is drawn from Ọ̀gúniran (1972: 24).

Data 2

A kì í ráfẹ́fẹ́ mú
 A kì í rómi mú
 Kò ṣẹ̀ni tó le mófo
 Torí afẹ́fẹ́ légélégé lorúkọ baba eji
 Èfúfúfù lẹ̀lẹ̀ lorúkọ baba ọ̀jò 5
 Kàkà kéji ó pa mí
 Eji a derù a máa lọ
 À-gbin-sínú ni tegbin,
 À-kùn-sínú ni tẹ̀fọ̀n
 Ọ̀rò hùnhùn inú èlédé ní í gbé 10
 Ọ̀rò tó bá ñ dun ijímèrè
 Ojò tó bá fojú kan Alápinni ní í tóká

Translation

No one catches the wind
 No one catches water
 No one catches vanity
 Because wind is the father of rain
 Wind is the father of rain
 Instead of rain to fall on me
 It will disappear
 Egbin is known for inaudibility
 Èfọ̀n is known for murmuring
 Murmuring abode in the stomach of a pig
 Whatever bothers a gorilla
 The day it has contact with Alápinni, it is resolved.

Lines 1, 2 and 3 of the above incantation show the use of negative assertions in Yoruba incantation during

interactions. Ọ̀jẹ̀ládé used these negative assertions to make his wish come to reality. He combined the negative assertions with the positive ones in lines 8 to 12 in order to make the communication between Ọ̀jẹ̀ládé and his audience hitch-free. After the above incantation, the group of masqueraders in the village revolted against him. The masqueraders warned Ọ̀jẹ̀ládé of his actions but he did not listen. Instead, he continued to transform into many things during his magical performance. When Ọ̀jẹ̀ládé transformed into a big crocodile, the village masqueraders used magical power to deny him from transforming back to a human being. The rain fell heavily on him which is a taboo and he was later carried away by erosion to a river in the village.

In the data also, Dúdúyemi brought out a big horn from his pocket, faced Ọ̀jẹ̀ládé and chanted some incantation quietly as if he was soliloquizing. Nobody heard him aloud during the recitation. He later commanded Ọ̀jẹ̀ládé to speak out again. The aftermath of this incantation chanted against Ọ̀jẹ̀ládé by Dúdúyemi led him to be barking like a dog and his tongue was rendered useless. All these are clear indications of the efficacy and power of incantation as a means of communication in Yoruba land.

In Data 3 below, Anseetu used incantation positively to rescue her husband Ọ̀jẹ̀ládé.

Data 3

Iṣu kì í ta kó gbàgbé ò̀ngò
 Àgbàdo kì í yomọ
 Kó gbàgbé irùkèrè
 A kì í kọ̀lé ká gbàgbé ote
 Àsùnkàn ni ti iyè 5
 Báfẹ́fẹ́ bá fẹ́, inú eẹkan a layè
 Bákùkọ bá gbọ̀npá pipi
 Iyè inú rẹ̀ a là
 Ọ̀nà m̀erindínlógún
 Lewé oniyeye fi í lujú 10
 Gbogbo rẹ̀ ni fi í mumi
 Ojúmọ́ kii mó kenu imọ́ o ma ji
 Èjìogbè bámi gbé iyè Ọ̀jẹ̀ládé wá

(Oguniran, 1972: 68)

Translation

A matured yam does not forget yam set
 Maize cob does not forget its horse tail
 No one builds a house and forget the roof
 During sleep, heart memory remains alive
 If the wind blows the eẹkan gives way
 When the cock flips its feathers, it regains its memory
 The oniyeye leaf has sixteen openings
 It was all to absorb water
 The palm leaf blows daily
 Èjìogbè bring back the memory of Ọ̀jẹ̀ládé.

The above excerpt depicts that Anseetu used incantation positively to free her husband from the bondage of mental derailment. This is because when Anseetu called her husband after the incantation, he responded promptly.

This incident proves the use of incantation as a means of communication beyond reasonable doubt.

Another evidence of the efficacy of incantation occurred in the novel when Ọ̀jẹ̀ládé and Dúdúyẹ̀mí competed for the post of “Baálẹ̀ Arẹ̀kú-Eégún”, a masquerade chieftaincy title. Ọ̀jẹ̀ládé challenged Dúdúyẹ̀mí to recite “Ìyẹ̀rú Ọ̀kín Ọ̀lófámọ̀jò” i.e., lineage descriptive poetry. Instead of rendering the lineage poetry, Dúdúyẹ̀mí started coughing and vomiting blood. Besides, he was totally destabilized by horrible cold and the audience were amazed that Ọ̀jẹ̀ládé was able to conquer Dúdúyẹ̀mí with incantation. Later, a chief notified the king to plead with Ọ̀jẹ̀ládé to free Dúdúyẹ̀mí from the magical bondage. Then, Ọ̀jẹ̀ládé responded positively to the king’s plea and chanted the following incantation.

