

A Semiotic Study of Court Poetry Performance in Nigeria: Text and Context¹

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The tradition and performance of court poetry is popular in Nigeria. This paper examines its performance in four geographical locations where monarchy thrives in the country. It is observed that court poetry performance consists of explicit and implicit systems of communication that are linguistic, paralinguistic, kinesics and para-kinesics. These features orchestrate court poetry discourse. It is against this background that the paper discusses the process of information exchange in court poetry performance in Nigeria. It highlights in particular how kinesics factors responsible for body motion communication such as movements, gestures, postures, silences and break enter into mutual relation with literary language for meaning making. The paper also reveals that in the performance of court poetry, the context and the ingenuity of the poet largely influences his/her ability to shape and reshape his/her text. It also shows that the characteristic of each performance determines its text and context.

1. Introduction: The Tradition of Court Poetry in Nigeria

In societies where monarchy thrives in Nigeria, both professional and non-professional praise singers are attached to the institution. According to tradition, specific families or clans known to specialize in this area are called court poets. Finnegan (1970) explains that they are trained to record in oral verses the great achievements of the king and his ancestors. In traditional Benin society of Midwestern Nigeria, professional court poets are called Ughoron literally meaning men of heaven's gate². In Òyó community of western Nigeria, one of such poets is called akígbe oba (king's herald)³. In Bomo village of northern Nigeria, such poets are called maroka or town criers⁴. So also in Idah, Igala community, there are Amachodochi Atta and Amafokakachi Atta⁵. These are the drummers and trumpeters of Atta who give him honour. These men live in the court or come early to the court in order to praise the king. They stay at the entrance of the court so that all things can pass through their watchful eyes. In Igalaland of central Nigeria, performance starts in the morning with greetings for Atta:

Gaabaidu,
Olodudu o
Atta moluji.

(Lion,
Good morning
Wake up Atta).

Besides, court poets announce the arrival of visitors both verbally and rhythmically on the drum. In addition, court poets herald the arrival of the king and chronicle his achievements and those of his ancestors. When the need arises, they pass scathing comments

about the king. Apart from the professional court poets, queens and princesses also sing special praises for the kings.

The context of the performance of these poems varies from place to place. It ranges from daily performance to festive ones and from the profane to the sacred. (Olateju 1988 and Akinyemi 1997).

2. Process of Information Exchange

There are explicit and implicit systems of communication, which account for the semiotics of court poetry performance in Nigeria. The process of information exchange includes linguistic and paralinguistic constructs which send various signals. Both transmit messages in a two-way delivery - response transaction which involves the performer and audience. For the purpose of this paper, the examination of the process of information exchange will be considered on two main systems: performance and linguistic which have no marked boundaries between them. Units from both systems are attached through the use of codes, which include proxemic, vestimentary, general kinesics and musical. These codes are intimately connected and complement one another in the content and kinesics continuum of court poetry performance.

Performance is an artistic and creative process through which court poetry comes alive. It is an activity which is based on the praise of the monarch. While Derrida (1978) asserts that performance is repetition of an action (247), Schechner (1982) considers it as restored behaviour (40). Despite this, each performance is unique in its own way. It is not a repetition of another one like it. It is a collective activity, which involves one or more performers and an audience. As an activity, performance in court poetry arises within its social context. It is creative, realized, achieved and transcendent of the ordinary course of events. Schechner (1982) opines that it has become what the book was: "an index, a symbol, multiple truths and lies.... behaviour heightened" (1). He explains further that performance is amoral and its amorality comes from its subject and transformation. This is a startling ability in man to recreate himself and to change or become what he ordinarily is not by assuming roles. For example, in court poetry performance from Yorùbá (Òyó), the royal wives assume different roles: poets, drummers, singers and dancers all at once. Drewal (1992) contends that these transformations happen in a light mood which refreshes and loosens the tightness of the performance. Hence, performance in court poetry is an underlying process of off balancing, loosening, bending, twisting, reconfiguring and transforming the permeating eruptive or disruptive energy and mood below and to the sides of focused attention. Playing becomes an integral part of court poetry performance for the purpose of compelling as definite mood and attitude. In the process, performer and audience consciously and unconsciously engage in semiosis. Semiotics is the science of sign and sign systems. It is a study of systems of communication which could be linguistic or non-linguistic (Piere Guiraud 1975). Its focus is in how these systems operate mutually or separately in order to produce meaning. The contributions of de Saussure (1915) and Peirce (1940) to semiology cannot be overemphasized. In his own contribution, de Saussure explains that behind and beyond language lays a whole range of sign systems. He opines that words are signs which have two sides: a mark, which he calls the 'signifier' and a concept which he calls the signified. The signifier is the sign vehicle while the signified is the meaning. In this theory, things have no place but words acquire meaning as they enter a system of relations. Words have meaning only in the context of the language system in which they operate. de Saussure explains further that semiology teaches what signs are and also the rules that govern them as we stated earlier in the study. Thus, a sign is implicitly regarded as a communicative device between two human beings intentionally aiming to communicate or express something. This is not always

