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Panegyric Discourse: A Study of Ogunde's 'Eko'

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Abstract
Literary works composed and presented in local languages are often restricted to their regions of production and not accessible to a wider appreciation. This paper presents panegyric as phenomenon endemic within the social-cultural ambit of Yoruba race among several ethnic settings in Nigeria in particular and Africa as a whole. It attempts to showcase the aesthetics in praise poems/songs among the Yoruba. It also highlights the therapeutic essence of praises on human and non-human (towns not excluded) particularly among Yoruba. In this paper, 'Eko', the primary source, is selected from one of the various studio-recorded songs of Hubert Ogunde. The secondary sources include interviewing some members of Ogunde's immediate family and some prominent people with sepecialised knowledge of Yoruba language and culture generally and Ogunde's songs in particular. The song, having been transcribed and translated, is semiotically analysed for wider appreciation. From the discourse, the metaphorical representation of Lagos beyond a mere town, is aesthetically established; thereby intimating both the current and intending dwellers of the mega city (Yoruba and non-Yorua) the good, the ugly and the prospects the city offers.
Keywords: Panegyric, Eko, aesthetics, therapeutic, semiotics, transcription, translation

Introduction
Panegyric (*Oríkì*) constitutes major indices in the discourse of Yoruba oral arts from cultural perspectives and as entrenched in the songs of Hubert Ogunde. *Oríkì* in Yoruba is most of the time

meant to praise-sing. It is also used to lampoon and abuse erring individuals. For instance, the thief (*Olè*) and the lazy one (*Ọ̀lẹ*) have their own *oríkì* in Yoruba. *Oríkì* functions in diverse ways in Yoruba. A good wife should know the praise name of her husband's lineage on order to fit in properly as a cultured woman. Yoruba equally praise individuals based on their physical appearance and behavioural pattern. Another major *oríkì* archetype, which is cultural specific, is the ascribed praise name. This is called *oríkì àmútòrunwá* (praise name ascribed from birth). Examples of such *oríkì* in Yoruba are meant for the twins and children born after them. Others include children born with some bodily signs.

Yoruba have three major types of *oríkì: Oríkì ìlú* (praise names of towns), *Oríkì orílẹ̀* (Praise names of the lineage) and *oríkì ìnagijẹ́* (praise names based on personal attributes). Such attributes could be that of persons, places or things. For instance, Eko (Lagos) has praise names like all other towns in Yoruba land. Therefore, major towns from other ethnic groups of Nigeria are expected to have their own praise names. For instance, a town like Enugu, coined from Enu Ugwu (a town on the hills) or Kaduna, named after a river which derives its name from the crocodile, should have praise names based on their uniqueness were they in Yoruba land.

Elebuibon further explains the concept of *oríkì* beyond tellurian space to the super-sensual realm where he underpins the imperative of appeasing the deities with praises. He posits that 'in order to understand the lifestyle of an *òrìsà* (god/goddess), one needs to study his or her *'oríkì'*. He states further that 'it is important for an *òrìsà* devotee to learn the praise names of that *òrìsà*. When they chant the *oríkì* of the deities and make their petitions, they have the hope of having their prayers answered.'

The manners by which Ogunde personifies and deifies Èkó (Lagos) through panegyrics is born out of personal experience of

the artiste on the popular city and perhaps based on the attributes for which the city has over the years acquired fame. The socio-economic attributes of Lagos, according to Apter, are enumerated in hyperbolic apostrophe 1983, 153. Based on the foregoing, Lagos, if an animate object, would experience intense gratification for being so praised and venerated Barber1991, 75.

Eko, the Quintessential Mega City

The song 'Èkó,' is especially dedicated to Lagos, Nigeria's commercial city located in the South West region of the country. Modern day Lagos is now a state which is bounded on the West by the Republic of Benin, to the North and East by Ògùn state with the Atlantic Ocean providing a coastline on the South. Lagos is traditionally referred to as 'Èkó', a name which, in the modern time, merely refers to the present-day Lagos Island. Both names, Lagos and Èkó, among the Yorùbá are used interchangeably. The origin of the name 'Lagos' is traceable to a Portuguese explorer, Ruy de Sequeira in the 15th century, meaning 'Lakes,' the name Èkó has historically posed a lot of contrasting claims and counter claims as regards the authentic 'owners' of the town. The two major contenders, who are historically from Ilé-Ifẹ̀, are the Aworis and the Binis; both laying claim to the ownership of Lagos.

