

THE BENIN MINSTREL AND PRAISE POETRY: THE EXAMPLE OF SIR VICTOR UWAIFO

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ABSTRACT

This essay critically examines the praise song-poems of the Benin oral artist¹ Sir. Victor Uwaifo. It acknowledges the connection between African folklore and his renditions, as well as argues Uwaifo's creative depth in modernizing the character of traditional oral material. Our analysis is limited to two praise song-poems entitled: *Iye na gbon* and *Do Amẹ Do* respectively. The oral material are sourced from Uwaifo's recorded audio productions. The consideration of these selected praise song-poems is based on the interplay between human and non-human figures as viable themes in African oral poetry. Thus, we adopt Bernth Lindfor's interpretative criticism in our analytical approach to the study. This critical position is necessary to underscore the rich poetic elements in the song-poems. Moreover, our translation of the oral items is done at the level of equivalence, i.e. side by side correspondence of the Edo lexical items and their English forms. In the end, it is revealed that the strength of Uwaifo's praise song-poems is rooted in his mastery of the dynamics of poetic sophistication, performance and a firm grasp of the Benin world-view.

Introduction

Sir. Victor Efosa Uwaifo is a renowned African cultural artist, architect, philanthropist and public servant with diverse interests in both oral and visual arts. He was born in Benin City, Edo state, Nigeria on 1 March 1941. He attended primary and secondary schools in Edo and Lagos States respectively. Uwaifo's academic brilliance and intelligence earned him a B.A degree with

¹ In the context in which the word "oral artist" is used here, it is specific to a bard, griot or a minstrel especially in the delivery of poetry.

first-class honors in Fine and Applied Arts from the University of Benin. He also got his M.A degree from the same University in 1994 where he majored in Sculpture.



Sir Victor Uwaifo displaying his guitar skills and in his academic regalia.

The “Guitar Boy” as he is fondly called – thanks to his mastery of the musical instrument and a song of the same title - is a Member of the Order of the Niger (MON). This is a National Honours of Merit that he received in 1983, the first Nigerian oral artist to be so honoured. It is pertinent to mention here that Uwaifo’s place in Africa’s High-life Music history is monumental. One cannot mention High-life greats such as Emmanuel Tetteh Mensah, Victor Olaiya, E.C Arinze, Kofi Ayivor, and Cardinal Rex Jim Lawson without also talking about the magisterial musical legacy of Uwaifo. He is a former Commissioner of Arts, Culture and Tourism in Edo State (2001-2003). Moreover, he has received international recognitions and awards for his cultural and artistic skills including his record-breaking architectural masterpiece and major tourist artefact – The Aeroplane House – in the ancient city of Benin. He retired from the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria, where he served as a lecturer.

Folklore and Uwaifo’s Oral Songs/ Poems: The Connection

There is no doubt that there is a recognizable connection between Uwaifo’s oral materials and African folklore. In fact, “some critics have condemned [Uwaifo] for his modernizing

influences of traditional oral pieces.”² Yet, the oral artist has always maintained his allegiance and reference to African cultural and traditional influences towards the development of his music. To Uwaifo, a good grasp and appreciation of African folklore is crucial to the development of an oral artist. He speaks of this lucidly here:

... the foundation of my music is very cultural, as demonstrated in the beat and the lyrics. The fact that I use modern instruments to produce my sound has not altered the basic character of the music.... We have experimentation and evolution of ancient African cultures and my music is no exception to this. ³

When you listen to Uwaifo’s recordings, there is no doubt that he owes his oral artistry to “the beat and the lyrics” of African folklore, especially within the diverse Edo-speaking communities of Southern Nigeria. In this connection, an observant listener to such songs as *Joromi*, *Iden*, *Giodo Giodo*, *Amẹ* as well as his “Eḱassa” and “Sasakossa” beats would notice that many of his lyrics and beats are sourced from the folklore of his community.

