

ỊZỌN ORAL POETRY AS RITUALS: A STUDY OF OLODIAMA ORAL TRADITION

Deinmotei Erefaghe Igbe

Bayelsa State Polytechnic, Aliebiri

Patience Ayebaemi Zuokemefa

Bayelsa State Polytechnic, Aliebiri

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ABSTRACT

This research examines Ịzọn oral poetry as rituals in the central part of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The focus of the study is on Olodiamma oral tradition of Bayelsa State. The study asserts that there is a connection between poetry and rituals in Ịzọn oral tradition. This is because the rendition of Ịzọn oral poetry goes together with incantations and invocations. To attain this assertion, a selected number of religious/sacred songs, war songs, work songs, and wrestling songs that have elements of mysticisms are collected as samples from some communities in Olodiamma Clan. The sources of data collection are gathering of information from informants, participant observations, participation of religious rites by the researchers, taking pictures with camera and making audio recordings. The selected poems are translated and transcribed from Ịzọn language into English language using poetry analysis technique in line with the premises of archetypal literary theory.

Keywords: oral poetry, rituals, Ịzọn, Olodiamma *ibe*, chanting, song, incantation, possession

INTRODUCTION

A ritual is a system of happenings involving words, actions, or objects, performed according to a set sequence. It is a rite enacted for supernatural activities. It is a ceremony destined to persuade spirits to turn fortune in one's direction. It is "a phenomenon that has formality, dramatic quality and sensuality which provides an intriguing contrast to ordinary behavior" (Ogungbile, 2005, p.118). Ritual "is a religious expression that has been in existence from time immemorial" and it is "a performance of ceremonial acts prescribed by tradition or by sacerdotal decree in a specific observable context" (Ogunleye, 2014, p. 209). It involves incantations, vows of devotion, coronations, rites of passage, marriages, dedication ceremonies, cleansing rites, festivals, funerals of religions and sects.

However, there is a connection between rituals and poetry in African oral tradition. Poetry in oral tradition is performed live and memorised word for word. Similarly, an oral poem is a composition in verse form communicating ideas and beliefs vocally. It can be sung, performed or chanted. Both rituals and poetry use gestures and words, recitation of fixed texts, performance of special music, songs or dances, processions and manipulation of certain objects (Bell, 2013). Percy Bysshe Shelley's definition of [Oral] Poetry is distinctive here, and deserves to be quoted at length:

[Oral] Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred. It is at the same time the root and blossom of all other systems of thought; it is that from which all spring, and that which adorns all; and that which, if blighted, denies the fruit and the seed, and withholds from the barren world the nourishment and the succession of the scions of the tree of life. It is the perfect and consummate surface and bloom of all things; it is as the odour and the colour of the rose to the texture of the elements which compose it, as the form and splendor of unfaded beauty to the secrets of anatomy and corruption (p. 995).

When a poem is chanted, it is alleged to be a song. A good number of rituals in traditional African settings are literally songs containing poetic elements such as rhyme, repetition, symbolism, assonance, and alliteration. Ritual performance uses a limited and strictly prepared set of lyrics which anthropologists call a "restricted code" (Bell, 2013, p. 140). Ritual poetry helps participants to use rhetorical style, which is limited in grammar and vocabulary (Bloch, 2011). However, when translated and transcribed into English language from Ịzọn language, oral poetry looks like a free verse. Also, repetition is a common device of oral poetry in Ịzọn culture.

Furthermore, poetry in Ịzọn oral tradition can be used for ritual purposes. This is because most incantations and invocations are performed in a poetic manner. The performers are diviners, traditional priests, members of religious sects and social groups. Usually, "this genre of oral literature [oral poetry] comes in the form of incantations such that it is difficult for the uninitiated to understand what is recited. It is in this regard that some critics have tended to see them as secret codes" (Emezue, 2019, p. 23). Thus, this paper examines the relationship that exist between Ịzọn oral poetry and rituals. It sees Ịzọn oral poetry as rituals. The focus of the study is on Olodiana oral tradition. Olodiana is an Ịzọn clan in Bayelsa State. The study identifies four types of oral poetry that have elements of rituals in this Ịzọn clan. They are religious/sacred songs, war songs, work songs and wrestling songs.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Studies on Ịzọn oral poetry always focused on other issues. A significant feature of most of the critical positions of these critics is that while they adopt different methods to interpret Ịzọn oral poetry, they have not studied Ịzọn oral poetry as rituals. This is because they failed to examine the connection between oral poetry and rituals in Ịzọn oral tradition.

Therefore, this study examines the mystical aspects of Ịzọn oral poetry in line with the principles of archetypal literary theory. The study is significant in that it will, among other things, offer to scholarship the importance of rituals in Ịzọn oral poetry as remedies for solving social problems in African oral literature, folklore, anthropology, linguistics, ethnography and religious studies.

AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of this research is to study Ịzọn oral poetry from Olodiana Clan of Bayelsa State as rituals. To fulfil the aim of this study the objectives are to:

- a) examine the connection between poetry and rituals in Ịzọn oral tradition;
- b) study the practice of incantation, invocation, possession of deities and spirits during the rendition of Ịzọn oral poetry;
- c) appraise the themes, structures, stylistic techniques, growth and functions of Ịzọn oral poetry that helps to validate the ritualistic essentials of religious/sacred songs, war songs, work songs and wrestling songs.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research seeks to address the following questions:

- a) What is the relationship between oral poetry and rituals in Ịzọn culture?
- b) How does ritual poetry affect the socio-cultural development of the people of the Niger Delta region and Nigeria at large?
- c) How does ritual poetry influence the religious harmony of the people of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria?

METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION

The research work adopts the primary and secondary sources of data collection. The primary source of data collection is gathering of information from informants (members of religious sects, social groups and custodians of cultural secrets), participant observations, participation of religious rites by the researchers, the use of questionnaires, interviews of resource people and documentation (taking pictures with camera and making audio-visual recording). Also, the data was translated and transcribed into English language which is scrutinized through secondary sources of data collection, which are basically library-based (relying on books, articles and reviews on Ịzọn oral tradition).

DATA ANALYSIS TECHNIQUE

The research adopts the qualitative data analysis technique because it is entirely based on fieldwork. Data was collected from members of religious sects, social groups, guardians of cultural mysteries, participant explanations, participation of religious rites by the researchers, interviews of resource people and documentation. The data was translated from the Ịzọn language into English language. Afterwards, the data was transcribed using poetry analysis technique.

Also, the research investigates the autonomous elements of a poem in its entirety. This

is because poetry analysis is an artistic and creative illustration of qualitative research. Scrutinizing poems line by line allows the researchers to breakdown poems in order to examine their diction, themes, organisation and form. Poetry analysis aids the researchers to interpret the meaning of the Ịzọn oral poems under study and appreciate them literarily. It will allow the researchers to organize and create facts with poetic responsiveness.

STUDY AREA

Olodiana *ibe* (Clan) is located in the Central part of the Niger Delta region (Alagoa, 2005). The clan is made of the following communities in Southern Ijaw Local Government Area of Bayelsa State: Ondewari, Olugbobiri, Ikeinghabiri, Ikebiri and Korokorosei.

POPULATION OF THE STUDY

The research was carried out in all the communities that constitute Olodiana *ibe* (Clan) of Bayelsa State in Nigeria. Also, the researchers visited royal palaces, religious places, shrines, forests, lakes, rivers, museum, historical monuments, schools and business hubs to collect data.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

ARCHETYPAL LITERARY THEORY

Theory is the meticulous deduction and guidelines of procedure based on a structured body of knowledge framed to study a specific phenomenon. However, in oral literature, theory is “a way of emancipating” oral presentations from the stranglehold of a “‘civilised sensibility’, and throwing them open to a kind of analysis in which, in principle at least, anyone could participate” (Eagleton, 1983, p. viii). Literary theory helps us to appreciate and criticise works of oral literature. Also, literary theory “has opened, or reopened, our eyes to textual irresolution, stickiness, awkwardness, it has certainly opened many eyes to meaning in [oral] text previously quite unregistered or only dimly perceived” (Cunningham, 2002, p.41). According to Roger Webster (1990), literary theory helps us to be “aware of the methods and procedures which we employ in the practice of literary criticism, so that we are not interrogating the [oral] text but also the ways in which we read and interpret the text” (8). Also, it seeks “to explain the range to which the [oral] text is more a formation of a culture than an individual authorship and how the text helps to inspire some social commitment” (Selden, 1989, p.7). It is with this view of theory in mind that this research adopts the archetypal literary theory as its analytical framework.

Archetypal literary theory is a practice of investigation based on the documentation and reading of frequent figurative and allegorical forms in culture, art and literature. The theory was initiated in the early 20th century from the theories of the British Anthropologist Sir James George Frazer in his seminal work titled, *The Golden Bough*. Frazer’s study was on mythologies. Approximately two decades later, the Swiss psychologist, Carl G. Jung brought archetypal study into the field of psychoanalysis (Baldick 2015). Also, archetypal literary theory begins “with Carl Jung [...] in *The Spirit in Man, Art and Literature*, which contains two essays (first published in 1922 and 1930). Jung archetypal analysis suggested that some symbols in dreams and myths were deposits of ancestral reminiscence conserved in shared

unconsciousness. Also, Jung archetypal study was James Joyce's *Ulysses*" (Dobson, 2005, p. 1).

