

The Ijò Praise-Poet: Chief Adolphus Munamuna in Performance Imomotimi Armstrong

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Abstract

There is no dearth of studies on how the African praise-poet renders his poems in performance in African oral literature scholarship. However, Africanist scholars in the disciplines of performance studies, folklore, anthropology and literary studies have not extended such studies to the Ijò praise-singer, Chief Adolphus Munamuna. Therefore, this study examines the manner in which the Ijò bard performs his chants. First, it begins with a survey of the historical development of the performance approach to the study of folklore and, thereafter, compares the way Chief Munamuna performs his chants to other praise-singers on the African continent. The paper notes that the Ijò verbal artist performs the same way others perform. It further points out that the utilization of a cell phone to audio-record praises or poems by Chief Munamuna himself during a performance is what, perhaps, marks him out among his colleagues elsewhere in Africa. Data for the study was gathered from observations of live performances of the praise-poet. The study will appeal to folklore and oral literature scholars because it has contributed to existing scholarship on the nexus between performance and the African bard. More importantly, it has generated awareness about the use of a cell phone by a bard to record his own live performances in order to preserve them for posterity.

Keywords: Chief Munamuna; praise-poetry; the Ijò; *ibe*; Niger Delta

Introduction

Praise-chanting, as a verbal art, is not synonymous with the Ijò of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. As such, until recently, there was no such person in the mould of the *imbongi* of the Bantu-speaking peoples of South Africa or the *maroka* among the Hausa or the Yoruba *oriki* chanter. The practice of chanting praises of people was imported into Ijòland by Chief Adolphus Munamuna. Chief Munamuna, an Ijò man from Otuan community in Ogboin *ibe* (clan; *ibe mọ* being the plural) in Bayelsa State, lived for a long time among the Yoruba, got acculturated, fell in love with their praise-singing culture, came back to Ijòland and established it, as it were. The oral poet chants praises of people at such occasions as funerals, marriages, political gatherings, Christian ceremonies, coronations, among others. To date, he is the only person in Ijòland that chants praises of people, another reason that praise-chanting is a new development amongst the Ijò. Chief Munamuna is a literate verbal artist who transcribes and sometimes translates his chants

like some modern *imbongi* amongst the Zulu and the Xhosa in southern Africa. In the next section, the study examines how the Ijò bard performs his praise-chants. It is important to state here that this paper is not a consideration of the stylistic aspects of the bard's poems, something which has been done elsewhere (see Armstrong "formula", "Stylistic"). The paper is rather concerned with the manner in which the Ijò oral poet performs during a performance. However, before looking at how the Ijò praise-singer performs, the study surveys the development of performance as an approach to the study of folklore. A consideration of the historical development of performance will keep the reader in good stead to follow the discussion of Chief Munamuna's performance practices that follows.

The Performance Approach to the Study of Folklore

The performance approach to the study of folklore developed amongst the writings of some American scholars such as Roger Abrahams, Alan Dundes, Dan Ben-Amos, Robert Georges, William

Bascom and Kenneth Goldstein who sought a context-based approach to the study of folklore based on the ideas of Bronislaw Malinowski, and especially Dell Hymes². For example, Malinowski, from his study of myths, legends and fairy tales among the Trobriand Islanders, opines that “the limitation of the study of myth to the mere examination of texts has been fatal to a proper understanding of its nature” (21-22). Malinowski further makes this assertion:

The text, of course, is extremely important, but without the context it remains lifeless. As we have seen, the interest of the story is vastly enhanced and it is given proper character by the manner in which it is told. The whole nature of the performance, the voice and the mimicry, the stimulus and the response of the audience mean as much to the natives as the text; and the sociologist should take his cue from the natives. The performance, again, has to be placed in its proper time-setting – the hour of the day, and the season, with the background of the sprouting gardens awaiting future work, and slightly influenced by the magic of the fairy tales. We must also bear in mind the sociological context of private ownership, the sociable function and the cultural role of amusing fiction. All these elements are equally relevant; all must be studied as well as the text. The stories live, in native life and not on paper, and when a scholar jots them down without being able to evoke the atmosphere in which they flourish he has given us but a mutilated bit of reality. (29-30)