This work is not really meant to dwell much on the historical facts about the origins of Lagos; however, the influences of the two tribes that are laying claim to the ancestry of the commercial and influential city are quite distinct. The Aworis can be said to be the first settlers who, through Isheri, along Ògùn River, settled in the hinterland before migrating towards the sea. The Benin, on the other hand, conquered Lagos as they had done to many coastal towns from the present Delta, Onàdó and Ògùn states having earlier established a formidable monarchy in their kingdom. They (Benin) planted a king in Lagos, with the title Ọba, replica of that of Benin (which is maintained till date) thereby collecting royalties from them as subjects of Ọba of Benin (Akinola 2012, 7-9). The

name 'Lagos,' given by a foreigner, possesses the qualities addressed in this song by the poet, as a city in the midst of waters. However, the name Èkó was derived from two major sources. In Benin (Edo language) Èkó means 'camp' (perhaps, war camp) while in Yorùbá, it is translated as 'oko' (farm) as reflected in the naming of the palace of Ọba of Lagos: '*Iga Idunganran'* meaning 'a palace built in the pepper farm' in Àwórì dialect. After the amalgamation of the Northern and the Southern Protectorates in 1914, with Lagos as the capital, the domination of Lagos by the Benin ended since they (Benin) had equally become subjects of the British to whom they paid taxes.

From the poem, it can be deduced that Lagos is a 'blessed' city and it is, in turn, ready to bless anyone who deserves to be blessed, as epitomised in the allusion to Erelú Elébùté. It is also implied in the poem that both 'good' and 'bad' are there in Lagos for the dwellers to make their own choice. Lagos is also a land of opportunities where one can, with time, meet with fortunes. In addition, one needs to adhere strictly to the norms and value systems of one's immediate environment. Therefore, the poet insinuates that if a man is not mindful of his disposition, he can easily be submerged by the vicissitudes of (city) life.

The poet begins by creating an awareness that some immigrants, including the poet, desire to settle down in Lagos. Here, Lagos is being portrayed as a bird (of superstitious essence) called *kowéè*, whose cries portend both fortunes and misfortunes. For instance, as believed, among Yorùbá, the *kowéè* bird howls and chirps at the same time. If the bird makes the two sounds, (howling and chirping) the hearer will meet fortune that day. However, if it merely howls without chirping, the hearer of the sound should consult the oracle in order to propitiate the gods so as to ward off evil or misfortune.

The poet and other travelers make frantic attempts to pay homage to Lagos so as to have a successful stay eventually when they arrive. The praise names of Lagos are variously mentioned: 'The crown prince of the sea…', indicating the watery presence in Lagos. The poet makes a twist stating the incomprehensibility of the status of Lagos, especially to the immigrants:

> The wise cannot tie water in a knot in the cloth
> No sage can ever count the sand of the earth
> The wanderers have not known where the earth ends
> The sharp knife cannot carve its handle, never…

The poet goes ahead, making an allusion to the mythical expedition of 'Orúkọtán,' a personality (perhaps conceived by the poet) an epithet of Lagos, who had been ordained by fate to become the greatest among his siblings, (other ancient towns in Yoruba land) of which he (Lagos) was the last born. Lagos is being presented here as one of the later settlements among the ancient Yorùbá towns. The poet treats Lagos with profound reverence that he employs the metaphysical concept of numerology, harping on the strength of the number '3' which is regarded as a number associated with perfection. The study of numbers is based on one general principle that every number has an inner nature and individual vibrations associated with it; and that 'three' typically symbolises reward and successes in most undertakings. The significance of number '3' is, therefore, registered by the poet as he alludes to concepts with three features: 'Thrice is Ajé called; thrice it is that a ram butts…' Having saluted Lagos for (the mandatory) three times, the poet is then content that his stay in the city would be rewarding.