According to M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham, archetypal literary theory signifies frequent "narrative designs, patterns of action, character types, themes, and images that recur in a wide variety of works of literature, as well as in myths, dreams, and even social rituals. Such recurrent items are often claimed to be the result of elemental and universal patterns in the human psyche" (18). Archetypal literary theory depends on a number of primary propositions, the most important of which is that the total collection of human beliefs, antiquities, and perceptions inherited as a body of universal symbols. This theory sees a work of art as a product of culture, but a culture that does beyond the present or resent past. Proponents of this theory believe that no work of art is self-sufficient. Thus, this study examines Iẓon oral poetry as rituals in line with the premises of archetypal literary theory.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

ORAL POETRY

Oral poetry is a poetry that is composed, transmitted and realised orally. The poems are composed by different social groups during special occasions and conveyed orally in Iẓon language from one generation to another. These poems "permeate every aspect of African life and culture, they commonly derive their names from the different occasions on which they are performed, or from which they are derive" (Okoh, 2010, p. 160). Also, it is "a literary poetic form that exists mainly in memory from where it is transmitted from one generation to the other, through narration or by word of mouth" (Odueme, 2019, p.149). The ownership of this poetry in Iẓon culture is communal and not private. Thus, this study examines four types of oral poetry that have elements of rituals in Iẓon culture. They are religious/sacred songs, war songs, work songs and wrestling songs. The poems are translated and transcribed from Iẓon language into English language.

RITUALS

Ritual practices show some of the most important, sensitive, and intricate parts of human life. It is a figurative and monotonous activity through which we create contacts with what we ruminate to be the most valued aspect of culture. Ritual involves chants, incantations, vows of devotion, rites of passage, dedication ceremonies, cleansing rites, cultural and religious activities. It is a habit ratified for supernatural happenings. The "study of ritual shows the connection that exist among the various aspects of society, such as religion, politics, and economy" (Kyalo, 2013, p. 35). This paper examines the connection that exist between oral poetry and rituals in Iẓon oral tradition. Thus, the concentration of the study is on the elements of rituals in Iẓon oral poetry from Olodiana *ibe* in Southern Ijaw Local Government Area of Bayelsa State.

EMPIRICAL FRAMEWORK

Iẓon oral poetry has received different degrees of critical attention from scholars. However, a noteworthy feature of most of the critical positions of these scholars is that while they use various approaches to study Iẓon oral poetry, they did not show that this literary

genre basically addresses issues of incantation, invocation, possession of deities and spirits in Olodiana *ibe* (Clan) of Bayelsa State. Therefore, this section will begin a chronological order of the publication of the works to be reviewed.

In his article, “The Ijo (Ijaw) People of Delta State: Their Early History and Aspects of Social and Cultural Practices”, Charles E. Ariye (2013) examined the historical clarification of the Ijo [Iẓon] ethnic nationality in the Niger Delta. However, his focus was on the Ijos of the western part of the Niger Delta region. He studied the lacuna that exists in the literature of these groups as compared to the Ijos in the central and eastern parts of the Niger Delta, but praised their “rich heritage that has been developed over time” (25). For Ariye, these Ijo [Iẓon] groups have “a religious base of common identity [that] is provided by the worship of a single national god. Again, all members of the clan observed the prescribed taboos and attended the annual or occasional festivals under the supervision of a high priest” (28). The Iẓon groups he studied are Egbema, Gbaramatu, Isaba, Diebiri, Seimbiri, Tuomo, Ogulagha, Iduwini, Operemo, Mein, Kumbowei and Kabowei. However, Ariye did not study the Iẓon groups in the central part of Niger Delta. Also, Ariye did not examine the relationship that exist between the Iẓon oral poetry and rituals. Therefore, the present research examines this relationship.

That “African traditional literature is fraught with songs, dances, riddles, jokes, proverbs as well as chants, incantations, invocation, rituals and musical performances” (1) is the main thrust of Odingowei M. Kwokwo and Tariliye E. Angaye’s “Orality, performance and creativity: A descriptive perspective of the Izon *Obobo bi* necromancy” (2020). They believe that these oral forms aid in establishing a good relationship between the world of the living and the world of the dead in Izon culture. Also, Kwokwo and Angaye write that: “Oral poetry in Iẓon tradition is diverse but one that is often neglected in scholarly discourse is the elegiac poetry of the ‘*Obobo bi*’ or necromancy” (1). This is because of the growing influence of Christianity in the region. The focus of their research is on the concept of necromancy. They believe that there is need to preserve this practice as a literary piece in the Iẓon oral tradition. However, Kwokwo and Angaye limit their analysis of Iẓon oral poetry to the study of necromancy, without presenting an issue like incantation in this genre of oral tradition. Therefore, this study is important at this point, because it uses the archetypal literary theory to examine this concept.