Following Malinowski was Dell Hymes who in a famous paper in 1962 called for the study of the cultural rules governing a peoples’ language and not the mere linguistic rules by coming up with the phrase “ethnography of speaking” (“The Ethnography” 16). In a later article, Hymes contends:

Linguists have observed speech but have

systematically analysed just those aspects of it that have answered to problems of formal grammar....Social and expressive aspects of speech have been attended to only when they have intruded inescapably into grammar....A more exact or general study of the rules governing the interaction between participants in speech events has been left aside. (“Breakthrough” 42-43)

As a result of the insights from the writings of Malinowski and Hymes, Abrahams, Dundes, Ben-Amos, Georges and Goldstein looked for, as it were, an approach to the study of folklore that was based on performance. For example, Abrahams, the reputable American folklorist, in an article in 1968 points out:

Too long have the anthropologists and psychologists seen folklore as data which merely project ethnographic or psychological detail. Too long have folklorists emphasized the international attributes of folklore as esthetic constructs without a consideration of how the lore reflects the groups in which it exists, persists, and functions. Too long have all investigators been willing to divorce folklore from the people who perform it, or to regard it as peripheral – and therefore meaningless – or debased. Most folklore studies in the past have been used more to justify our vision of ourselves as advanced human beings than to cast light on the life of others. (157)

Similarly, Ben-Amos calls for a redefinition of folklore to capture the place of performance by positing in these terms because existing definitions are wanting in that regard:

Folklore is very much an organic phenomenon in the sense that it is an integral part of culture. Any divorce of tales, songs, or sculptures from their indigenous locale, time, and society inevitably introduces qualitative changes into them. The *social context*, the cultural attitude, the rhetorical situation, and the individual aptitude are variables that produce distinct differences in the structure, text, and texture of the ultimate

verbal, musical, or plastic product. *The audience itself, be it children or adults, men or women, a stable society or an accidental grouping, affects the kind of folklore genre and the manner of presentation.* (“Toward a Definition” 4, italics added)

Thus, Ben-Amos defines folklore as “artistic communication in small groups” (“Toward a Definition” 13). In the same way, in an article entitled “Verbal Art as Performance,” Richard Bauman specifically said:

“WE WILL BE CONCERNED in this paper to develop a conception of verbal art as performance, based upon an understanding of performance as a mode of speaking. In constructing this framework for a performance-centred approach to verbal art, we have started from the position of the folklorist, but have drawn concepts and ideas from a wide range of disciplines, chiefly anthropology, linguistics, and literary criticism. (290)

Bauman avers that performance “conveyed a dual sense of artistic *action* – the doing of folklore – and artistic *event* – the performance situation, involving performer, art form, audience, and setting – both of which are central to the developing performance approach to folklore” (“Verbal Art” 290, italics in original). Bauman argues that existing approaches to the study of verbal art in the disciplines of linguistics, anthropology and literature are “constructed in terms of special usages or patterning of formal features within texts” (“Verbal Art” 291). He further opines that “a performance-centered conception of verbal art calls for an approach through performance itself. In such an approach, the formal manipulation of linguistic features is secondary to the nature of performance, per se, conceived of and defined as a mode of communication” (“Verbal Art” 292).

The arguments of these group of scholars who called for a performance-based approach to the study of oral traditions did not go unchallenged by traditional folklorists (see, for example, Ben-Amos’s “The Ceremony of Innocence”; Steven Jones’ “Sloughing Towards Ethnography: The

Text/Context Controversy Revisited”; Georges’ “Toward a Resolution of the Text/Context Controversy”). In any case, shortly after Bauman’s paper, Hymes, who by then had become the leading champion of performance theory, could say in the paper, “Breakthrough into Performance,” that “in contemporary folklore the term performance has reference to the realization of known traditional material, but the emphasis is upon the constitution of a social event” (“Breakthrough” 13). Therefore, he goes on to say that his analyses of the oral traditions of speakers of Wasco will be “situated in context, the performance as emergent, as unfolding or arising within that context. The concern is with performance, not as something mechanical or inferior, as in some linguistic discussion, but with performance as something creative, realized, achieved, even transcendent of the ordinary course of events” (“Breakthrough” 13).