Ogunde further express his experience of the hard times that Lagosians are exposed to as a result of the influx of immigrants into the city, which leads to competition in their struggle for survival. Lagos is described as 'hot' for the poor while the elites relish their riches. The cost of living is invariably high and the

poor can hardly cope with the attendant excruciating effects. The poor cannot properly feed their family, rent apartment that can make them comfortable or afford the rent for shops and market stalls. The hope of the poor according to the poet, however, lies in the hands of the omnipotent God to help them out of their helpless situation. The poet however affirms that the issue of high cost of living is not limited to Lagos, as the dwellers of other major cities of Nigeria equally have their own share of the hard times:

> 'It is not Lagos alone; it is all over the place
> Follow me let us go, let us go to Ibadan,
> The story is the same.

Ogunde's reference to other major cities of Nigeria in connection with the high cost of living is not based on information he gathers from the media, both print and electronic, but born out of his wide travels which 'was unmatched among the traveling troupes of his time' (Jeyifo 1984, 54).

The poet however, reiterates his stern conviction in the ability of the Almighty God to assuage the suffering of the masses:

> We beseech you, Lord that will not end us with hunger
> The same Lord who will not kill the poor alive
> He is the Lord, He is our rescuer, I will be
> vindicated (lines 73 to 75).

The poet further admonishes the ingrate elite who, in spite of their relative life of comfort, still complain like the poor ones. He chides them to learn to show appreciation to God for His benevolence to them.

The grumbling elites are reminded of their low financial and social status on their first entry into Lagos; and their present situation which has greatly improved to meet the challenges of the city life:

> Look, my friend, remember that day, the day you entered Lagos
> Your trousers were above the ankle… lines (82 to 87).

The poet artistically paints the picture of the negative influences the city has imposed on the low-income earners in the society. For instance, the poor have been psychologically disoriented and made inconsequential, thereby exhibiting some anti-social behaviour. For example, the poet presents a reckless driver who, in a night driving, refuses to dim/lower the head lamp of his vehicle, thereby focusing a full blinding ray of light on the face of the on-coming driver (the poet) in front of him. The reason for the unruly behaviour of the driver is not far-fetched; he is under the influence of alcohol and hard drugs. The poet, who represents the easy-going middle-class elites in the city, in order to avoid confrontations with the miscreants, decides to comport himself thus:

'Variety in Lagos, I step aside for you the evil ones'

The categories of the morally decadent city dwellers, according to the song, cut across gender and age boundaries. For instance, the poet further describes a morally bankrupt woman, whose physical appearance is quite disgusting; she dresses indecently in an obscene manner; wearing a dress made of a yard of a piece of cloth, which is apparently too small on her body. She is further described as wearing bogus eye glasses and high heeled shoes that make her to walk with difficulties.

The poet afterwards makes a swift turn from the humorous issues previously discussed and returns to the main issue of extolling the qualities of the much-venerated city, Lagos. In doing this, he further dwells on allusions, as preludes to the concept of predestination, that stem from obedience, using the legendary story of one Erelú Elébùté. This persona is depicted as wealthy and so much venerated by all and sundry. According to the poet, she enjoys her present status as a result of her obedience. Erelú Elébùté, an immigrant, consulted the gods before she took off to Lagos and sacrifices were prescribed for her; she obeyed the instructions of the gods by offering the prescribed sacrifices. This resulted in her enviable wealth. Erelú Elébùté begins to relish her

new-found fortune; she shows appreciation to her benefactors which marks her out as a grateful person.
The poet, in line with the antecedent of Erelú Elébùté, now affirms his resolve to obey the voice of the 'gods' so that he can weather the storm of Lagos and become prosperous. The insinuation of the poet, here, can be interpreted as a metaphorical representation of Lagos 'the deity' to be appeased in order to make a head way in the city. If one does not adhere to the code of conduct in the city, one is likely to be drowned by the waves of Lagos life. Lagos is here personified as capable of 'bringing' and 'taking away.' So, if one knows how to play to the rule of the game, one would be successful in Lagos. Anything short of this, according to the poet, will bring misfortunes.