In “*Egbesu*: An African Just War Philosophy and Practice”, Elias Courson and Michael E. Odijie (2020) say that the “*Egbesu* war philosophy has long been preserved in Ijaw culture through oral tradition” (1). Thus, qualifying this deity as an unbiased war theory and opens up the space for future study of this practice. However, for Courson and Odijie, “the real work of unravelling this ancient philosophy of war, which can tell us much about the Ijaw [Iẓon] people, is made difficult by its reinvention for modern warfare” (13). This is because *Egbesu* has been interpreted as immunization against human weapons. Also, they write that the *Egbesu* ideology should be examined and advanced beyond the arena of warfare to a more philosophical approach that will aid the intellectual development of the Iẓon people. However, Courson and Odijie limit their analysis of this rich Iẓon oral tradition to the study of *Egbesu* as a philosophical approach rather than a religious experience of the Iẓon people. On the contrary, this study will examine *Egbesu* as a religious system and cultural heritage that [

protects its worshippers and followers from all forms of danger via oral poetry. The present study will show how oral poetry is a major requirement for invoking the presence of this Ịzọn deity.

This section has been concerned with the review of scholarly works on Ịzọn oral tradition. Although the critical positions of the literature are suggestive, illuminating and interesting, none has been able to explicitly study the relationship between oral poetry and rituals in Olodiamma *ibe* (Clan) of Bayelsa State. This is because the critics approached Ịzọn oral poetry through different theoretical perspectives. On the other hand, this study shows the relationship that exist between Ịzọn oral poetry and rituals through the examination of the following poetic elements: composition, themes, stylistic techniques and development of the selected oral poems in line with the premises of archetypal literary theory.

AN ANALYSIS OF ỊZỌN ORAL POETRY AS RITUALS IN OLODIAMMA *IBE* (CLAN) OF BAYELSA STATE

RELIGIOUS/SACRED SONGS

Religious/Sacred Songs “are hymns, prayers, praises, possession songs, and oracular poetry, all with their varying conventions, content, and function in different cultures” (Finnegan, 2012, p.165). These songs are used in the worship of Ịzọn deities. They are characterized by a spirit-possession hue. They are used for religious oblations and ritual occasions.



Olodiamma Egbesu oral poets chanting sacred songs



Oral poets reciting traditional religious songs

Religious/Sacred Songs are mostly sung at places considered to be holy ground. An example, is a family or community shrine. According to an Iẓon traditional belief, “human beings originate as disembodied spirits, or *teme* in the realm of the creator, *Wonyinghi* (‘Our Mother’), and return there after dying. While awaiting birth, people often establish relationships with nature spirits (*Oru*, or *Orumo*) [...], who may later wish to join them on earth” (Anderson, 1999, p. 127). For example, worshippers of *Wonyinghi* usually chant praises to her to bring down her divine presence, possess and protect them on their daily activities. A popular traditional Iẓon religious song to *Wonyinghi* is “*Deḷisentimi iyo*”:

Deḷisentimi iyo

Deḷisentimi iyo
Enḡ ebimọ bіндеi iyo
Q-owọ deḷimini iyo
Ilaye wur la dei sei
Q-owọ deḷimini iyo
Ilaye akpọ bing dei iyo
Deḷi Sentị
Pāsisei koroḡbo

***Delisentimi iyo* [English Translation]**

You are smiling on us
 Your good is so much
 Oh, you are smiling on us
 What you have has reached us
 Oh, you are smiling on us
 What you have has filled the earth
 You are smiling...
 Please come down

The origin of this poetry is communal and not personal. The idea behind the recitation of this poem is to celebrate the consciousness of the abiding presence of *Wonyinghi* in the life every native of *Olodiana ibe*. The poem has elements of rituals because “*Deḷisentimi iyo*” is an old Iẓon incantation word translated as “you are you are smiling on us”. There is an occurrence of assonance in lines 3 and 5 of the poem because of the repetition of identical vowel sounds as stressed syllables: “*Q-owo deḷimini iyo*”. The long vowel “*o*” helps to

accentuate the idea of the love of *Wonyinghi* towards her children. The implication of assonance in the song is to create emphasis on this lovely atmosphere experienced by the poets.

Also, there is symbolism in poem. Like other traditional African poems, the poets use “symbols as a means to express their specific ideology, social structures, and to represent characteristics of their specific culture” (Lakhadive, 2019, p.1). For example, in primordial times, “*Dēlīsentiṃi iyọ*” was only chanted as a solo without a chorus or refrain. This is to enable the deity to possess the individual in search of divinity. Also, the diviner must put on white or blue cloths to signify the purity of *Wonyinghi*. Here, the white or blue colours appeals to the audience’s sense of sight. Thus, creating a mental representation (visual imagery) of *Wonyinghi* during the chanting exercise. The inference of this poem shows that human beings depend on supernatural beings for help in all human activities.

