

**TOWARD THE CLASSIFICATION OF SPECIAL PURPOSE ORAL POETRY:  
WAR, WORK AND MARRIAGE.**

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**Abstract**

In African poetry, some subjects are regarded to be of particular significance than others. It has been identified that different groups of poetry in Africa include those associated with secret societies, various types of associations, initiation, begging, masquerades and common songs about cattle and cattle herding. The study identifies 'work', 'war' and 'marriage' as topics with particular interest for many African societies and as such gave rise to specialized poetry. It further observes that songs that accompany work, she notes, are common in Africa and deserve treatment by their sheer quality. The study concludes that special purpose poetry is poetry of songs used in warfare, hunting and working or labour execution.

**Keywords:** Classification, Special Purpose Oral Poetry, War, Work and Marriage.

**Poetry**

Treating the above mentioned three subjects-wars, marriage and work in terms of poetry, according to Finnegan, poses some difficulty because some of them seem closely tied to occasions of their performance -whether war, hunting or work- they have a fixed formulaic utterance with little room for variation and minimum change and innovation. Hunting, war and work songs belong to the non-innovatory genres because the utterances in them have little room for variation, change and innovation (207). Topical songs or lyrics belong to the innovatory genre. However, there are few exceptions in this order because the Yoruba Ijala hunting poetry provides for variation and composition. Same is true of work songs depending on the soloist.

Hunting and war poetry share similar ideas of romance and glory, for instance, same poetry is used by warriors and hunters for war and "to honour a man who had killed a leopard with a spear" (207). Hunting and war are related because the two involve action that is out of the run of ordinary normal day pursuits; there is danger, triumph and heroism in both. There is also boasting by hunters and those going for war. Both of them are faced with great challenge that requires a demonstration of specialized ability to achieve the feat. War songs are meant to be sung at the end of war and not during the battle. The emotion and excitement associated with military exploits expressed in poetry before the war situation urge or stir up the poet and audience to declare war and be ready for battle. A War Songs are meant to be sung at the end of war and not during.

While most war songs explicitly glorify war, some show awareness of the dangers and cost of war "battle never goes hungry" (218). The warrior goes to war in the knowledge that he may not come back from the battle and that his going to war is to perform his duty to his people or state.

Hunting shares many characteristics of military or war poetry with its association with "ideas of danger, pride and glory", and its preoccupation not only with action but with "contemplation of action in prospect or retrospect". With the heroism and hazards associated with it, hunting remains a frequent topic in people's songs particularly the Bushmen. A successful kill is a common occasion that calls for hunting songs to be sung, for instance, and outstanding kill of an elephant by an Akan hunter makes him climb the elephant and burst into songs. Hunting songs are frequently performed in public and festive occasions among the Akan people. An Ethiopian hunter is received with hunting songs on killing an elephant. Same is true of Limba hunter of Northern Sierra Leone who kills a bush cow. Special celebration for such is fixed on a special date other than the day of the hunt.

Praise and celebration accompany killing of game considered outstanding or dangerous e.g elephant, lion, leopard or buffalo. The hunter's risk and achievement are magnified using the terms used to refer to the beast e.g. Elephant praise named "He who remains mountainous". The hunter boastfully sings of his exploit and retells his heroism in poetry designed for the audience and not for the exigencies of his hunt.

Such common songs of triumph and recollection in Africa are recognized as separate forms. They are particularly specialized in some societies as hunters undergo special training that involves magical artistic and practical skills. Such form associations with rules, hierarchy and initiation. The Akan professional association of hunters uses hunting songs to assert their pride and their dominance even over political. (223).

Hunting songs are sung at the funeral of skilled hunters and hunting associations have special festivals during which they admit hunters to higher ranks. Hunting poems have in some cases become specialized independent branch of poetry not related to hunting. The Yoruba Ijala chants associated with hunting performs specifically at specialist hunters gathering. Ijala artists perform elsewhere to entertain in social occasions on invitation outside hunters' forum or ceremonies related to hunting.

The Ambo hunter of Zambia is traditionally welcome when he kills an elephant. A hunter who kills not less than four animals is honoured 'with a special hunting feast to which his friends are invited and men sing on the hunt. Traditional hunting songs are sung on the occasion- (no composition of new songs).

