

## Poetry as Psychotherapy: The Example of *Orin Aremo* in Yoruba Folklore

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### Abstract

There are several studies on the relationship between folklore and healthcare practice in the culture of Yoruba people. This study however argues that the contemporary Yoruba society continues to utilize these traditional art forms in medical practice. With specific reference to Yoruba oral sub-genre, *Orin Aremo*, ('baby rocking song') which is deeply rooted in Yoruba culture, this study draws an interdisciplinary link between orthodox pediatric medicine and indigenous epistemology. The paper observes that, despite the absence of an empirical basis for its efficacy, contemporary Yoruba society still appropriates the art form. This therefore goes a long way to show that, indigenous folk culture remains as potent as ever in the affairs of humanity irrespective of the stages or advances of civilization. As exemplified by *Orin Aremo*, indigenous verbal and artistic resources remain vibrant and are of immense socio-economic and artistic value.

**Key words:** psychotherapy, poetry, Yoruba folklore, *orin aremo*,

### Introduction

This paper discusses the psychotherapeutic significance of *Orin Aremo*, an oral sub-genre in Yoruba oral literature. Given the fact that this sub-genre is deployed by women in Yoruba society as a tool for soothing or rocking their restless infants, the paper attempts to link this practice within the general concept of psychotherapy. By psychotherapy, this paper does not intend to delve into the intricacies of psychotherapy, a sub-clinical discipline, rather an attempt is made to situate an age long practice within a contemporary concept. In other words, the relationship between this paper and the concept of psychotherapy is literal and superficial. The intention of the paper is to demonstrate that there is an assumed faith among women practitioners of Yoruba society on the efficacy of the poetic genre for therapeutic purposes. This may generally be located within the general context of the belief in the power of doing things with words.

The Yoruba of South-western Nigeria, like any other human society, has an age-long tradition and rich repertoire of artistic and verbal resources. These resources are not only profound but are integral part of the everyday life of the people. Owing to the fact that the verbal resources emanate from a Yoruba culture that was essentially oral, the survival of these resources are intrinsically linked to regular activities which ultimately ensure their continued existence. As Oyin Ogunba (1976:40) asserts:

In traditional Africa, poetry is an everyday pre-occupation because of the oral quality of life. In oral society, poetry tends to perform a multitude of functions, literary and extra-literary, and is the main vehicle for the apprehension of the universe. That is to say that in a non-scientific society, the substitute for systematic scientific probing is the imagination and poetry is its chief mode of expression.

Among these oral forms is *Orin Aremo*, literally meaning “song used to rock a crying baby” or child rocking songs. This form has always been part and parcel of the socio-cultural cosmos as long as there is biological continuity of procreation which makes child care an imperative, especially on the women folk.

Therefore, *Orin Aremo* is a “creative” form (Sheba, 1992) employed by Yoruba women in the belief that it possesses the therapy to calm their babies when the need arises. The question for the present discourse is whether this practice has contemporary relevance and to what extent does this apply to its use as means of psychotherapy.

### ***Orin Aremo* and Yoruba Oral Poetry**

It is curious that despite the huge body of literature available on Yoruba oral literature, scholars seem not to have shown sufficient interest in *Orin Aremo*. Despite the existence of “a kind of intellectual division of labour” among scholars of Yoruba literature ( Olatunji, 1987), *Orin Aremo* is conspicuously missing. For example, Olatunji’s *Features of Yoruba Oral Poetry* (1984), which classifies various forms of Yoruba oral poetry, or Oyin Ogunba’s (1976) discussion of Traditional African poetry did not deem *Orin Aremo* fit as an important oral sub-genre. Few studies exist on *Orin Aremo* in Yoruba oral literature scholarship. Apart from Sheba’s (1992) and a veiled reference to *Orin Iremolekun* (lullabies) by Orimogunje (2011), the recent study of *Ewi Iremolekun* by Oyebade and Olumuyiwa (2003) are the major efforts at studying this poetic form, despite its inherent huge potentials. What is more worrisome is the fact that, despite the significance of this form for gender theorizing from the African perspective, little attention has been paid to it by scholars. As a poetic form that fits into Kolawole’s (1998:1) classification of “women oral literature as a form of dynamic self-expression”, *Orin Aremo* has not enjoyed adequate critical attention. In fact, one wonders why Opefeyitimi’s (2009) treatise of “Women in Yoruba Culture” does not cover *Orin Aremo*, even though it would have been a worthy addition to the critical essays.