the case in court poetry performance, because sometimes, meanings not intended by the performer may be seen by the audience.

de Saussure extends his notion of signs and codes to social communications; so he emphasizes the social functions of signs in sign systems such as code of manners and symbolic rites. Firstly, he distinguishes between three types of signs: iconic - that which has resemblance to its referent, indexical that which has association with its referent, and symbolic that which has arbitrary relationship with its referent (Selden and Widdowson 1993). Thus, he defines semiotics as an action or an influence which involves a co-operation of three subjects or three abstract entities: 'sign', 'object' and 'interpretant'. Secondly, he shows that a sign never arrives at a definite meaning: any definition is subject to further definition. de Saussure's position does not take cognizance of human subjects that are involved in the process of coding and decoding of signs. These human subjects are crucial to court poetry performance. Eco's (1976) theory of semiotics takes into account a broader range of sign phenomena. He defines a sign as "everything that ... can be taken as standing for something else" (16). Guiraud's (1975) position, corroborates Eco's assertion that a sign function communicates ideas through a message when, according to Eco, "two functions: expression and content enter into a mutual correlation." Both information content and its corollary redundancy account for meaning. Thus, communication takes place on different levels at the same time. All these are significant aspects of meaning making. Eco adds that the message evokes possible interpretations by possible interpreters. He says further that the human addressee is the "methodological guarantee of the existence of signification." He emphasizes the process of communication, the message and the interpreter. The attention given to the human is crucial to court poetry performance as we observed earlier. This is because the signification process involves a two-way delivery - response transaction between the performer and audience. This transaction facilitates intelligibility of texts-in-context.

In general terms, this transaction can be described as transmission of signals from addresser to addressee and vice-versa. The function of the sign is to communicate ideas through messages. This implies that for communication to take place, there must be a 'referent, a sign, a code, a means of transmission and obviously, an emitter and receiver' (Guiraud 1975). The initial factor is the source of information. In court poetry performance, the source may be the poet or a musical instrument like drum, gong, calabash or such paralinguistic constructs as noise, clap or smile. It could also be a state of affairs. The transmitter could be the voice or body of the poet or his audience which he manipulates to emit signals along channels. The performance is made up of multiple messages which pass through several channels such as music or poetry. During its passage, the signs are boosted by sound and noise. These signs are arranged syntactically for formal and thematic unity. The receiver picks up the signal and interprets the complex messages as an integrated text. This is thereby converted into a coherent message that is comprehensible to the 'destination'. The receiver in turn assumes the role of the transmitter of signals to the performer through his/her laughter/applause as was the case during the performance of kirari (praise) by the chief's wives in Bomo (Hausa). This feed back system and inter communication between performer and audience is one of the major features of court poetry performance.

3. Content - Code Dialectics

The performance of court poetry shows a dialectical inter-relationship between content and code. One must assume therefore, that semantics of verbal language cannot be outlined unless one accepts as a general background, the intertwined influence of many semiotic codes. In the content continuum, ideas are expressed through formal devices. According to the Russian formalist, Shklovsky (1917), poetic speech uses formal devices in a way that our perception and sound texture of ordinary language is renewed. When this is done, the familiar becomes de-familiarized. It is for this reason that Shklovsky asserts that “de-familiarization is found everywhere form is found.” Similar to the Russian formalists’ notion of de-familiarization, the court poet makes strange in order to describe something which the addressee has seen and recognized many times. In the Benin court poem below, the poet makes the monarch look strange as if the audience is seeing him for the first time. Besides, the text draws attention to itself through its use of repetition.