A closer observation of the song shows that the poet is of the opinion that one tends to lose his fortune: money, houses, wives and children to the influence of Lagos life if one is not extraordinarily careful. For instance, a man may lose his wife to another man if he fails to satisfy her, particularly, financially, sell off his house as a result of bankruptcy; and lose control over his children when he is no longer capable of providing for their needs.
The poet further describes Lagos by rechristening it as 'Come' 'Hear' 'Bring' ending each line with the clause, 'that is your name, Lagos.' The word 'come' here, signifies the accommodating tendency of Lagos, having the potential of welcoming arrays of immigrants on a daily basis. 'Hear' stands for the need for one to keep his or her ears to the ground in Lagos so as to remain continuously alert to discover every new development or information so as not to be caught unawares. The word 'bring' points to the fact that Lagos is a land of opportunities whereby one can easily come in contact with fortunes. 'Lift' here, is a call to action to all dwellers of Lagos to live up to the challenges and tap any slight opportunity that comes their ways. In that case, when all others are making efforts to grasp opportunities, the poet is insinuating that no one should remain idle. The song is ended with

the poet making the passionate plea that Lagos should be considerate by bringing fortunes to him and not taking them away. Ideas are cleverly woven in figurative language in the song, showing the poet's mastery of Yorùbá language. A good example is the use of simile in the statement: 'With high-heeled shoes like àgéré's unsteady feet,' (line 106). The song is also replete with metaphorical expressions and ideas as indicated in the following contexts: 'good fortune birds' is used metaphorically for Lagos as having the potential of bringing fortunes to the people. 'The crown prince of the sea, with veranda on the waters' is referring to the watery presence of Lagos as a city in the midst of waters. 'Bring' 'Come' 'Hear', all used as appellations of Lagos, are metaphors to indicate the capability of Lagos to engage in what the words connote. 'Sea water' and 'fresh water' as used in:

> I have washed my head with sea water,
> I have washed my feet with the fresh waters
> I am the one God has bathed and; like crystal, clean
> (lines 15 to 17)

The above is an indication of the poet's different experiences that actually prepared him to face the challenges of the city life; and the attendant success, in line 17, above. 'Day and 'night' as used in line 99, stand for 'good' and 'evil'. 'Home of beads' stands for the highly prized architectural designs of the sky scrapers buildings on the Lagos Island. Also, the concepts in lines 114: 'The birds do inhabit the sky; The white men make the oceans their highways', metaphorically refer to the ever-busy nature of Lagos, even, in the sky, perhaps, referring to the airplanes or on the sea, as ships, in their hundreds are harboured at the seaport and the unending trouping in of immigrants into Lagos through land transportation.

In the song, Lagos is ascribed the attributes of a living being as the poet uses the clause, 'I call you, Lagos' suggesting that Lagos has ears with which it listens to him. 'Ẹgbà tree says it would save me

from my enemies' in line 17, also portrays a tree speaking like human. Apart from using personification, pun, which is however, lost in translation, is evident in the Yorùbá version of the song, thus: 'Igi ẹgbà lóun á gbà mí lọ́wọ́ àwọn abínú ẹni…' Lagos is further given a person's attribute by the way the poet uses some transitive verb such as 'bring', 'lift' to describe the activities that Lagos is capable of performing. 'Death that kills', in line 85, is also an example of personification.

Paradox is used by the poet in the statement, 'kill the poor alive', which is undoubtedly self-contradicting; but a second thought confirms the sense in it. As can be inferred from the statement, it is obvious that a man who is unable to fend for himself and his family is as good as dead. Lagos is portrayed as having two sides to two different categories of people at the same time as we have in: 'Lagos is hot for the poor, It is cold for the rich' (lines 41, and 42; 52 and 53).

Conclusion

Eko, composed and sung in Yoruba, ordinarily has the propensity to be domiciled within the Yoruba speaking regions. However, the transcription and translation of the song into English have broken the (linguistic) barrier thereby giving the ample opportunity to non-Yoruba speakers/readers to grasp the message and appreciate the contents. In the song, Ogunde paints the picture of Lagos as a city of vast opportunities. He also reveals the duality of the disposition of Lagos as being able to make or mar an individual, depending on such individual's inclination toward it (Lagos). Ogunde highlights the high cost of living in the Nigerian cities, particularly, Lagos and other social vices identified with the cities in Nigeria and elsewhere. He also suggests to the listeners/readers to embrace the positive side of life that Lagos can offer; and he admonishes the fortunate ones in Lagos to always be full of appreciation. The poet finally expresses the tendency of Lagos to corrupt the city dwellers especially if they are not careful. This

paper has established the import of panegyric as a genre of poetry in Yoruba cultural practices, especially with its ability to extol the physical, historical and philosophical traits of human and inanimate beings.

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