One’s impression is that *Orin Aremo* faces a kind of delineation challenge in view of its nature and mode of production. In other words, in terms of data collection, *Orin Aremo* may not necessarily fit into the performative paradigm underscored by Olatunji (1993:8) that:

Yoruba oral literature is fully realized in performance, music, song and dance. It is dialogic in execution and a vibrant reactive relationship (or dialectics) subsists between artists and audience before whom they perform.

The point therefore is that scholars’ lack of attention and focus on *Orin Aremo* may have been a realization of the fact that the sub-genre hardly fits into a strict classification. But Olabiyi Yai (1999:13) anticipates this when he declares:

An exogenous classification of oral literature of a given culture is invariably confronted with a dilemma: how to classify entities and literary forms where basic features are unknown? In my own view, a typology of literary genres should be a closing, not an opening, operation because a genre typology has little value as long as the features of the various types have not been thoroughly identified, studied and compared.

As far as this paper is concerned however, *Orin Aremo* is a vibrant poetic form characterized by performance features of dance/body movements and songs.

The relationship that exists between *Orin Aremo* and other forms of Yoruba poetry is one that is both intertextual as well as functional. Since all poetic forms and indeed all forms of literary production in the African consciousness are linked to social functions, *Orin Aremo* relates to its use as a mechanism of engaging the baby when the situation demands. These situations are usually when a baby is discomfited in anyway – be it when the diapers are wet, when there is heat, when hungry or thirsty, when under pressure to urinate or defecate. The initial reaction of the baby to any of these situations is to cry to get the mother’s/guardian’s attention. Crying thus becomes a means of verbal non-lexical communication. After the baby’s needs have been attended to, *Orin Aremo* is then used to support or soothe the baby. This is where the mother’s creativity alluded by Sheba (1992) is now readily seen.

Let us illustrate with this example:

<i>Toni lo n ke yi o</i>	Here is Toni crying
<i>Ki ni ma a ra fun?</i>	What would I buy for him?
<i>Ma mu re London</i>	I will take him to London
<i>Nilu oyinbo</i>	The land of white people
<i>Ma mu re America</i>	I will take him/her to America
<i>Nilu Oyinbo</i>	The land of white people
<i>Ma ra motor fun</i>	I will buy him a motor car
<i>Ma ra bicycle fun</i>	I will buy him a bicycle

In the *Orin Aremo* excerpt above, the scenario indicates a baby crying and a mother promising everything if only the baby will stop crying. Meanwhile, it is instructive to note that the content of this excerpt clearly indicates an aspiration tone, especially as it relates to material desires and travelling motif. It is also interesting to note that the mother may simply be expressing her wish not only for the child but also herself.

*Orin Aremo* can also be a viable site for intertextual aesthetics. In this connection, the relationship between *Orin Aremo* and a genre like *Oriki*, Yoruba praise and descriptive poetry is evident:

<i>Toni o,</i>	Toni
<i>Ko roko</i>	Does not go to the farm
<i>Toni o</i>	Toni
<i>Ko rodo</i>	Does not go to the river
<i>To ba ji a gbobe kana</i>	When s/he wakes up s/he warms the soup
<i>A jeba tan a seku rono</i>	He eats <i>eba</i> and the stomach protrudes

*Omo oloro ti n jeyin awo*      Child from a wealthy lineage that eats guinea fowl  
eggs

The above illustrates a kind of egoistic rendition by the mother showing off the family lineage of the baby as s/he does not need to toil before being fed. It also indicates the fact the child is from a wealthy background. This, therefore, means that the *Orin Aremo* genre possesses intertextual links with *Oriki*, which essentially praises and describes its subject. This is the same attribute the poetic except above shows.

*Orin Aremo*, as a form of Yoruba poetry, can also create a sense of history and genealogical consciousness. Like *Oriki*, as we have mentioned elsewhere (Coker, 2008), it can draw the attention to the person's genealogical lineage, though it may not treat the issue in detail like *Oriki*:

<i>Toyin n ko o</i>	Where is Toyin
<i>O wa n le o</i>	S/he is home
<i>Nibo nile re?</i>	Where is her home?
<i>Abeokuta ni</i>	It is Abeokuta
<i>Wa mu mi debe?</i>	Come and lead me there
<i>O dola</i>	Wait till tomorrow
<i>Ola ti pe ju</i>	Tomorrow is too late
<i>Je a tete lo</i>	Let's go quickly

### ***Orin Aremo* as Poetic Therapy**

As stated earlier, *Orin Aremo* is essentially a song. Added to this, one can say that *Orin Aremo* is a spontaneous song of exigency. This is because it hardly follows a particular pattern or order. Its production is only driven by a need; a belief that, that is what a child needs at that point in time. As the Yoruba believe that "*pipase*" (mock dancing steps) works wonders to calm a child and that "*agbomojo lomo n moju*" (the child is usually familiar with whoever rocks/dances with him/her, in the overall belief that "*oorun lo n gba ti owo omode*" (sleep disarms a child).