In African traditional society, rhythmic work songs are common work songs which belong to special purpose poetry because they are connected with specific occasions and actions not found in war and hunting chants. Work songs are used in works that have routine tasks and are rhythmic in the process of their execution. Such routine task jobs which Finnegan regards not as "glorious or romantic" include; paddling threshing or hauling (231). The work, she says unlike "hunting and military poetry" provides occasion than subject matter while the song depends on the rhythm of the work. All monotonous labour jobs call for use of work songs, e.g sawing, pounding, mowing, corn grinding, roadwork and mining. Work songs are sung by most manual workers in their hard labour. Work songs are marked from other songs because of their functional relationship to the activity which they accompany (special purpose poetry). Work songs encourage co-operative spirit in workers. Some work songs comment on the benefits of hard work and life in general.

From their own perspective, Mapange and White in Nwizu classify work, war and hunting poems as "survival Poems" "Achievement and heroism". According to Chinwendu Nwizu, warriors are "praised and eulogized and highly expected at the instance of going for a war."

**War Song**

The war song is one of the "special purpose poetry" for its "particular significance in African poetry". War songs are songs used by people or warriors going to engage in a war or battle with an enemy group. War songs are sung during warfare. Such songs are meant to imbue confidence in the singing fighters to confront their enemies with courage and hope to defeat them. War songs instill fears into the opponents who become afraid on seeing the singers of such songs in the mood to destroy. The songs are capable of making the singers' opponents have low spirit, fear and succumb to their enemies. War songs are usually short, repetitive and emphasize on the strength of the singers especially as a group. The song reinforces the strength of the singers by exaggerating their power to overcome their opponents. War songs motivate the under-aged youths to aspire to become soldiers and be fearless to defend their people in war situations.

Below are examples of war songs rendered in the native language (Igbo) of the Igbo people and with which the people engaged in war with their enemy communities of the pre-literate period.

**1. NZOGBU NZOBU**

Nzogbu .....	Enyi mba, enyi
Nzogbu Nzogbu .....	Enyi mba, enyi
Nzogbu nwoke .....	Enyi mba, enyi
Nzogbu nwanyi .....	Enyi mba, enyi
Azobukwala m oo .....	Enyi mba, enyi
Nzogbu .....	Enyi mba, enyi
Zogbuo onye ukwu .....	Enyi mba, enyi
Zogbuo onye nta .....	Enyi mba, enyi
Azobukwala m o-o .....	Enyi mba, enyi

**Translation**

Trample Elephant of the town, elephant	
Trample trample .....	Elephant of the town, elephant
Trample on the man .....	Elephant of the town, elephant
Trample on the women .....	Elephant of the town, elephant
Trample not on me .....	Elephant of the town, elephant
Trample .....	Elephant of the town, elephant
Trample on the big .....	Elephant of the town, elephant
Trample on the small .....	Elephant of the town, elephant
Trample not on me .....	Elephant of the town, elephant

The elephant is such s devastating animal which strength and power one must not underrate. The elephant's image is used in the above war song to symbolize the war team singing the song. The singing warriors want their enemy to see them as possessing the some qualities in terms of physical size, strength and courage as that of the much dreaded elephant, and see themselves (the opponents) as the grass trampled upon by the elephant. By implication the singers threaten to destroy any one from the side of their opponent that challenges them just as the elephant destroys the grass under its feet.

**2. ONYE AKPALA NWA AGU AKA N'ODU**

Onye akpala nwa agu aka n'odu  
 Ma o di ndu, ma o nwuru anwu  
 Onye akpala nwa agu aka n'odu

**Translation**

Let no one touch the tail of the young lion  
 Whether the lion is alive or dead  
 Let no one touch the tail of the young lion

The strength of the Lion which image is used in the above war song cannot be underrated by any one that knows it in terms of fighting its enemy. The Lion tail is very valuable to it and as such remains a very sensitive part of the animal, that anyone who tempers with it faces the anger of the beast. The song which warns all never to attempt touching the tail of a young lion (cub) whether it is dead or alive metaphorically refers to the warriors' opposing enemies who have provoked the anger of the warriors by challenging them and as such must face their wrath. The song thus serves as a warning to anybody or group to keep distance from the singing warriors or face untold consequences from such warriors following their provocation