Following the position of these scholars, Okpewho too has called for performance-based studies of African traditional verbal arts (for some of Okpewho’s performance-based discourses, see, for example, “Rethinking Epic” 218, 225-228; “The Art” 7-16; “The Oral Performer” 164-167; “Performance and Plot” 86-88; *The Epic in Africa* 50-65; *Myth in Africa* 76-81). In fact, Okpewho’s concern with the performance approach to the study of oral literature even made him demand, in one instance, conference participants to perform their conference presentations (Ayidoho, 225).

As would have seen by now, performance is an approach to the study of verbal arts that places the text in context, not a text that is detached from its context. Put differently, performance directs “attention away from study of the formal patterning and symbolic context of texts to the emergence of verbal art in the social interaction between performers and audiences” (Bauman and Briggs 59). It focuses attention on key components of performances such as performers and audiences. The performance approach also includes the music provided by the percussions or accompaniments. It also takes into consideration such things as the costume and every other equipment used in the performance of a verbal art. The next part of this paper will now be devoted to examining what goes on when Chief Munamuna is performing in his

role as a praise-singer.

Chief Munamuna in Performance

In his collection of Zulu praise poems, Trevor Cope gives a classic description of the method of delivery of a chant when he tells the reader how the *imbongi* performs *izibongo*:

The praiser recites the praises at the top of his voice and as fast as possible. These conventions of praise-poem recitation, which is high in pitch, loud in volume, fast in speech, create an emotional excitement in the audience as well as in the praiser himself, whose voice often rises in pitch, volume, and speed as he progresses, and whose movements become more and more exaggerated, for it is also a convention of praise-poem recitation that the praiser never stands still. (28; see also Okpewho, *African Oral* 131-133)

Cope's description of chanting is similar to what J. H. Nketia observes amongst the Akan of Ghana (23-25). Jeff Opland, too, has made the same comments about the Xhosa *imbongi* in performance (*Xhosa Oral* 67). Furthermore, Oludare Olajubu, notes that during a performance, the Yoruba verbal artist "supplements his verbal efforts with dramatic actions, gestures, charming voice, facial expressions, dramatic use of pauses and rhythms and receptivity to the reactions of the audience" (82). That is exactly the way Chief Munamuna chants. He does not stay in one place. He moves from one place to the other. He uses his right hand in a most dramatic manner. Each time Chief Munamuna utters a word, phrase or sentence at a stretch, he raises the hand. The hand he raises does not stay quiet in that position. It keeps shaking heavily in demonstration. At the end of the word, phrase or sentence, he drops the hand back to its normal position. In other words, at the beginning of every statement, the hand is raised; at the end of every statement, the hand drops. That is, at every breath pause, the hand is dropped. In this way, Chief Munamuna, like the Zulu *imbongi* "suits the actions to the words, the words to the actions" (Cope 29). The bard's voice never falls when he is chanting; it is always high and very fast. It is so high that even someone who is far from the place the performance is taking place knows that

Chief Munamuna is at it again. The times the praise-singer chanted for me formally in a gated private school, people heard his voice and came in.

Cope further observes that "many more breaths are taken in praise-poem recitation than in normal speech, for the method of delivery demands that the lungs be always fully inflated" (30). Chanting uses fast speech in a loud manner that brings pressure on the lungs to contract. In order to keep them inflated, Chief Munamuna takes in regular breaths. A praise-singer or chanter will also have to recollect his thoughts and know exactly what to say next. This is so because it is not every time when the words, the phrases or sentences will come naturally to him. Therefore, the verbal artist takes breaks to recollect his thoughts and think of what to say next. A break or a pause does not last more than 5 seconds. What is more, the Ijo bard makes use of what Parry and Lord refer to as "stall", a *yerimọ* (literally, you see!).