What many should understand here is that Uwaifo is a revolutionary artist. The strength of his genius lies in his ability to convert what is known as “the common property of a community” or “communal authorship” into a global and commercial phenomenon with a unique touch. The depth of his creative energy is demonstrated through his deployment of “modern instruments” to produce “[his] sound” and “[his] music” without endangering “the basic character” of African folklore. By extension, it is of utmost importance that we recognise Uwaifo’s “own touch”, “signatures” and “stamps of character” to quote the words of Isidore Okpewho ⁴ even in the midst of these songs. It is the recognition of these qualities that show his creative genius and originality. This thought is fundamentally important in our appreciation of the bard’s praise song-poems.

Theoretical Background

This essay is anchored in interpretative criticism. The position of folklorist Berth Lindfors towards this form of criticism is very insightful. He points out that “interpretative Criticism

² John Collins, *West African Pop Roots* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 126. *Emphasis added*

³ Collins *West African Pop Roots*, 126.

⁴ Isidore Okpewho, *African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character and Continuity* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2004), 7.

concerns itself with establishing and defending a theoretical position upon a body of literature. It avoids careless overstatements and amasses data only when the data is useful to the argument being advanced.”⁵

It is important to point out here that Lindfors is speaking in the context of Oral literature. His suggestion on this kind of criticism subjects the critic to the facts encapsulated in the oral material. To Lindfors, it is important that the critic who chooses to adopt this critical approach aligns himself with the tools of interpretation based on the “data” before him. In this connection, it is inferred in the above excerpt that this form of critical evaluation is anchored on “establishing and defending” the aforesaid “data” in order to project a constructive “position” that is reliably sorted from the “body of literature”. The interesting thing about the adoption of this approach is that it does not only task the critic’s innate skills of interpretation, but it also strengthens his linguistic profundities. By so doing, there is an interpretation of “data” that is streamlined according to the facts of the oral material without recourse to “careless overstatements.” From all indications, Lindfors is postulating that the critic in this context must avoid certain pitfalls in order not to skew his interpretation of the oral material.

Moreover, we are further informed that the interpretative critic is pragmatic in his sourcing of oral “data.” This action is informed by his zeal to fortify a “theoretical position” that enhances his “argument” in close relationship with his evidence. It is suggested in the closing lines of Lindfors’s argument that interpretative criticism is necessary for the presentation of “useful” facts as the critic is only bound by the available “data” that is “being advanced.”⁶

The above insight is further elucidated by Lindfors special focus on the interpretative critic himself:

The interpretative critic who studies traditional elements in contemporary African literature is more likely to be interested in investigating their artistic functions or their esthetic and metaphysical implications than in merely validating their existence. He seeks to go beyond the obvious into less accessible regions, sometimes even venturing to use his tools to probe the mysterious

⁵BernthLindfors, *Folklore in Nigerian Literature* (Ibadan: Calptop Publications, 2002), 12. (Subsequent and succeeding quotes and references are from the same source and page unless there is a change of page reference in which case a new footnote is cited)

⁶ Lindfors, *Folklore in Nigeria Literature*, 13.

inner working of the human mind. He is the most adventurous of all critics.⁷

One of the strong points put forward here is that the interpretative critic is an investigator. This investigative character is what Lindfors wants from the critic of “traditional” oral literature. A careful reading of Lindfors’ words draws our attention to how the critic “studies traditional elements in contemporary African Literature.” In the first place, he suggests that the critic must mine the available “data” to answer his questions about the “artistic functions” of a given piece. Moreover, he is tasked with identifying the “esthetic” features as well as the philosophical “implications” of the available oral text. Indeed, it is this demonstration of critical thinking skills that elevate the interpretative critic above the level of the ordinary, concerned with merely recognising or identifying the “existence” of oral material.