Another example of a religious poem in Olodiana *ibe* is “*Dịrimọ weị*”. This song is performed by worshippers of *Adumụ* in Korokorosei community in the Olodiana *ibe*. The “*Dịrimọ weị*” song is patterned after the movement of “*Bini Kurukuru* [the black python], who is worshipped at several locations in the region” (Anderson, 1999, p.131). Also, the use of “tradition-specific (and often highly formalized) verse styles and a prescribed act sequence means that many oral-traditional performances cross the liminal threshold between ordinary and special, between unmarked actions and the ritualistic” (Maring, 2011, p. 393). This deity is known as *Dịrimọ weị* or *Adumụ* in Azuzuama, Olugbobiri and Ikebiri communities. The *Dịrimọ weị* or *Bini Kurukuru* incantation and dance is rooted in an historical event that brought the black python out of the forest to help traders in Olodiana *ibe* and neighbouring clans during trading activities in pre-colonial times. Below is the poem:

Dịrimọ weị

Lọị lọị lọị dīrimọ weị gḅan og̣eḷe gḅan
Lọị lọị lọị dīrimọ weị gḅan og̣eḷe gḅan
Lọị lọị lọị dīrimọ weị gḅan og̣eḷe gḅan

Dịrimọ weị [English Translation]

[snake movement]	Snake dance Snake dance
	Make the ovation for the celebration
[snake movement]	Snake dance Snake dance
	Make the ovation for the celebration
[snake movement]	Snake dance Snake dance
	Make the ovation for the celebration

Traditionally, this poem is a three-line poem. However, when it is transcribed into English language, it is increased to six lines. The effect is repetition. Repetition is a figure of speech that displays the logical prominence that is crucial to entice an audience’s attention on the key-word or a key-phrase in the poem. It infers echoing sounds, words, terminologies in a certain sequence in order to provide emphasis (Kemertelidze & Manjavidze, 2013). The repetition of “*lọị*” and “*gḅan*” in the lines of the song create a possession effect of the song on the

singers and audience. Also, the audience is seen participating in both song and dance because of the beats created by the assonant rhyme: “*Lq̃i lq̃i lq̃i*”. Thus, at the performance of this song, the *Adum̃* spirit is believed to be released as *deus ex machina* to people in need of help. Beneficiaries of such help are traders and travelers along the creeks and forests in and around Olodiana *ibe*. Somethings the black python is physically seen at different places in the community mysteriously helping people without hurting them.

WAR SONGS

These poems celebrate the ideas of glory, courage, adventure and achievement. These are the dominant ideas associated with war. War poetry is “the expression of the general values relating to war than an immediate part of an actual military expedition [...] When sung they are accompanied by small drums, by the brandishing of spears, and by bodily movements signifying courage and defiance, which stir up warlike feelings” (Finnegan, 2012, p. 204). They are performed and sung loudly by warriors to show bravery during war. Sometimes, in Olodiana *ibe*, war songs are chanted by worshippers of the *Egbesu* deity. *Egbesu* is the war god of the Iẓon people in the Niger Delta region. According to Benaebi Benatari (1989):

Egbesu is the divine enforcer and executioner. *Egbesu* is the divine security agent of God, securing the social order of societies that abide by the laws of nature, securing the minds of individuals who uphold divine law, [defending] from negative psychic influences or attacks released by other minds [...]. The invoking of *Egbesu* will take on the form of waging aggressive warfare against the forces that are causing the destabilization and disharmony, with the aim of re-establishing order and harmony, while at the same time being protected from harm. That is why *Egbesu* is termed the god of warfare. It is not invoked to cause war, but to end injustice wherever it may be (5).

Egbesu is commonly known as a masculine god whose spirit is demonstrated in peace, justice, power, protection and war in Iẓon cosmology. Chanting war songs to be possessed by this deity is one of the requirements of the worshippers of *Egbesu*. This is to enable them win in warfare. Also, *Egbesu* is a religious system and cultural heritage that protects his worshippers and followers from all forms of danger via oral poetry. Thus, turning the worshippers’ bodies into ritualised bodies. A ritualised bodies are bodies “invested with a ‘sense’ of ritual. This sense of ritual exists as an implicit variety of schemes whose deployment works to produce sociocultural situations that the ritualized body can dominate in some way” (Bell, 2013, p. 98). Oral poetry becomes a major requirement for invoking the presence of this Iẓon deity. Also, for the purpose of this study, the researchers collected a data (a war song) from the field (Ikeinghabiri Community in Olodiana *ibe*) to buttress this point.