Ne o ren Oba
Ne I ma ere re
Oba hin ukpo
O mu ukpo yan ukpo
Ikueken nu ke aro ne
Ikueken nu ke iyeke nee
Nikere gha gbe ezuzu

(Those who do not know the great Oba
Let me show them the Oba
The great one who sits on the throne
He sits on the pavilion,
Many servants sit before him,
Many servants sit behind him,
While many others fan him)

The semantic quality derives from the feeling of suspicion that one gets each time an expression is repeated, it means something different. The feeling of ambiguity on the other hand, is suggested by the excess of expressive redundancy which violates a stylistic norm. The repetition shows an ambiguous arrangement which provokes a reassessment of the text. Thus, the redundancy of the lexical items stands for semantic complication on the definitional level. The mode of semiological expression is emotive, subjective and expressive. Besides, in the content continuum, references are made to past and present monarchs through different semantic markers. Here is an example from Òyó (Yoruba):

Kinní yíí, kinní yíí
Kinní oníyèyè yíí
Kinní alábùkù yíí,
Afolábí

(This thing, this thing,
This Shameless thing,
This dishonoured thing,
Afolábí)

The verbal index this, is a semantic code which denotes closeness. In its usage in these lines, it excludes physical connection with the referent, Afolábí and considers closeness as a signified content. It is an expressive sign which is naturally motivated, concrete and analogical. In one of the performances in Bomo, the monarch was ‘mentioned’ and referred to through the expression:

Salihu dan Salihu,
Sarki mai ba da riga,

(Alhaji Salihu, the son of Salihu,
The Sarki that gives clothes,)

The process of mentioning involves the use of an indexical device: a pointed finger coupled with a directional glance. The pointed finger is produced by an aggregation of combinational units like the verbal expression Alhaji Salihu

This directional feature orientates the attention of the addressee from left to right. Spatial parameter is used as combination unit in the performance. The process of giving prominence is a gesture of showing, which foregrounds this bit of the performance from the rest of the text. Besides, it is a process of making ‘strange’, a process of de-familiarization. This bears resemblance to the Russian formalists’ notion of ‘ostranemic’ or de-familiarization (Bennett 1979). In Òyó (Yorùbá), the process of mentioning and introducing monarchs in old and new Òyó Kingdom involves this linguistic shifter. This is what Scholes in *Structuralism in Literature* calls ‘code of puzzles’ (1976). It is used as an aspect of narrative syntax which consists of hermeneutic code:

Ó wá dorí taa ni?
Ó dorí Aseéperí Gíwá,
Súúlólá, Mówánwá...
Ó wá dorí taa ni?
Ó dorí Afolábí...
Ó wá dorí taa ni?
Adéyanjú o kú o Dèjì?...
Ó wá dorí taa ni?
Láyíwolá n be nílé Láyíoyè...

(Whose turn was it?
It was Aseéperí, Gíwá,
Súúlólá, Mówánwá...
Whose turn was it?
It was Afolábí...
Whose turn was it?
Adéyanjú, how are you Dèjì?...
Whose turn was it?
Láyíwolá is at home, Láyíoyè)

The question - intonation is a vectorization which involves increasing the vocal pitch and dynamics in paralinguistic feature. This is a lexical system in which signs are in intersecting relationship. They include both meaning and information. Meaning comes out of that information. In Adeboye Babalola’s performance of the poem, it is combined with musical melody. Drums and musical instruments that are used in court poetry performance are what Peirce describes as indexes, because they are associated with monarchs. As soon as