**Work Song**

The work song is another "special purpose poetry" used in executing manual works. Work songs are songs which accompany work. They are used in carrying out manual jobs that are energy sapping. Works for which work songs are used have fixed work rhythm on which the songs for them develop. They are designed to encourage especially those working as a group. Work songs make the people at work to forget the pains of work because they are carried away by the rhythm and melody of the song which they enjoy as they perform the work. The songs lift the spirit of the workers and make them work tirelessly. The work rhythm gives the frame work on which the song is developed. In music accompanied works, Onuekwusi (2001) asserts that "music distracts the labourers and labour is no doubt achieved unconsciously less painfully and more pleurably". He indicates the non presence of "any serious thematic content or subject" but emphasis on rhythm in the songs "as a tapestry on which improvisation in word and sentences and phrases can be made" (107). Okezie (2007:53-54) lists examples of works performed or done with work songs to include the following "routine monotonous jobs", sawing, pressing oil at the oil press, pounding palm fruits, grinding, paddling or canoeing, threshing grains, harvesting stocks of maize, millet, rice etc. Example of a work song (for oil press) sung by the Okigwe Igbo people of Imo State is as follows.

1. Okoro Igwe Nkwu

Okoro Igwe nkwu .....	A-a-ha-ha
Okoro Igwe nkwu .....	A-a-ha-ha
A si gi suwa nkwu .....	A-a-ha-ha
Gi lewe anya n'elu .....	A-a-ha-ha
I le nne gi n'elu? .....	A-a-ha-ha
I le nna gi n'elu? .....	A-a-ha-ha

I buru okorobia .....	A-a-ha-ha Okorobia biko suwa
nkwu .....	A-a-ha-ha

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I buru agboghobia .....	A-a-ha-ha
Agboghobia biko suwa nkwa .....	A-a-ha-ha
I buru nne nwanyi .....	A-a-ha-ha
A si go suwa nkwa .....	A-a-ha-ha
Okoro ume ngwu .....	A-a-ha-ha
Biko suwa nkwa .....	A-a-ha-ha
O bu aka aja .....	A-a-ha-ha
Aka aja na-eriju afo .....	A-a-ha-ha
Wepu ume ngwu .....	A-a-ha-ha
O gaghi enyere gi aka .....	A-a-ha-ha
Ma gi suwa nkwa .....	A-a-ha-ha
I ga-eriju afo .....	A-a-ha-ha

**Translation**

Young man of the palm press  
 Young man of the palm press  
 Please pound the palm nut  
 You begin to look upwards  
 Are you looking upwards for your mother?  
 Are you looking upwards for your father?  
 If you are a young boy  
 Young girl please pound the palm nut  
 If you are a mother  
 You are told to pound the palm nut  
 Lazy young boy  
 Please pound the palm nut  
 It is the dirty hand  
 Dirty hand feeds well  
 Stop being lazy  
 It will not help you  
 But if you pound the palm nut  
 You will feed well.

The above work song is used while pounding palm fruits in the manual Oil Press, where more than one person with a long wooden pestle pound cooked palm fruits in a big drum that is buried in the ground. The people stand in a circular form round the drum and pound the cooked palm nuts while singing the above work song. The leader of the pound group makes the main statements or sentences, improvising names of various categories of people which he chooses to mention, and enjoins them to join in the palm fruit pounding work in the Oil Press. The work song above condemns the attitude of the lazy people whom it advises to work because it is only by so doing that one feeds well.

**2. ONYE GBUWE ACHARA**

Onye gbuwe achara onye gbuwe .....	Onye akpola ibe ya
	Onye ikolu
Onye gbuwe achara, onye gbuwe .....	Onye akpola ibe ya
	Onye ikolu
Ma nwoke, ma nwanyi .....	Onye akpola ibe ya
	Onye ikolu

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Onye gbuwe achara onye gbuwe .....	Onye akpola ibe ya
	Onye ikolu
Ma okenye, ma nwata .....	Onye akpola ibe ya
	Onye ikolu
Onye gbuwe achara onye .....	Onye akpola ibe ya
	Onye ikolu
Ma onye ukwu ma onye nta .....	Onye akpola ibe ya
	Onye ikolu

**Translation**

Let everyone cut grass let everyone cut...let no one	call his fellow a prisoner.
Both male and female	let no one call his fellow a prisoner.
Both the boys and the girls	let no one call his fellow a prisoner.
Let everyone cut grass let everyone cut	let no one call his fellow a prisoner.
Both the old and the young	let no one call his fellow a prisoner.
Let everyone cut grass let everyone	let no one call his fellow a prisoner.
Both the big and the small .....	let no one call his fellow a prisoner.