Egbesu worshippers chanting war songs in honour of the deity on a boat regatta

Egbekurere

[Solo]: *Egbekurere*
 [Chorus]: *Yaan Yaan Egbekurere*
 [Solo]: *Egbekurere*
 [Chorus]: *Yaan Yaan Egbekurere*
 [Solo]: *Tinkpo suo wu ghe*
 [Chorus]: *Yaan Yaan Egbekurere*
 [Solo]: *kiekpo suo wu ghe*
 [Chorus]: *Yaan Yaan Egbekurere*
 [Solo]: *Egbekurere*
 [Chorus]: *Yaan Yaan Egbekurere*
 [Solo]: *Egbekurere*
 [Chorus]: *Yaan Yaan Egbekurere*
 [Solo]: *Pelekpō su wu ghe*
 [Chorus]: *Yaan Yaan Egbekurere*
 [Solo]: *Tinkpo suo wu ghe*
 [Chorus]: *Yaan Yaan Egbekurere*
 [Solo]: *Egbekurere*
 [Chorus]: *Yaan Yaan Egbekurere*

***Egbekurere* [English Translation]**

[Solo]: *Egbesu is strong*
 [Chorus]: *Sea wave, sea wave Egbesu is strong*
 [Solo]: *Egbesu is strong*
 [Chorus]: *Sea wave, sea wave Egbesu is strong*
 [Solo]: *Shoot and it will not penetrate*
 [Chorus]: *Sea wave, sea wave Egbesu is strong*
 [Solo]: *Cut and it will not enter*
 [Chorus]: *Sea wave, sea wave Egbesu is strong*
 [Solo]: *Egbesu is strong*
 [Chorus]: *Sea wave, sea wave Egbesu is strong*
 [Solo]: *Cut and it will not enter*
 [Chorus]: *Sea wave, sea wave Egbesu is strong*
 [Solo]: *Shoot and it will not penetrate*
 [Chorus]: *Sea wave, sea wave Egbesu is strong*
 [Solo]: *Egbesu is strong*
 [Chorus]: *Sea wave, sea wave Egbesu is strong*
 [Solo]: *Egbesu is strong*
 [Chorus]: *Sea wave, sea wave Egbesu is strong*

This poem was composed anonymously. This is because of the sacred codes attached to it. This oral poem is an incantation song. This is because the word “*Egbekurere*” is no longer in contemporary Iẓon vocabulary. The modern-day Iẓon word for “*Egbekurere*” is “*Egbesu kuroṃu*” (*Egbesu is strong*). Another word of incantation in the poem is the repetition of: “*Yaan Yaan*” (signifying the power of the sea wave in protecting the Iẓon warriors during warfare). This oral poem is a call and response poem. Both the audience and performers are involved in the chanting of the song. This song inspires gallantry and courage in the hearts of the warriors. Thus, it invokes acceptance and compliance between the soloist

and the chorus. Also, the lines of this ritual performance maintain a chain of command and authority, and upholds the traditions on which the authority of the group is to follow. The call and responds structure of the poem reveals the cordial relationship that exists between leaders and their followers in Iẓon culture, which Olodiana *ibe* represents. Another example of a war song is the poem below:



An Iẓon war boat with its fighters chanting “Kirindị”

Kirindị

[Solo]: *kirindị Ọ kirindị Ọ*

[Chorus]: *kirindị Ọ kirindị Ọ*
Nakenaworị abomị Ọ tubahnghe
kirindị Ọ kirindị Ọ

Kirindị [English Translation]

[Solo]: Mud Fish, Mud Fish!

[Chorus]: Mud Fish, Mud Fish!
 I heard of you before I came
 None like you.
 There is no going back.
 Mud Fish, Mud Fish!
 I heard of you before I came
 There is no going back.

Here, the poet is eulogizing the mud fish for its amphibious qualities. Also, the repetition “*Kirindị Ọ*” in lines 1, 2 and 4 is used as a device in the poem to explore the

strength of the mud fish and its ability to stay inside the mud all through the dry season and resurfaces during the rainy season in the river. Also, the warrior (the oral poet) is praying to the mud fish to blessing him with the same ability to endure hard times during warfare. The poet persona says:

Nakenaworì abòmì O túbàhnghe

[I heard of you before I came/There is no going back].

At this juncture, the language of the poem is not simple. It is based on an invocation. In strength and skill of the “*kirindì*”, the poem uses metonymy to make its description of *kirindì* clear and vivid to the audience. In the poem, “*kirindì*” is the representation of a camouflage which is associated with a military strategy to survive in war. Also, there is irony in the title of the poem: “*Kirindì*” (Mud Fish). Fish stays in rivers and not on the mud.