Closely related to the above idea is the position of Lindfors that the critic of African oral literature must possess vast imaginative powers. The imagination enables him to dig deep into the “inner” recesses of the “metaphysical implications” of African folklore, to understand the character and sensibilities of the African “mind” as well as the thought-process and emotions underlying the poetry. As this knowledge is attained, the reader becomes equipped with “tools” to understand “the mysterious inner working of the human mind.” The beauty of this idea is that the interpretative critic uses his critical skills to unveil the mysteries in African folkloric elements, while at the same time improving and elevating the reader’s concept of humanity in general. Thus, he may be described further as “the most adventurous of all critics. ”

In the context of African oral poetry, praise poetry has been interpreted variously by different critics. However, the suggestion of Isidore Okpewho is crucial here. He notes that “Praise [poems]...are... those songs which highlight the achievements of the subject of praise or attest those sterling qualities that make a person [or an object] superior to everyone else... [t]he language... is usually lofty and exaggerated.”⁸

It is clear from Okpewho’s statement that praise poems are “songs” of praise. Moreover, it is inferred here that these types of “songs” are meant to emphasize the successes of “the

⁷Lindfors, *Folklore in Nigeria Literature*, 13.

⁸Okpewho, *African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character and Continuity*, 142.

subject of praise". In another way, praise poetry is the medium through which a minstrel underscores those rare "qualities" of excellence that make "a person [or an object]" not only unique but technically better in comparison "to everyone else."

At this juncture, it is important to consider the characteristics of language use in this kind of poetry. To Okpewho, the nature of praise poetry calls for a special kind of diction. This means that the oral artist is charged with the responsibility of using impressive words. Consequently, his songs are pervaded with hyperbolic expressions to emphasize the high moral quality of the "subject of praise." The poem is dominated by "lofty and exaggerated" expressions in order to capture the "superior" and "sterling qualities" of the character being praised. Moreover, these expressions reveal so much about the cultural values and sensibilities of the people and give us a clue into their world-view. Suffice it to say at this point that "praise poetry is also addressed to non-human figures and entities."⁹

The study of the oral performer and performance in Africa is seen as fundamental to understanding African folklore, reconciling the connection between the aestheticist model and sociological model. This point is succinctly put forward by Okpewho who notes that "although there is clearly room for cooperation between the two disciplines in the study of the oral performance, an aestheticist model is not exactly the same thing as sociological model. When a literary scholar investigates an oral narrative event, he should of course explore the social circumstances as an aid to contextual insight..."¹⁰

One of the virtues of this study is the blending of the two models, "aestheticist" and "sociological." In our analysis of the oral materials of the bard, there is a deliberate effort to reconcile the significance of the "contextual insight" of his performance with the literary strength of the available oral data as an intellectual exercise. By so doing, our exploration of the "social circumstances" - the Benin worldview - that informs Uwaifo's performance is underscored. It is this sociological context that facilitates our appreciation of the literary realities of the song-poems, thereby enhancing the "contextual insight" of the oral performance.

⁹Okpewho, *African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character and continuity*, 145.

¹⁰ Isidore Okpewho. "Introduction: The Study of Performance" In: *The Oral Performance in Africa* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1990) 7.

In as much as performance is an ever-present element in African Oral Literature, it is pertinent to note that Uwaifo's performance significantly challenges the visual and oral senses of his audience. In a way, the beauty of his praise song-poems can only be better appreciated through visual and oral skilled performance. This emphasis on the skilled oral performer is what informs the assertion of a critic that "much of what is normally classed as poetry in African Oral Literature is designed to be performed in a musical setting and the musical and verbal elements are thus interdependent."¹¹ Thus Uwaifo's song-poems are products of a "musical setting" as well as the skilful injection of "verbal elements" from his cultural background. Indeed, the bard is a skilled performer not only musically and vocally but also when considered from the visual perspective.

Literature Review

Uwaifo's art has attracted critical scholarship. Okey Okwechime and Efosa Legemah bring out the uniqueness of Uwaifo's song as folkloric material, which serves as an avenue for societal conscientisation/reformation¹². Osakue Stevenson and Daniel Eromosele suggest that supernatural influence was instrumental to Uwaifo's success.¹³ Austin Emielu asserts that the present generation of musical artists can revive and sustain High-life music through allegiance to artistes like Uwaifo.¹⁴ In another essay the critic focuses his attention on the issue of ethnic and regional identities in Uwaifo's songs.¹⁵ Using internationally known musicians such as Uwaifo for tourism development in Nigeria is stressed by Echezona Udoh-Awaih and Okezie Kelechukwu.¹⁶ Still others, notably Odoja Asogwa and Soge Emmanuel Olusegun, examine Uwaifo's prolific

¹¹ Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Cambridge: Open Book publishers, 2012), 7.