Stall, in the words of Rosenberg, is "language used repetitively (on either a lexical or syntactical level), whose formulation is somewhat automatic, so as to give the performer time to think of what to say next" ("Oral Sermons" 76). Rosenberg, in his various studies of the stall formula amongst African American preachers in the US, has noted how useful the stall formula is to those preachers. For example, he points out that African American preachers "admitted after close questioning that the purpose of the stall was to allow them time to think of what to say next" ("Oral Sermons" 81). In addition, the preachers said that the stall formulas help them to say "something to fill in what would otherwise be 'dead air', while ...thinking of the lines to come" ("Oral Sermons" 81; see also Rosenberg, "The Formulaic" 13). Like those preachers, Chief Munamuna regularly employs "*a yerimọ*" in all his praises to "think of what to say next." In fact, even in a poem of 50 lines, the reader might see that stall formula appearing 7 times.

The costume of Chief Munamuna is also one component during a performance that is worthy of note. The praise-singer does not put on any kind of dress at formal chanting sessions. He uses one piece of wrapper to tie around his waist. Only his feet from the waist down is not covered

by the wrapper. Then he puts on a somewhat long traditional dress known as *etibo*, which comes down close to his knees. Another piece of wrapper is hung down from his left hand. Moreover, Chief Munamuna clasps a walking-stick in his right hand to match the traditional attire. This sort of dressing was only seen at important occasions in Ijoland before now. Men in the rural areas still tie pieces of wrapper around their waists especially when they wake up from bed in the morning. However, nowadays, in Ijoland, it is very rare to see at an occasion or in public someone who ties wrapper and hangs another wrapper on his shoulder or his hand. Therefore, the bard's dress is distinctive. It stands out when he is invited beforehand to chant in public. This was how he dressed and chanted for me too when I told him I would use a video-recorder to record his chants in one of our meetings.

This distinctive dress of the Ijò verbal artist will surely make one think of the Xhosa or the Zulu *imbongi* who also puts on a distinctive dress. We are told that the *imbongi* does not wear an ordinary dress. He is marked out by the kind of attire he puts on during a performance. For example, Cope observes this about the Zulu *imbongi*: "The fact that the praiser is a specialist is reflected in his dress, which in the old days used to be a fantastic costume of furs and feathers and animal-tails, no less fantastic than that of the witchdoctor, who is also a specialist" (28). In addition, Cope makes the point that the *imbongi* puts on that dress only when he is performing the role of an *imbongi*. At other times, he wears "the ordinary dress and carry out the ordinary duties of daily life" (28). Similarly, Opland has averred that the Xhosa *imbongi* is marked by "the characteristic garb he wears on festive occasions; he is expected to appear and perform at such ceremonies in the presence of the chief" (*Xhosa Oral* 54). Opland adds that the *imbongi* "wears animal skins and brandishes spears or fighting sticks..." (*Xhosa Oral* 72).

Another chief feature of the performances of Chief Munamuna is the use of a talking drum (*opu eze*). The talking drum was the chief means of communication in traditional Ijò society. Among other things, it was used to communicate with warriors during a war, as well as beating the

praise titles of important personalities during ceremonies. The praise-singer has a talking drum but he does not beat it himself. Rather, at every occasion, he goes with someone who beats the talking drum at a very high volume for him. The young man beats the drum at regular intervals. During a performance, it is the young man who first goes into action by beating the praise titles of the oral poet. The day Chief Munamuna chanted for me in a very formal way, I heard him telling the young man, just before he started chanting, "*kule bo pèrè, kule bo pèrè*" (give the praise titles, give the praise titles). In this instance, Okpewho's position that during a performance, "because the chanter or reciter is anxious to give prominence to the beauty of his or her vocal style and to impress the words on hearers as audibly as possible, the music is often either severely subdued or totally absent" does not apply to the performances of Chief Munamuna (*African Oral* 133). In fact, in the case of Chief Munamuna, to some extent, the rhythm of the chants is dictated by the high volume of the music provided by the drum.

The researcher has not read that an *imbongi* uses a drum during a performance. Perhaps, it should be noted here that this paper is not a comparative study of the *imbongi* of the Bantu-speaking peoples and a West African griot that is Chief Munamuna (for a study of that kind, see, for example, Kaschula "imbongi and griot"). However, it should be noted that the use of a drum is not peculiar to just the Ijò oral poet as a chanter of praises. For example, the pacesetter of Yoruba oral literature scholarship, Adeboye Babalola, has remarked that "the best ijala performers make use of drum music whenever they are chanting on an important occasion. It is the special type of drum music called *ilu ode* (hunters' drum music) that is employed, and this is produced on the appropriate set of drums by drummers" ("Ijala Poetry" 15). In the case of an ijala performance, there is a drum ensemble. In contrast, only one drum is beaten during a performance by Chief Munamuna.