WORK SONGS

Work songs are important aspect of African oral tradition. They supplement work because they are closely linked to the occasion of their rendition such as, felling a tree, building a house, communal farming, building a fish pond, etcetera. The rhythm of a work song is usually in consonance with the rhythm of the work. The song lightens the burden of work and encourages communal spirit among the workers. Like other *Ịzọn* clans, a work song in *Olodiana ibe* is usually convoyed with drums, melody and dance. The poets perform either individually or in clusters but most composers perform in groups made up of artist, chorus, choral group, drum players and performers (Olajubu, 2004). For example, the poets usually chant work songs in *Olodiana ibe* to prepare the farmers to harvest the bush mango whenever its trees are shedding off their leaves. This is because they identify the mango tree (translated as “*Ogboin*” in *Ịzọn* language) as one of their clash crops in the area. An example of a work song *Olodiana* clan is “*Ogboin tų fịtị iyo*”:

Ogboin tų fịtị iyo

Ogboin tų fịtị iyo
Ogboin tų fịtị iyo

Birị fịtị fịtị iyo
Birị fịtị fịtị iyo

Ogboin tų fịtị iyo
Ogboin tų fịtị iyo

Ogboin tų fịtị iyo [English Translation]

The mango tree is died
The mango tree is died

The leaves are dried up
The leaves are dried up

The mango tree is died
The mango tree is died

This poem is composed by a cluster of farmers from Ikeinghabiri Community in *Olodiana ibe*. However, it only the *Boupelewei* (The man that clears the bush) and his group are permitted to carry out this ritual. The *Boupelewei* is the lead vocalist. This chant precedes the harvesting of bush mango (*Ogboin*) during the rainy season (Ariye, 2013). The bush mango popularly known as *Ogbonor* in Nigeria. It is a major cash crop from precolonial times (Feghabo, 2021). The small of “*Ogboin tų*” creates an olfactory imagery possessing effect on the harvesters that motivates them to spend many days in the forest under the protection of *Bou Orụ* (Bush spirits) who roam the forest to protect it from hazardous human activities (Anderson, 1999). Also, the repetition of “*Ogboin tų fịtị iyo*” and “*Birị fịtị fịtị iyo*”

in the poem adds beauty to the content of the song and helps to communicate the information about the harvesting of the bush mango. The farmers will chant the following lines to the creator, *Wonyinghi* (Our Mother) to preserve the forest for the next harvesting season after a successful harvest season:

Kiri okpo finì wọ piri

kiri okpo finì wọ piri

kiri okpo finì wọ piri

kiri okpo finì wọ piri

Olodi kiri okpo finì wọ piri

Ekpa kiri okpo bi paki korọ nìmi

bimejini

***Kiri okpo finì wọ piri* [English Translation]**

Open the land for us

Open the land for us

Open the land for us

Open the *Olodi* land for us

Open the *Ekpa* land for us

Because it is just lying down helpless

The beautiful thing about this communally composed ritual poem is that the poets (the farmers) use allusion to invoke the spirits of the land by calling the prehistoric names of the community in the lines of the poem. Allusion is “a passing reference, without explicit identification, to a literary or historical person, place, or event, or to another literary work [oral performers]” (Abrams & Harpham, 2015, p.13). “*Olodi*” was the founder of *Olodiana ibe*. The name is used by the poets who act as diviners for incantations and invocations activities within the boundaries of Ondewari, Ikeinghabiri, Olugbobiri and Ikebiri communities. Also, “*Ekpa*” is used as a metaphor in the poem to suggest the age long effect of environmental degradation on the setting. This is because the land “is just lying down helpless” when the natives refuse to call on their deities for help.

WRESTLING SONGS



An oral poet singing a wrestling song to prepare the wrestlers for a wrestling contest

Wrestling competition is an age-long cultural sport that is engrained in the way of life of the Iẓon people of the Niger Delta region. It is a practice and acknowledgement of skill and strength as well as promotion of indigenous values among young men. Before the wrestling season young men will train for months. Champions in wrestling tournaments are admired, respected by all and known as warriors. Wrestling competition involves singing, drumming, synchronization and rhythm and dancing (Azunwo & Chigozirim 2017). Wrestling matches are accompanied by songs that have deeper significance the physical experience. An example is “*Kpaĩngbị*”:

Kpaĩngbị

Kpaĩngbị Kpaĩngbị Kpaĩngbị
sụụ oze ogele ba fietị
sụụ ogele à tẹmẹ mọ sẹ sori mọ botei pamọ bọ tẹi
Kpaĩngbị Kpaĩngbị Kpaĩngbị
ogele fietị, Olotu mọ sẹ wọrị pa anda kiri bo
Kpaĩngbị Kpaĩngbị Kpaĩngbị
Bọghọtẹi, àtẹmẹ mọ sẹ sori bo seighị
Oze mọ fie mene anda kiri ghen
Owei sẹin fa.