Data 4

Dúdúyẹ̀mí tara gbéra nílẹ̀ o dide
 Ohun tá a wí fọ̀gbọ̀ logbọ̀ i gbọ̀
 Ọ̀mọ̀ Àmọ̀ Ọ̀kọ̀, gbéra nílẹ̀ o dide
 Ọ̀rọ̀ tá a sọ̀ fún ogbà logbà i gbà
 Ọ̀rọ̀ tókété bá sọ̀ fúnlẹ̀ nílẹ̀ i gbọ̀
 Dúdúyẹ̀mí gbéra nílẹ̀ o dide ojú nílẹ̀
 Dúdúyẹ̀mí Ọ̀kọ̀ ọ̀mọ̀ okun ọ̀lá
 Dúdúyẹ̀mí gbéra nílẹ̀ iwọ̀ ni n bá wí

5
 (Oguniran, 1972: 72)

Translation

Dúdúyẹ̀mí wake up quickly and stand up
 Ogbọ̀ heard what we tell it
 Son of Àmọ̀ Ọ̀kọ̀, wake and stand up
 What we tell igbà, igbà should accept it
 What the big rat tells the earth, it will accept
 Dúdúyẹ̀mí wake and stand up, time is going
 Dúdúyẹ̀mí Ọ̀kọ̀, off-springs of Okun Ọ̀lá
 Dúdúyẹ̀mí wake up, I am talking to you

The outcome of the data above reveals that Dúdúyẹ̀mí was totally relieved from the bondage of Ọ̀jẹ̀ládé’s magical incantation. In the light of this, both competitors danced together to celebrate Dúdúyẹ̀mí’s freedom. It is apparent to note that the efficacy of magical incantation cannot be over emphasized during public performance by the popular Yorùbá Alárinjọ masquerades as a means of communication.

NEW TRENDS

It will be recalled that before Christianity and Islam gained prominence in the Yorùbá society, Alarinjo masquerades were among the well known traditional public entertainers. During their performances, magical incantation was often used to know who was who among the masquerades. Chanting of magical incantation was a way of displaying their superiority over one another among the masquerades especially when two or more people were competing for the chieftaincy title like what transpired between Ọ̀jẹ̀ládé and Dúdúyẹ̀mí in the novel “Eégún Aláré” where the data for this study were drawn. It could also be invented when the masquerades want to entertain their spectators for mon-

ey. However, it is pertinent to note that Western education, Christianity and Islam have made the use of incantation as a means of communication during masquerade performance has greatly reduced in the Yorùbá society. This is because what used to be a family profession in the past is no longer so. For example, members of the Ọ̀jẹ̀ families who were in charge of the cultural system or profession in the past have now been converted to either Christianity or Islam.

Therefore, the two religions condemn the Alárinjọ masquerade among the Yorùbá because the preachers claim it does not conform with the way of God. They say any member or members who continue to patronize or promote this Yorùbá cultural heritage will not enter the kingdom of God. This kind of fear created in the minds of Christians and Muslims encourage them to run away from what can make them lose the kingdom of God at the end of their lives. Western education also has made the popularity of the popular Alárinjọ masquerade to become a thing of the past or a primitive event. Some who are neither Christians nor Muslims who have acquired Western education have either lost contact with their roots or are no longer interested in such a thing. In other words, Western education encourages people to look for white-collar jobs at different locations either within or outside the Yorùbá land. This situation makes the popular Alárinjọ travelling theatre foreign or strange to the children of the educated ones. As a result, the younger generation does not see the popular Alárinjọ masquerade of the past as a progressive or an important event.

CONCLUSION

We have shown that previous researchers claim that incantation is an important aspect of Yorùbá oral literature can be divided into three categories namely chant, song and recitation. However, in this paper, we focus on incantation as a means of communication among the masquerades in Yorùbá land and our data were drawn from “Eégún Aláré”, a Yorùbá novel. We submit that incantation, which is traceable to the Ọ̀sanyìn deity, can be defined as a combination of carefully arranged speeches or words in a poetic form and the use makes things work quickly as the users wish or words that make human wishes come to reality with immediate effect. We argue also that before Christianity and Islam gained prominence in the Yorùbá society, Alárinjọ masquerades were among the well known traditional public entertainers and that during public performances, incantation was often used to know who was who among the masquerades. We argue further that Western education, Christianity and Islam have made the use of incantation as a means of communication during masquerade performances a thing of the past and what used to be a family profession in the past is no longer so because members of the Ọ̀jẹ̀ families who were in charge of the cultural system or profession in the past have now been converted to either Christianity or Islam or have been made to have a negative disposition towards the use of incantation or to even the masquerade profession. This study has shown that communication chain of “sender-code-receiver-feedback” can be nullified with the use of incantation. The sender of the message here relies on the efficacies of

his incantation which can be directed to non speaker of his language, Yoruba.

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