¹² Okey Okwechime & Efosa Julius Legemah. "Folkloric Enterprise in Sir. Victor Uwaifo's Music" *Nigerian Journal of oral Literatures*. No 4, August 2017, pp.117-128

¹³ Osakue Stevenson Omoera and Daniel Eromosele Omorua. "The River Goddess and Melody – Makers in Nigeria: A cultural view on Majek Fashek and Victor Uwaifo. *Modern Africa: Politics, history and society*. Vol. 7, No.2, (2019). 31

¹⁴ Austin Emielu. "Issues in the Revival and Sustenance of Highlife Music in Nigeria". *LASU Journal of Humanities*. Vol. 20, June, 2009, pp.29-38

¹⁵ Austin Emielu. "Ethnic and Regional Identities in Nigerian Popular Music: A Special Focus on Edo". *A Paper Presented at the Department of Music and Musicology, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa*, April 2012.

¹⁶ Echezona Adaora Udo-Awaih and Okezie Kelechukwu. "The Role of Music to Tourism Development in Nigeria. *Journal of Tourism and Heritage Studies*. Vol.7, No.2, 2008, pp. 110-122.

works in the visual arts.¹⁷ John Collins considers the legacies of Africa's musical symbolisms to the world through the inspirational songs of Uwaifo and his contemporaries.¹⁸

In the light of the above, a critical investigation of the praise-song poems of Uwaifo, specifically *Iye na gbọn* and *Amẹ* respectively reveals a deliberate and intelligent infusion of "artistic" elements to enhance the "esthetic" quality of oral performance. The beauty embedded in the oral "data" is demonstrated through an in-depth interpretative criticism of each verse in the respective praise poems. This critical interpretation gives us access into the "inner working" of not just the "mind" of the minstrel but also exposes us to the world-view of the Benin people.

Analysis

One of the praise song-poems of Uwaifo that attracts our attention is "*Iye na gbọn*" (Mistress). The rendition is crafted with poetic beauty to the accompaniment of several musical instruments this way:

Iye! Iye! Iye! Iye! Iye!	Miss! Miss! Miss! Miss! Miss!
Iye! Iye! Iye! Iye! Iye!	Miss! Miss! Miss! Miss! Miss!
Iye! Iye! Iye! Iye na gbọn!	Miss! Miss! Miss! Mistress!
Iye! Iye! Iye! Iye na gbọn!	Miss! Miss! Miss! Mistress!
Iye! Iye! Iye! Iye na gbọn!	Miss! Miss! Miss! Mistress!

From the beginning, our attention is held through the skilful introduction of the subject of praise. By way of information, the Edo lexical item *Iye na gbọn* is a pet name for a young unmarried female. Repetition and wordplay suggests that the poet is infatuated with his Mistress, reminding us that "the theme of praise is to a certain extent similar to that of love, for both sentiments are fundamentally based on feeling of admiration for a person or an object."¹⁹ Repetition charges the poem with energy. While the musical atmosphere it evokes strengthens

¹⁷ Odoja Asogwa and Soge Olusegun. "Victor Efosa Uwaifo: A Versatile Artist". *Nsukka Journal of the Humanities*. Vol.23, No.1, 2015, pp.29-40.

¹⁸ John Collins. *African Music Symbolic In. Contemporary Perspective: Roots, Rhythms and Relativity*. Berlin: Business GmbH, 2004.

¹⁹ Okpewho, *African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character and continuity*, 142.

our perception of the bard's thought and infuses a rare note of delight in the poem's construction. Repetition is said to have "both an aesthetic and utilitarian value" in oral literature.²⁰ There is no doubt that the use of this technique underscores the dominant role of *Iye na gbọn* in the minstrel's life. By implication, Uwaifo is revealing to us the sensibilities of the average Benin male lover towards his *Iye na gbọn*. The exclamatory tone that characterises each line of the contracted form "*Iye*" further registers a sense of emotional attachment. The manner in which the exclamatory tone is repeated is not only attractive but also thrilling. Moreover, one must acknowledge the artistic manner in which the minstrel verbally addresses the young woman. The transition from *Iye* (Miss) to *Iye na gbọn* (mistress) stretches our imagination to capture the strong feeling of affection that exists in the relationship.