In his article, "Performance and Plot in *The Ozidi Saga*," Okpewho notes that the fact that every major character in *The Ozidi Saga* introduces himself "by a signature tune" indicates that "the narrator is using material inscribed in the folk tradition" (68). "By a signature tune" is meant

when a character shouts out his praise title to announce his arrival. Okpewho is correct in his observation. That is how Ijò big personalities, to date, announce their presence at events such as political gatherings, wrestling bouts, burials and marriages. However, for politicians, it is their loyalists who shout out their praise titles. Chief Munamuna regularly makes use of this “material inscribed in the folk tradition” of the Ijò at his formal performances. However, unlike the characters in *The Ozidi Saga* and Ijò wrestlers of today, the Ijò oral poet introduces himself in a normal speaking voice. The best elegant addresses are those delivered at funerals. For example, all his funeral chants begin with this address; the only change is in the name of the deceased:

- Ama mọ igoni mọ, a nua*
Imeṅe pina pina ama
Adogidigbo
Okinigbogbosi gbosi
Ikpanḡi tẹbẹ asaiṅ, bidẹḡ kẹ fie...
Bongbai ọubẹbẹ aru saḡ bo igbeimi
Tuḡo kẹ ọubẹbẹ a o...
Ani didubamoweremi yein
Sele Aguozu, Kalabeki taṅtuḡo
10. *Duweḡi kiri ka duḡa*
Amẹṅe ọubẹbẹ aru
Fani gban bọ beri gbangha
Nama diẹgha, indi diẹgha
Kẹmẹṣe beri tiṅmọ i pei
A nua

The community and guests, you are welcome
 I'm the bright community
 The master storyteller
Okinigbogbosi gbosi
Ikpanḡi tẹbẹ asaiṅ; consulted before saying
 I came with a boat of oral poems today
 Which person's oral poems?
 It is for a respected mother
 Sele Aguozu, granddaughter of Kalabeki

10. It's in death a person becomes great
 It's her boat of oral poems
 The one who puts a fence around himself
 does not fence his ears
 No separating of animals, no separating of fish
 Lend me your ears, everybody
 You are welcome

The address basically performs two functions: introduction of the poet, as pointed out earlier, and the subject. In the address above, “Adogidigbo” (the master storyteller) and “the bright community” two of the many praise titles of Chief Munamuna, identify the artist. In shouting out his praise titles at the beginning of a performance, the poet demonstrates his deep knowledge of the traditions of the Ijò society where, as rightly noted by Layo Olaluwoye, men begin formal discussions at home or in public with “formulaic openings” (114). What Olaluwoye means by that is that the men from that ethnic group usually begin important deliberations by saying their praise names as a way of introducing themselves to one another. The subject – the deceased – is Sele Aguozu, the mother-in-law of the first executive governor of Bayelsa State, Chief D.S.P. Alamieyeseigha. The address is also used to solicit the attention of the mourners to what he (the poet) has come to say about the subject. This formal address is like the beginning of a Yoruba *esa Egungun* performance. An *esa Egungun* performance, according to Olajubu, has three parts. In the beginning, the leader of the ensemble “pays his homage and acknowledgements to gods...[and] goes on to introduce himself, describing himself as a great dancer and poet/singer of no mean order” (82; also compare Babalola, *Content and Form* 58). Like the leader of the *esa Egungun* ensemble, the Ijò praise-poet calls himself “the master storyteller.” In addition, Chief Munamuna closes his performances in this way:

Ibe kiri anda olotu kẹrẹ-kẹrẹ

Imeṅe Adolphus Munamuna
Ọubẹbẹ Olotu Keni, Iḡon Ibe
Ogboin tuḡo
Gbẹsi, Otuan kẹ ini ama
Otumongalanga indi ka duwọṅ do
Ogboin tu fẹtẹ-fẹtẹ, kiri fẹtẹ-fẹtẹ, kiri fẹtẹ-
fẹtẹ
Iḡon otu, a do...