***Kpaĩngbị* [English Translation]**

Kpaĩngbị [the sound of a drum]
Kpaĩngbị [the sound of a drum]
Kpaĩngbị [the sound of a drum]
the drums are calling again
the drums have summoned the spirit of bravery
Kpaĩngbị [the sound of a drum]
Kpaĩngbị [the sound of a drum]
Kpaĩngbị [the sound of a drum]
the drums have summoned the champions to
the wrestling ground
Kpaĩngbị [the sound of a drum]
Kpaĩngbị [the sound of a drum]
Kpaĩngbị [the sound of a drum]
come and hear the beats of the spirits
the dance of the ancestors
Kpaĩngbị [the sound of a drum]
Kpaĩngbị [the sound of a drum]
Kpaĩngbị [the sound of a drum]
the drums are playing again
the wrestling ground is set
wrestling ground
but the men are few

This poem was composed by an anonymous wrestler. The purpose of this poem is to prepare the wrestler for a wrestling contest. The song is structured in a call and responds manner. The singers accompany the drum beats. The drums are the sacred tools for invocation of spirits. The drum sound “*Kpaiṅgbi*” is played by the drummers or mimicked by orally the oral poets in the absence of a musical instrument. Thus, creating an onomatopoeia. The imitation of drum tempos by mouth suggests the meaning of the words whose sound is heard. However, drum beats generate a possessive effect on the wrestlers, consequently creating a spontaneous act of bravery to withstand the opponent in the wrestling arena. Also, it is believed that the drum beats invoke ancestral powers on the wrestlers. This song is highly solemn and closely related to the mystical music played by spirits of ancestors in their realm during such competitions (Lan 2018). Another example of a celebrated wrestling song Olodiana *ibe* is “*Anda kiri ɛnị toi kiri ɬon - ɬon kiri*”:



Two Izon wrestlers in a wrestling contest, listing to the tenor of wrestling songs

Anda kiri ɛnị toi kiri ɬon - ɬon kiri

*Anda kiri ɛnị toi kiri ɬon - ɬon kiri
Ama tẹmẹ suwo ba bọghọtẹi ă-tẹmẹ mọ sẹ keme-owọ ghẹ sụoḃoemi
Iye ini ăkeme anda kiri kẹrẹ
wọ mọ yẹrị mene
Anda kiri sụy bira kemi, ta keme fighe
Iyọn nana, anda tọrụ di
on kẹrẹ ɛna kuro
oze, Ekere ba ingologolo fie mọmọ on kẹrẹ ɛna kuro mọ
Anị duonio wọ worị kiri kọn anda kiri mien
Olotu anda kiri kẹrẹ-ẹ pọ
Olutu anda kiri kẹkẹ- zi*

Anda kiri ẹnị toi kiri ọn - ọn kiri [English Translation]

The wrestling ground is my arena
It is a sacred ground where the spirits of the community are reincarnated in human form
The wrestling ground is where real men contest for endurance without weapons
The wrestling ground is a battlefield where no wrestler is slain
Stamina, focus and skills are my ordnances
The sounds of drums, wooden gung and bells are my motivations
So let us turn the arena to a wrestling ground
Where champions are made and not born

The ownership of this poetry is communal and not private. This song is an example of a metaphor. “*Anda kiri*” is used as metaphors in the poem for bravery, endurance, motivations and the Ịzon communal spirit of sportsmanship. Also, the poets eulogize the wrestling arena as a sacred space set aside for this cultural sport in Ịzon tradition. This song is a medium through which the wrestlers enter this sacred space. This poem is a motivational song in the wrestling arena. Also, the declaiming of “*Anda kiri ẹnị toi kiri ọn - ọn kiri*” by the oral poets remind the wrestlers that the spirits of the ancestors are part of the spectators in the arena. Thus, stimulating the stamina and the African collective spirit of sportsmanship. This song is natural to the wrestlers and play crucial roles constructing their personal and cultural identity.

CONCLUSION

This paper has been concerned with Ịzon oral poetry as rituals in the central part of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The focus of the study is on Olodiana *ibe* (Clan) oral tradition. The paper revealed that the ownership of this poetry is communal and not private. This is because the oral poems under study are composed by different social groups during special occasions in the Ịzon communities under study and conveyed orally in Ịzon language from one generation to another. Also, the study has shown that there is a connection between oral poetry and rituals in Ịzon oral tradition. The study examined four types of oral poetry that have elements of rituals in Olodiana Clan. They are religious/sacred songs, war songs, work songs and wrestling songs. The study has shown that the practice of incantation, invocation, possession of deities and spirits go side by side with the rendition of these poems. The study is relevant in that it will, among other things, offer to scholarship the importance of rituals in African oral poetry. Thus, this study occupies a vital position in the study of African oral literature, folklore, anthropology, linguistics, ethnography and religious studies.

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