The artist's expression of praise clothed with affectionate words is vivid in the succeeding stanza. Hear him:

Kpaigbe! Kpaigbe! Iye na <i>gbọn</i>	Wake up! Wake up! Mistress!
Okpa viẹ nẹ; Ikhian rio `wa	The cock has crowed; I want to go home
Miẹ n' ulọka na gbe; nu gha ya ye mwẹn re	Take this corn pudding; so you can always remember me
Ẹdẹ gha munẹ, I gha vbe we rie gbe re.	when it is dusk, I will come back

By now, the listener must realize that the minstrel and his mistress are in the same room. Though not clearly stated, the minstrel has spent the night with his *Iye na gbọn*. The affectionate exchange further charges the atmosphere, while the conversational manner of the song lends it drama. Moreover, the emotional status of the minstrel is further espoused through the exclamatory character of his comment in the first line. He wants his "*Iye na gbọn*" to "*Wake up!*" from sleep. This display of affectionate concern demonstrates the closeness in the relationship.

As the conversation continues, there is the use of bird and auditory imagery in the second line to stress the fact that it is dawn. In traditional African society, the first cry of the cock in the early hours of the day is very significant. Africans used this signal from nature to ascertain time

²⁰Okpewho, *African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character and continuity*, 142

before they set out for the day's business. With poetic creativity and ingenuity, Uwaifo subtly reveals that in Benin, the male lovers normally leave the houses of their mistresses in the early hours of the day, underscoring a cultural sense of responsibility. It resonates with the Benin view of love, emotion and passion properly expressed in privacy at night as well as in contrast with daytime's labour and discipline. This insight aligns with Tanure Ojaide's thought that "in Africa, indigenous knowledge is archived in the folklore whose oral traditions carry profound thoughts and practices."²¹

One is not surprised then that the response of the "mistress" in the succeeding line of the poem underlies the reason behind the lover's praise. Here, the minstrel uses dramatic effects to express the charm and concern of his "mistress." She demonstrates her care through the loving offering of "ulọka" (corn pudding) to her lover. She intends the offering to serve as a strong symbol of her love in order, that the man will continue to cherish her and maintain his presence in her life. In appreciation of her loving and caring qualities, the poet reassures her of his return "when it is dusk." Undoubtedly, the expression in the last line espouses the level of admiration that the poet has for his "mistress."

Although, there is evidence here that the young woman's personality is part of her attraction. The minstrel's admiration for his "mistress" assumes another dimension later in the poem. Hear him:

Ẹnwẹn wẹ ni mu vbo rho	Your well-being is always in my thought
Uki a weere, i na wi vbe de	when the moon appears, I will be back
Elọvu nọ to so so rho	This loving relationship is intoxicating
Iya 'gbọn mwẹn khio ovbi'den	I have become a cat
Egbe wẹ miẹ mwẹn fan;	Your body is compatible with mine
Sikẹmwẹn n'ụ dede mwẹn	Come close and embrace me
I ma mie gbọna'dẹ	I have never felt anything like this before
Sikẹmwẹn n'ụ dede mwẹn	Come close and embrace me

²¹Tanure Ojaide, *Indigeneity, Globalization, and African Literature: Personally speaking* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 170

The dimension of praise here is laced with memories of affectionate physical expressions. Certainly, *Iye na gbọn's* admirable qualities are quite overwhelming to the bard. The expression in the first line makes this evident. As a result, he promises to return "when the moon appears." The use of celestial imagery is instructive for two reasons: First, it underscores the secrecy of the relationship. Second, in traditional African society, "the moon" serves as the light that illuminates one's path when walking in the night.