In other words, given the thin line between poetry and music, and the fact that poetry is more encompassing than music, in view of its characteristic features, *orin aremo* is certainly a poetic form that falls in the category of poetic therapy movement which believes in the use of poetry for healing. In the words of Perie Longo (2011:1):

The focus of poetry for healing is self-expression and growth of the individual whereas the focus of poetry as art is the poem itself. But both use the same tools and techniques; language, rhythm, metaphor, sound, and image, to name a few. In the end, the result is often the same. The word "therapy," after all, comes from the Greek word *herapeia* meaning to nurse or cure through dance,

song, poem and drama, that is the expressive arts. The Greeks have told us that Asclepius, the god of healing, was the son of Apollo, god of poetry, medicine and the arts historically entwined.

The inference from the above is that the belief by Yoruba women in *Orin Aremo* as a form of therapy is not misplaced. However, *Orin Aremo* has a lot of uniqueness that makes it an interesting and important form. This is in connection with its relationship with other oral forms as well as its intertextual aesthetics. As would be shown in selected excerpts, *Orin Aremo* relates to other poetic forms and, indeed, transcends literature when addressing its subject.

It should be noted that scholars ( Leedy 1985, Orimoogunje 2011) have drawn attention to the relationship between oral literature and medical practice among the Yoruba. This extra-literary quality goes a long way in justifying the therapeutic significance of *Orin Aremo*. In discussing his version of *Orin Aremo*, which he calls *Orin Iremolekun*, Orimogunje categorizes this as a form which is found in a domestic context of health-related verbal art in indigenous health practice. According to him (p. 2):

The Yoruba believe that little babies understand what people say, though they cannot talk. This belief makes them say sweet things and make promises that can convince the little babies that the world is worth living in. Another cogent reason is that they believe that the little babies, or more appropriately, their inner selves have control over their health and their willingness to live. In other words, it is believed that the inner selves of the children hear the good wishes of the nursing mothers and endorse them. The effect of the genre is to make babies sleep sound----- that contributes immensely to their good health.

With an understanding of the above is the reality of the fact that “Africa’s long tradition of oral artistry still wields a remarkable influence on the contemporary life of its society” (Zewde, 2000). Therefore, the use of *Orin Aremo* as a form of poem therapy fits into this contextual framework.

In the contemporary Yoruba society, there are variations and interesting dimensions to the construction and creativity in *Orin Aremo*. As a matter of fact, *Orin Aremo* seems to parade an array of linguistically eclectic -----which indicates the level of education of the mother and her social standing. The point is that though the creation of *Orin Aremo* and the belief in its efficacy runs through women of all classes and varying social standing, the content of same depends on the author/songstress/poetess. Let us consider an excerpt from a middle class elite as an illustration:

Kunle, my baby

Omo daddy,

My fine- fine baby

I love you

Why are you crying?

I will buy you chocolate

I will buy you plenty ice cream

A Kunle-Kunle

The above shows that the mother in question refers to elements that are synonymous with her socio-educational exposure, through a rich blend of code-mixing and literary device of repetition. This is a further proof of the dynamism of *Orin Aremo*.

It should be stated that though from the foregoing, *Orin Aremo* has proved a worthwhile tool for mothers, especially nursing mothers to engage in psychotherapy, the perceived efficacy does not have a scientific and empirical base. The intrinsic creativity in *Orin Aremo* can also be said to endear the mother to the ward. The psychotherapeutic essence of *Orin Aremo* is thus grounded in the belief in its efficacy by its users – the mothers who are the production agents.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The discussion of the psychotherapeutic significance of *Orin Aremo* in this paper has taken into consideration the place of the oral form in Yoruba oral literature. Having established the gap that exists in oral literature scholarship about *Orin Aremo*, this paper identifies the form as possessing extra-literary attributes which position it as a unique and dexterous form exuding embellishments of songs, descriptive metaphors as well as dynamic themes which correspond to the milieu of production.

It remains to be said that through innovation, *Orin Aremo* has continued to be a relevant tool in contemporary society. Its peculiarity of poetic license which allows the composition to accommodate whatever sensibilities or idiosyncrasies the concerned mother considers expedient to introduce, all in a bid to achieve the ultimate aim of soothing the baby for whom the song-text is targeted.

As a therapeutic agent, *Orin Aremo* locates its efficacy in the psyche of its users, who, across generations continue to rely on its soothing potentials. This is certainly believed to be inherently embedded between the lines and which ultimately reflects its enduring relevance.

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