The wrestling of a clan sees many champions
 I'm Adolphus Munamuna
 The Chief Poet of the Iḡon Nation

Son of Ogboin
Precisely, Otuan is my community
The chameleon that uses fish as chewing stick
Ogboin tu *fẹṭe-fẹṭe, kiri fẹṭe-fẹṭe, kiri fẹṭe-fẹṭe*
People of Iṣon, I salute you

In the above chant, the verbal artist restates his name, shouts out his self-proclaimed title as the poet laureate of the Iṣo ethnic group, mentions the names of his *ibe* and community. The sixth line is the praise title of the poet's community, Otuan. It is said that of all the communities making up the poet's *ibe*, it is the poet's community that has the most collection of fish. Small wonder, they say they use fish as chewing stick. The seventh line is the praise title of the verbal artist's *ibe* - that there will always be many people in the *ibe* or clan.

Much has been said about the performance practices of Chief Munamuna. There is also the technological side in his performances. Technology has indeed brought unimagined benefits to the disciplines of oral literature, anthropology and folklore (see, for example, Turin, Martindale, and Shneiderman 199-200; Merolla 155-160). The aspect of gathering children in the night and telling them stories is no longer a common sight with the advent of the radio and the television. Today, we have story telling sections on radio stations. Audio-visual-recordings have made it possible for us to store verbal arts on cassettes, memory cards and CDs to be played on the radio and the television at home for children. These advancements in technology have offset the inadequacies of the earliest scholarship in African oral literature. Transcriptions and translations were never true portrayals of what goes on in a live performance. We now have the opportunity to see the very important interactions between the critic (audience) and the performer. Moreover, verbal art forms are disseminated on social media: WhatsApp, Facebook, E-mail, amongst others. The Iṣo praise-poet makes use of one of these benefits of technology to oral literature during performances.

When Chief Munamuna wants to chant, he sets his cell phone on a voice-recording mode and holds it in his right hand. As he is chanting, the phone is recording it. The bard first told me of this

practice when we had a discussion on documentation in oral literature. It was the poet's friend at the Bayelsa State-owned radio station, Glory FM, who drew his attention to the need to document his chants for posterity when he used to go on radio to perform his poetry. Before he started recording his chants, each time he chanted in public, the poem went away, as it were. That means, at best, he could only recall some lines after every chant. As such, in order to have the whole chant after a session, the verbal artist decided to make use of a cell phone. This practice has given him the opportunity to commit his chants to paper.

However, technology, despite its obvious benefits, has been a bad servant, as it were, to the verbal artist on two occasions. Immediately Chief Munamuna chanted the poem about this researcher, he started going through the different voice recordings on his phone. He told the researcher he was checking the recording of the one he had just chanted for him. Unfortunately, the oral poet did not find the chant on the phone. He was busy lamenting about it that day. The researcher had to send him his own through WhatsApp when he got to where he was studying for his doctoral degree. The second time was when the bard lost the memory card where he had recorded all his chants.

Conclusion

This paper has established that Chief Adolphus Munamuna, the Iṣo praise-singer, performs like other praise-chanters on the African continent. Like other bards, he chants very fast and at the top of his voice, takes in regular breaths and puts on a distinctive attire. Furthermore, and like others, he makes use of a talking drum, and starts and closes his performances with a signature tune. The only performative practice that maybe peculiar to him is his use of a cell phone to audio-record his chants at the time of chanting them. Chief Munamuna brought Yoruba praise-chanting tradition to Iṣoland and has successfully perfected the art. Praise-chanting was never a verbal art form amongst his people. It is for this reason that he still remains the only person practicing this form of art. Therefore, one really does not see this new practice surviving after him in Iṣoland even though he has begun to train people informally.

Note

1. This paper is a revised version of a section of this researcher's doctoral dissertation done for Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa
2. For a survey of the beginnings of performance to its mature phase, see, for example, Isidore Okpewho's insightful introduction to *The Oral Performance in Africa*).

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