The expression in the third line encapsulates the essence of the minstrel's praise. The language is loaded with romantic cadences interwoven with animal imagery that further accentuates the poem's amorous atmosphere of this praise poem. Of particular interest here is the domesticated species of the *Felis Catus* in the world of carnivorous animal. In the context of the song-poem, Uwaifo has now become an "ovbi'den". Through his nocturnal activities like the *Felis Catus*, he has developed fantastic night vision with which he hunts for his prey. In a similar manner, his verbal praise could be interpreted as purring sounds of satisfaction and approval for his "mistress" at night. This deft use of language elevates the poetic strength of the verse. Moreover, the succeeding lines of the rendition are suffused with the language of praise and satisfaction. The hyperbolic expression in the penultimate line demonstrates the true status of the poet-artist. He is in love. No wonder he cries out in the last line: "sikemwẹn n' dede mwẹn" (come close and embrace me).

Another praise song-poem that reveals the artistic creativity of Uwaifo is *Do Amẹ Do*. This time, the bard eulogises a non-human figure (water). The introductory lines are borrowed from an Egbọ song-poem²² to capture the attention of the listener. Hear him:

Avba de vba ni ooo?

Who are those coming?

²² Atoe Osabuohien Simeon asserts that the *Egbọ* song-poem used in this context serves as an introductory verse that encapsulates the unique qualities of a particular community and its people. It has reference to a formal introduction before an audience by either a cultural troupe or music group.

He reminds us that the lexical item "*Egbọ*" in Benin transcends its literal meaning of "a thick forest" to a highly philosophical dimension. This insight he avers is seen in the Benin proverb "*Egbọ gha wo, ovbiokhuo o laee*", which means "when a forest assumes its densely status, it's humans that create a path along it". By implication, what is seen as tough, difficult and strong are surpassed by humans. This rare attribute forms the essence of the verse above and informs us of Uwaifo's conception of the Benin culture

Ibieromwan nu ranran zo Ogun	My comrades/ peers that are like molten fine metal
E nọ ma khuẹ, no mo se ooo	One who did not have a bath, yet is beautiful
Ukhu egbe e re a ghe	It is what inheres in the body that is looked at

The reference to traditional orature confirms the cultural foundation of Uwaifo's poetic creativity. The connection between Uwaifo's rendition and Egbó folklore highlights the significance of water for human existence. It is delightful as well that our auditory senses are engaged by the call and response exchanges. In the first line, the poet assumes the position of the Egbó bard with a resounding call suffused with biting rhetoric. The response in the second line is crafted using "hot" imagery. The picture is painted with analogical references. To refine precious "fine metal," a good understanding of gold refining is crucial to appreciate the thoughts here. By implication the "comrades/peers" are invested with beauty as well as figurative value of inherent proportion.

As the rendition continues in the penultimate line above, the depth of their sophisticated beauty is reinforced with hyperbolic suggestion. The construction is loaded with lofty ideas anchored on penetrating verbal intelligence. As a result, our mental acumen is charged to appreciate the philosophical intuition in the last line. The expression encapsulates the unique perception of the Benin people. If anything, it draws our attention to Uwaifo's use of cultural elements to underscore the Benin world-view on critical and insightful evaluation of inherent human values.

Uwaifo's praise for *Amẹ* continues in the successive lines with poetic sophistication and craftsmanship. This time to the accompaniment of gong, flute and drum:

Amẹ no vbi ye gbe	Water is like blood to the body
Do amẹ! amẹ do!	I greet you, water! Water, well done!
Amẹ no vbi ye gbe	Water is like blood to the body
Do amẹ! amẹ do!	I greet you, water! Water, well done!

The strength of the above lines lies in Uwaifo's use of artistic expressions. The biological image captures the essence of water's significance to the Benins. Here "water" and "blood" are seen as having comparable significance for the "body". We are informed that just as we cannot separate ourselves in family relationship because of the "blood" in our veins, "water" is equally a critical part of the body. It is a thing of great novelty and imaginative depth that the minstrel embeds his praise for water – a biological metaphor, thus making clear the inseparable relationship between water and people in the Benin cosmology.