they are beaten, listeners immediately recognize the 'presence' of the king even without seeing him, because the sign (drum) and the referent (monarch) are associated (Selden and Widdowson 1993:105). In Bomo, Alhaji Makama started his performance with an indexical sign from his drum, *gangan noma*⁶ a big round drum that is beaten with gongs simultaneously. As soon as the drum is beaten, the people understand that a performance is about to begin. In Igala, music is produced by a team of male instrumentalists and female vocalists. In a male/female binary opposition complimentary, the women sang, and danced round in circles while the men beat the drums. The men beat with drum sticks, two big round drums, called *okaga*⁷, beaten only for the monarch. In Òyó, the musical instrument called *àáró* is an important one. It is iron cast into a shape like that of a nymph. Two of such are struck together at intervals during performance. In an oral interview with the court poet, he explains that *àáró* has a spiritual connection with the procreation of the monarch. The instrument, *àáró*, is a symbolic and personal code which physically, has an arbitrary relationship with the procreation of the monarch (Selden and Widdowson, 1993). But its spiritual connection is far from being arbitrary for its weekly usage 'ensures' the procreation of members of that royal lineage. In the monarch's unconscious mind therefore, '*àáró*' exists for him as a source of procreation and he ensures its weekly usage. The instruments used in different performances produce signs with explicit denotative and connotative values. Music in court poetry draws the attention of the audience. In Bomo (Hausa), the audience comes in ones and twos until a large crowd is formed. These musical codes enhance both the proxemic and vestimentary ones which are part of the setting of the performance. There are rules governing costumes in terms of status and character of performers. It was popularized by Barthes. In his theory of semiotics, Barthes says that pieces of garments which cannot be worn together belong to a system and pieces which can be fitted and worn together are syntagm. Both of them work like language. Barthes explains that the fitting together of clothes is a mode of communication which sends signals through codes. What Terence Hawkes (1977) refers to as 'symbolic codes'; that is, codes which give people recognizable groupings and configurations (117), fits Barthes' description of syntagm. In the performance by the Isikhuan women guild in Benin, the lead singers wore a crown-like hair do and *aso-òkè*⁸ round their chests. This differentiates them from other singers. The other singers dress in a uniform of *ankara*⁹ made into traditional *ìró* and *bùbá*¹⁰. In Igala, the costume of the male performers is blue and red *ayala*¹¹ (flowing gown) with a cap of the same material. In Bomo, the court poet dresses in *babariga*¹² with a matching cap. The *babariga*, *ayala*, trousers and *ànkàrá* uniforms fit together to make a particular kind of utterance and to evoke the impression that the performers are professionals and significant subjects. These clothes in general are replicable stylizations with inter-twined pseudo-combinational units and programmed stimuli. These vestimentary codes combine with proxemic ones to form the background for the performance. The uniforms are codes which denote the marks and functions of each of the performers and connote the prestige and authority that is attached to each rank and function (Guiraud 1975).

The spatial arrangement of the stage is a crucial semiotic element. In the organisation of space, the stage in court poetry is first of all an empty or open space that is distinguished by the presence of the court poet and his audience. It is public and informal without any fixed fixture but with few semi-fixed ones such as drums, trumpets, calabash and other instruments earlier mentioned. The first striking factor is the physical organisation of the empty space in a circular form. This removes every demarcation and restriction between audience and performer, hence no proscenium arch exists between them. This facilitates stage-audience closeness (Scheub 1977).

This use of space represents a semiotically loaded choice subject to powerful rules which generate a range of cultural units. Hall refers to this arrangement and the interpersonal relation as proxemic (1966). Furthermore, this paper corroborates Sékoní's (1990) view that in oral performance, the performer and the audience are united in their perception of the world. This psycho-social setting facilitates easy interaction between audience and performer. Performance in court poetry is a therapeutic technique which is used to uncover the unconscious of the monarch. This unconscious is often expressed in poetry. The ego of the monarch is boosted by the 'praises' of the poet. The text satisfies the unconscious wishes of the monarch. In some cases, the performer invokes another 'world' or realm and transports the audience to this realm. For example, when he evokes the monarch's progenitors as the performer did during Yùngbà chant, she/he takes the audience to the spiritual realm. Performance therefore creates an exotic reverie, or an evasion into a realm of 'wishes'.

Predictably, the audience responds as a unit to the spectacle and even exerts a dynamic influence on the performer's text in both participatory and critical capacities. As a result of this, the text is communally constructed by both the poet and the audience. During the performance in Bomo, the poet engaged his audience in this conversation. This dialectal influence is a hermeneutic code which expands his text:

Solo: Na ne waziri na nan?
Isah Waziri Babba

Dan maro ki jikan maroki
An yi da kai jiya

Shekaranjiya ma an yi da kai
Chorus: Isah Waziri Babba
Solo: Limamin garin yana nan?