The above work song believed to be the work song of prisoners working in the prison yard, is also used by school children and students while doing the work of grass cutting in the school, during manual labour. It is as well used by other workers outside the school environment. The song enjoins everyone to participate in the work of grass cutting without looking down on others or calling them prisoners. It calls on all cadre of human beings; male, female, the big and small, boys and girls and, soon to take part in job of grass cutting with other fellows doing same. Singing the songs while doing the work makes them forget that they are suffering or passing through pain especially working under the scorching sun.

**Marriage Song**

In Africa is an occasion of great celebration. Marriage terminates the youthful life of a young man and girl as bachelor and spinster and ushers them into a new world of mature couple. During marriage, there is a great feeling of happiness and joy by both families of the boy and the girl getting married. While the girls family is happy that their daughter is being taken as a wife by a man, the boy's family feels happy because their son has attained the full status of a man by fulfilling the most important requirement for manhood. The girl bids farewell to her family members as she goes to her own husband and permanent home to settle as a full responsible woman. The boy's family, on the other hand feels happy in receiving the new woman to increase their family members. The ceremony is usually celebrated with songs by the bride's mates and relatives who are there for her send forth to her husband's home. Some of the marriage songs rendered by the bride's mates advise the bride on how to live in harmony with her husband, parents-in-law and their relations. The songs also console the parents of the bride for the parting of their daughter from them for her own husband's home. In marriage songs some prayers are made for the couple to be blessed with children of both sexes and grow old to enjoy the fruit of their labour through their children. Below are some of the marriage songs of the Igbo speaking people of Nigeria.

1. **Etu ugbu a Echi**

Etu ugbua echi, oo etu ugbua echi  
Etu ugbua echi oo, Etu ugbua ec'hi  
Dorati gi na di gi ga-ebi oo, etu ugbu a echi  
Dorati gi na di gi ga-ebi ooo etu ugbu a echi

**Translation**

By this time tomorrow, by this time tomorrow  
By this time tomorrow, by this time tomorrow  
Dorothy you will live with your husband, by this time tomorrow  
Dorothy you will live with your husband, by this time tomorrow  
The above marriage song is sung by the bride's mates while accompanying the bride to her husband's home. This exercise or ceremony which marks the sendforth of the bride is done in the night and is usually on the eve of the bride's wedding. The song is a reminder to the bride that by same time tomorrow (next day) she would be living with her husband as she bids farewell to spinstership. While the above marriage song is being sung, the bride as well as her mother usually cry because of the separation.

2. **O LAA**

O laa  
O laa be-ya  
O laala  
O lass be ya  
Ngozi alaa  
O laa be ya  
O laala  
O laa be ya

**Translation**

she goes  
She goes to her house  
She goes  
She goes to her house  
Ngozi goes  
She goes to her house  
She goes  
She goes to her house

Culled from Okoye (pg, 175).

The above marriage song states that the bride (Ngozi) is going-going to her own husband's house. The song implies that a girl has only a temporary place or apartment in her father's house. It is only when she gets married to a man that she can claim to have got her own house which is her husband's house.

**Conclusion**

Poetry in oral literature is realized as songs. Africans have a lot to do with songs because songs form an important part of their social, political, economic and religious life. There is hardly any activity in African society that is not accompanied by a song. People sing to express their sorrow, happiness and other emotional feelings they have. In traditional African

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society the use of songs is indispensable in carrying out the daily activities and ceremonies of the people. Africans sing when they go for war, celebrate birth and marriage ceremonies, perform manual work, during burial of the dead, to lull babies to sleep and to express love especially for the opposite sex. Songs are equally operational in the places of traditional rulers and during animal hunting expeditious by hunters. Religious worships and Divination in African traditional setting have their own forms of songs that are recited or realized as libation texts.

The various activities and occasions mentioned above have particular type of songs used in each and which cannot be used for another. In view of the above fact, songs are classified according to specific occasions or ceremonies they are used to celebrate. In line with the above understanding, Okezie (2007) classified the different types of songs under, work song, war song, funeral song, marriage song, birth song, love song and children's song. Onuekwusi (2001) goes extra mile to include religious poetry and libation texts as other forms of songs in use in a typical African traditional society setting. Let us look at the various songs in accordance with the classification above.

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