As a result, the use of apostrophe in line two makes it clear that the poet-artist is addressing "water" as if it is both present and animate. The praise of water – a non-human figure – relates to its critical importance for human wellbeing. The references to ecocritical elements speaks to the foundational strength of the Edo people's ecological intelligence and sensibilities. The repetition of the praise as well as the exclamatory mode underscores its rare character and impact. The atmosphere of the song-poem is further strengthened through the technique of repetition. The poet's use of repetition is not mechanical, rather it enhances the musical quality of the poem and stresses the importance of the subject of praise.

The song-poem attains its crescendo as the minstrel croons:

Amẹ ni ma ya khue	Water that we used to have our bath
Do amẹ! Amẹ do!	I greet you water! Water well done!
Amẹ no vbi ye gbe	Water is like blood to the body
Do amẹ! Amẹ do!	I greet you water! Water well done!
Oh! Oh! Oh! Ah!	Oh! Oh! Oh! Ah!
Ẹhẹn! Ẹhẹn! Ẹhẹn! Ẹhẹn!	Ẹhẹn! Ẹhẹn! Ẹhẹn! Ẹhẹn!
Eẹh! Eẹh! Eẹh! Eẹh! Eẹh! Eẹh!	Eeh! Eeh! Eeh! Eeh! Eeh! Eeh!

In the first line, the minstrel acknowledges one of the critical qualities of water to humankind. The expression is direct, elevating the liquid's uniqueness and giving the song its universal appeal. Uwaifo has turned an ordinary subject into one that is sublime. The strength of

this song-poem lies in its transcending the borders and boundaries of human imaginations. Its originality lies within its cultural heritage, underscoring the point that “although poetry is universal, the forms and conventions within and through which it manifests itself vary from society to society, from period to period and from culture to culture.”²³ Moreover, the poem’s charm rests on its relevance to our everyday lives, drawing our attention to the imaginative powers of Uwaifo.

The work’s melodious and rhythmic tempo becomes effectual in the poem’s concluding triplet. A discerning listener realizes that these lines contribute to the beauty of the rhythmic flow. The emotional energy and beat is best appreciated by listening rather than just reading. This thought aligns with the views of Romanus Egudu that rhythm “plays a significant role in poetry because it intensifies emotions... [it] not only expresses emotion in poetry; it can also facilitate our understanding and appreciation of the theme of a poem.”²⁴ Thus, this poem’s regular rhythmic codes generate emotional beauty, expand “our understanding and appreciation” of *Amẹ*. Besides, it also indicates the joy in water evoked by “a special kind of beat, pulse, movement, or rhythm.”²⁵ The admiration generated by these musical qualities underscores the huge place of oral poetry in contemporary African discourse.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that Uwaifo’s minstrelsy within the purview of praise performance and tradition exposes and draws on the cultural heritage of his people – in terms of love, emotion, passion, labour, dignity, ecological consciousness and intelligence. He does that in a particular artistic manner. From stanza to stanza, the song-poems are laced with vivid pictures and dramatic conversations to elucidate the character of the subject of praise. In the process, we are led into the minds of the Benin cultural personality and its relationships with diverse emotional sensibilities.

It is our position here that Uwaifo’s song-poems epitomize the universal appeal of cultural productions. The central focus of the works illuminates the bard’s imaginative intelligence and

²³F.B.O. Akporobaro, *Introduction to African Oral Literature* (Ikeja: Princeton Publishers, 2006), 304

²⁴Roman Egudu, *The Study of Poetry* (Ibadan : University Press, 2007), 46

²⁵Egudu, 8.

testifies to the robust nature of Benin cultural values, enabling our imaginative acceptance of their beliefs in the powers of nature. In addition, our analyses also highlight the Benin metaphysical understanding of beauty.

Finally, we must commend the artist's use of poetic elements in his praise verses. His use of repetition, metaphor, hyperbole, simile, musical devices and diverse images contributes a great deal to the production of these classic works. In the end, it is the combination of poetic sophistication and delivery of Uwaifo's singing that makes him a quintessential minstrel of Benin cultural values specifically and African oral traditions in general.

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Mr. Atoe Osabuohien Simeon. A 72 year-old/ Retired School Principal in Orhonigbe, Orhionmwon Local Government Area, Edo state, Nigeria. *Personal communication*. 25th May, 2020.