Solo: Is Waziri around I inquire?
Isah the senior 'Waziri',

The offspring and grand child of the riot
You were actively involved yesterday and also last year, you were actively involved.

Chorus: Isah the senior 'Waziri'
Solo: Is Imam of the town around?)

The audience's response through the pointing of finger to the two chiefs informed his praise of them. Other paralinguistic constructs such as laughter, clap, dance, pasting of naira notes and shouts were signals that greeted the success of Alhaji Makama during his performance. This is a combination of visual and tactile communication, which constitutes one level of the audience's participation and encouragement. On the other hand, in his critical capacity, the audience shouted at the poet to stop when the monarch wanted to address them. In this way, the audience is the prime mover and determiner of the text and context. Their reaction whether participatory or critical, alternately prompts the narrator to expand or shorten his text and performance. Despite the encouragement or discouragement that the performer receives from the audience, he still makes effort to steady himself and not be distracted from his flow of thought, contextuality and logic. If this is badly managed, the poet could end up being a failure in practical aesthetic terms. It is for this reason that the court poet puts his ingenuity

4. Improvisation in Performance

A. Frost and R. Yarrow (1990) opined that improvisation is not just a style or a performance technique. It is a dynamic principle operating in different spheres. It is a transformative way of being or doing, a skill of using body, space and human resources to express ideas. Court poets do these in various ways. They learn praise chants of monarchs and war lords largely from oral sources. They, in turn, transmit it through oral performance. Each performance involves both recitation as well as spontaneous composition. Materials from the past are repeated, elaborated and contracted through selection and matching of relevant lines while new ones are created at every performance. Thus, each performance of a single praise chant is never verbally identical with another like it. In my recordings, the praise chants of Lawarikan, a hero of old Òyó kingdom which were recorded twice show similarities and differences. Each performance of this particular subject's chants is similar but the units are to a greater or lesser degree differently selected, ordered and differently worded. This shows the inventiveness of the performer. In composing his text, the court poet does not rely solely on the oral information passed to him. He draws from his knowledge of the stock language and imagery. The text is composed spontaneously by formulaic selection, determined by relevant and immediate topicality in the course of the performance.

The performer adds new information by way of expansion and substitution. Ayòdádé Babalolá, the rárà chanter of Aláàfin Lámídì Adéyemí of Òyó informed this researcher in an interview, that when the Aláàfin took a new wife and bought a new car, and acquired a new property, he added this information to his praise chant. These pieces of information are new materials that are peculiarly Adeyemi's achievements and hence, in his praise. Besides, there are abstract-pattern sentences into which the chanter can substitute a great number of words. In this example from Igala, the chanter maintains a pattern into which words are substituted:

Ojo gwo Atta
Amideju
Ogbe gwo Atta
Amideju
Eju gwo Atta
Amideju

(God greets Atta
Let me live
Ogbe greets Atta
Let me live
Eju greets Atta
Let me live)

In the pattern here, the fixed words are to Atta or greet Atta. The individual creative consciousness of the poet plays a large role in reshaping themes and motifs drawn from a common repertoire. The poet has scope to recast his/her materials, recombine them and add new elements by borrowing, adapting and sometimes by fresh composition. Court poets in Òyó mix their linguistic codes. Ayòdádé Babalolá mixes his poem which is chanted in Òyó dialect with English words.

Kábíyèsí se bẹ̀ẹ̀ ó bó sààfin baba re,
Wón njoba lo, kını wón ò se

Àtandá ti lo twenty-five.

(His Royal Highness is king,
And still king, what will they do?
Atanda has spent twenty-five years.)

Besides, the poets invent generic codes. The underlying genial is praise but this is mixed with proverbs, incantations and homage in the performance by the royal wives. At such points the performance becomes esoteric and figurative:

Ìbà ò o, mo júbà o o
Ìbà òrìsà, mo júbà o o
K'óba ó jé òòsà, àdúà ó dà o o,
Ìròkò e e e,
K'óba ó jé òòsà àdúà ó dà.

(Homage Oh! I pay homage Oh!
Homage to the divinity, I pay homage
Let prayer will be answered oh,
The King be a divinity)

Eh eh eh ìròkò,
May the king be divined for prayer efficacy?)

Coupled with this, the poet's good and charming voice and facility with language attract his audience. In addition, his idiosyncrasies and other ideolectal and dialectal influences serve as materials for the evocation of a poetic experience. Audience's attention is sustained through the introduction of variety of songs, drumming and clapping. Babalola, for example subtly discourages boredom through such varieties of accompaniment that readily provoke his audience's fear or anger or joy as the case may be:

Ó dorí Afolábí
Ààrinolá Kábíyèsí,
baba kábíyèsí oko Móyíólá,
Afolábí Bóorépò
Bólájókòó Aláàfin ìdera ni,
Oba l'omo Láwoyin...

Òtè ìgboro, òtè Òyó
Ó gbe baba d'élésà níjósí...

Àwon èyàn jànkàn
jànkàn, Afolábí
Wón ní retí kí baba
Kábíyèsí ó wálé...

Àárò kan kùtù kùtù
fèèrè ilè ní mó,
Ààrinolá nla gbókú
oko ìyá níkolà...

(It was the turn of Afolábí
Ààrinolá, father I salute
you, husband of Móyíólá
Afolábí Bóorépò
Bólájókòdó Aláàfin, the pleasant one
Láwóyín's son was a great king...

Public conspiracy, the conspiracy in Òyó
Took father to Ilésà once...
Important people
were expecting the King at home,
They were expecting His
royal majesty, Afolábí...

One early morning,
at dawn,
Ààrinolá we heard about the demise of the
husband of tribal marks maker...)

Poetic images in the above lines, like what Sekoni (1990) describes about oral tales, are patterned in such a way that subsequent images vary the audience's attention through the employment of suspense. The image of nobility conjures an apparent feeling of pride. This, again, is contrasted with the compelling topicality of conspiracy that led to the King's exile and subsequent death, at which point the graph drops sharply creating the emotion of sorrow. This is a very effective technique: a movement from grace, nobility and power through suspense, fear and hope to sorrow and despair. Thus, intermittently, the poet activates, stabilizes and depresses the audience's sensibilities through this provocation of variegated emotions (Sekoni 1990). The poet uses his body, space, and all human resources to generate coherent physical expression of the idea, situation and subject of this praise. He does it spontaneously in response to the immediate stimulus of his environment, and he does it as if taken by surprise or without preconceptions. This skill of using bodies, space and human resources is fundamental to court poetry performance. Although he works within a framework of oral materials, he makes up new ones. In addition, he responds physically and verbally. He integrates with the environment or context. And consequently, he expresses that context in the most appropriate shape, thereby making it recognizable to others. Thus, court poets embrace movement when words are not adequate.

5. Body - Motion Communication: Kinesics Factors

The kinesics components of court poetry performance are movements, gestures, facial expressions and postures. These components are better appreciated within a conception of kinesics discourse governed by global syntactic relations and a range of possible communicative functions. Of these, the most notable is the para-kinesics signal, which makes statements about the context of the message situation (Birdwhistell 1971:117). Such signals do not only draw attention to the court poet, they also designate him in an interaction sequence. An important one is deictic gesture, which indicates the poet and his relation to the state. This is the primary means whereby the spatial orientations of the body are established. In court poetry performance, the sign, which indicates the presence of the stage in Bomo, is the drum and then the audience who comes in ones and twos.

Gesture constitutes the ostending body state and on stage space. Thus, it is through the deixis that an important bridge is set up between gesture and speech. Except in extreme cases of gestural autonomy (mime), the two cooperate in the production of poetic discourse. This was the case in Bomo when speech combined with mime. One of the characteristics of the para-kinesics signals is that it cross - references in a number of ways. Kinesics markers accompany language - related signals. Alhaji Makama, the court poet of Sarkin Bomo uses pre-nominal markers during his performance. He moves forward and backward in front of Sarki and points a finger, closes and opens his two palms wide as if saying give way. The pointed finger is a code which Barthes calls 'code of semes'. According to Hawkes (1977), this is a code of connotations which utilizes hints or 'flickers of meaning' generated by certain signifiers (117).

Makama announces Sarki's arrival:

Sarki ya fito
Alhaji Salihu dan Salihu
Mai garin Bomo, Alhaji Salihu

(The king has come out
Alhaji Salihu the offspring of Salihu
The emir of Bomo, Alhaji Salihu).

Thus the 'I' poetic persona and the here and now of the dramatic communicative context are related to the actor's body through the gesture which accompanies the utterance. Thus it is Alhaji Makama's gesture, which materializes the poetic subject and his world by asserting his identity with and actual body and actual space. Apart from these, court poets use illocutionary markers, which indicate the intention of a given utterance in the poems. The gesture or simultaneous movement, which accompanies the utterance, actually emphasize or even define the kind of speech act in the performance by the poets. During the performance of *Ìgbàtiti* (hitting the calabash), by the royal wives in *Òyó* (Yoruba), the performance of these lines is accompanied with a stretch of their heads and mouth forward and a stretch of the hand at the male audience and particularly the King:

Á à Afolábí èké l'ókìùnrin ò e
(À á Afolábí men are backbiters)

This gesture serves to emphasize that the utterance is an ironical comment; a mockery of the character of Afolábí, one of the past kings of *Òyó*. On hearing this line, the *Aláàfin* who understands that this private code refers to his father Afolábí, moves swiftly to the microphone and sings in response:

Á à Afolábí èké l'obìnrin ò e
(À á Afolábí women are backbiters)

He also stretches out his hands to the women folk as he sings.

So strongly conventionalized is the participation of gesture in the illocutionary acts that in court poetry performance, kinesics stands alone. In Bomo village, a Hausa community, when Alhaji Makama wanted to start, he looked straight into the eyes of his co-performers. He informed me that whenever anything goes wrong during any of his performances he signifies to his co-performers through a straight look. The importance of these attitudinal

markers to court poetry performance is that they permit a given interpersonal relationship during performance.

Individual poets establish personal kinesic styles or idiolects. In court poetry performance, selected characteristic features of social movement are heightened or exaggerated so as to increase their very sociality. Thus, the subject-defining, attention-drawing and intention-stressing functions of kinesics markers are emphasized in order to maximize their ostensive potential. In Òyó and Bomo, the attention-drawing kinesics construct is dance. This is sometimes accompanied with song. Both audience and poet engage in this. Queen Ramotu of Òyó moves her hip to the left and then to the right during performance. In Bomo, the audience spontaneously formed a dance troupe, which changed hands from time to time. Each dancer has a hoe. The dancer raises one leg-in front, and then bends down with the hoe moving between the air and the earth in a manner that mimics the act of ridge making. Each dancer makes an imaginary ridge as he moves swiftly from left to right and right to left. There is a high degree of intra-group reciprocity in this type of performance. Thus through their movement, they tell the story of their economy which is agriculture. For them, these are everyday gestures which are put in the context that make the spectator think differently about the variety of communication media which are engendered by the context of the performance. Besides, the audience laughs, smiles, shouts, cheers, claps, sings, and dances as signs of approval. These signs of approval determine the tempo of the performance. All the recorded performances in the present research show instances of this.

Silences and breaks also serve as important markers during court poetry performance. During Yùngbà (melodious) chant of different kings in old and new Òyó Empire, queen Ràmótù indexes the end of one chant and the beginning of another by her silence. At the end of each praise, she keeps silent and takes a break. She then moves to the praise chant of another king, through the use of the verbal marker Hin-in (Oh! Yes). As soon as she begins this, her co-performers join her and continue the chant. The various court poets in our research take different postures. In Igala court poetry performance, the women dance round in circles as they chanted the praise of Atta. The men, in the same performance play different musical instruments. Alhaji Makama of Bomo beats his drum, bends double, and moves up and down again. He makes a loud bang which he echoes in the sound hey! This is a stimulus. This given stimulus corresponds to a given foreseeable reaction that he expressly aims to elicit. Thus, this programmed stimulus is the expression plane of a supposed effect function as its content plane. The posture shows the poets familiarity and excitement with his chant. Adéoyè Babalolá of the court of Oba Lámìdì, Aláàfin of Òyó, sits at the entrance of the palace and raises his voice in a tone higher than ordinary utterance. He puts his hand to his mouth in an attempt to enhance the acoustic level of his voice.

Apart from phonemic and syntactic structure, the poet further endows his performance with certain vocalic characteristics. Such paralinguistic or suprasegmental features as loudness, tempo, timbre and non-verbal sound enhance court poetry performance. They supply essential information regarding the poet's state, intentions and attitudes. David Abercombie (1968) explains that they serve further in conjunction with kinesics factors to disambiguate the speech act: the conversational use of spoken language cannot be properly understood unless these paralinguistic elements are taken into account. Adéoyè Babalolá of Òyó palace chants on a loud, high pitch and fast rate. He constantly regulates his pitch, tempo, loudness, resources and rhythm to reflect his psychological and emotional state. The chief's wives in Bomo (Hausa), chant Sarki's praise on a moderately low pitch at a moderately slow rate and a moderately resonant timber. This is done on a regular rhythmical pattern.

During Yùngbà chant, when the spirits of past and present Kings in Òyó Kingdom are evoked, the royal wives chant with a softly loud voice, on a low pitch, at a slow rate, a

resonant timbre and with irregular pauses. This is because of the feeling of sadness which the chant arouses. Ìgbàtiti on the other hand is performed in an atmosphere of cheerfulness. Thus, it is rendered on a moderately high pitch and voice, at a moderately fast rate on a regular rhythm and a moderately blaring timbre. Thus the text and the context determine the vocalic characteristic of each performance.

This paralinguistic handling by the poet regulates the flow of semantic information and varies the presentation of content according to degree and kind of attention required. The pitch and intensity of vocalization are indices of the poets' emotional state and of their attitudinal colouring. Thus, court poetry gets its meaning through linguistic, paralinguistic, kinesics and para-kinesics features with which the poet orchestrates his discourse as it is illustrated above.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we have examined the explicit and implicit systems of communication, which account for the semiotics of court poetry. These include linguistic and paralinguistic constructs which enhance one another in performance. We observe that there are no marked boundaries between them. Signs from different communication systems enter into mutual relations so that a message can be passed across. In addition, we have identified how signs from different systems communicate messages in a two way transaction between the poet and the audience. These signs include vestimentary, musical, kinesics and proxemic ones. They are composed and presented by both performer and audience in a two-way delivery system. In an attempt to show this, we foreground the discourse in universal syntactic relations and a range of possible communicative functions.

Notes

¹Nigeria is a West African country that is inhabited by about 120 million people with hundreds of different languages. Its three major national languages are Hausa, Yorùbá and Igbo. This paper is based on a Ph.D. research into court poetry in Nigeria. Its focus is on selected areas where monarchy thrives. These areas are Idah in central Nigeria, Bomo in Northern Nigeria, Oyo in South-western Nigeria and Benin in mid-western Nigeria. The court poems quoted in the paper are those collected from these areas during the research.

²Ughoron: Edo name for court poets

³Akígbe oba: Yorùbá name for court poets

⁴Maroka: Hausa name for court poets

⁵Amachodochi Atta and Amafokakachi Atta: Igala name for men who praise the king, Atta

⁶Gangan noma: a big round drum used in Bomo for court poetry performance.

⁷Okaga: two big drums used in Idah for court poetry performance.

⁸Aso-Òkè: locally made, woven, expensive material that is popular around the Yoruba speaking areas of Nigeria. It is worn on special occasions.

⁹Ankara: Yoruba pronunciation of 'Accra'; and the name given to a cotton material which was originally manufactured in the city of Accra. The material has become popular in Nigeria new and is also manufactured locally. The origin is not Yorùbá. It originated from Accra (Ghana). The clothe is manufactured in Accra that is why it is called Accra.

¹⁰Ìró & Bùbá: Yoruba words for wrapper and top. This is a local style of attire worn by women in the South Western part of Nigeria.

¹¹Ayala: Igala word for a flowing gown worn by men. It is popular among the Igala people of the middle belt zone of Nigeria.

¹²Babariga: Hausa word for a flowing gown worn by men. It is common among the Hausa people of Northern Nigeria.

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