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A Semiotic Study of Court Poetry Performance in Nigeria

This paper is based on research into court poetry in four geo-political areas of Nigeria.[1] The areas: *Idah* in the Middle Belt, Bomo in the north, Oyo in the south-west and Benin in the mid-west are some of those areas where monarchy thrives in Nigeria. The research which started in 1999 is still ongoing. It reveals that among other things, both professional and non-professional praise singers are attached to kings' courts. According to tradition, specific families or clans known to specialise in this area are called court poets. Ruth Finnegan explains that they are trained to record in oral verses the great achievements of the king and his ancestors.[2]

In traditional Benin society of mid-western Nigeria, professional court poets are called *Ughoron* literally meaning "men of heaven's gate."[3] In Oyo community of South western Nigeria, one of such poets is called *akigbe oba* (*king's heralder*).[4] In Bomo village of Northern Nigeria, such poets are called *maroka* or "town criers."[5] So also in Idah, Igala community, there are *Amachodochi Atta* and *Amafokakachi Atta.*[6] 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 court entrance so that all things can pass before their watchful eyes. In Igalaland of central Nigeria, performance starts in the morning with greetings for Atta:

Gaabaidu,	Lion,
Olodudu o	Good morning
Atta moluji.	Wake up Atta.[7]

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. Both Adesola Olateju[8] and Akintunde Akinyemi[9] explain that 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.

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 purposes 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 Jacques Derrida asserts that performance is repetition of an action,[10] Richard Schechner considers it as "restored behaviour."[11] 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, all of whom assume roles. As an activity, performance in court

poetry arises within its social context. It is creative, realised, achieved and transcendent of the ordinary course of events. The startling ability in man to recreate himself and to transform into what he ordinarily is not is seen clearly. For example, in court poetry performance from Yoruba (Oyo), the royal wives assume different roles: poets, drummers, singers and dancers all at once.

Margaret Drewal contends that these transformations happen in a light mood which refreshes and loosens the tightness of the performance.[12] 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 a definite mood and attitude. In the process, performer and audience consciously and unconsciously engage in semiosis. Semiotics, the science of sign systems, is a study of systems of communication which can be linguistic or non-linguistic.[13] Each of the three types of sign which Ferdinard de Saussure distinguishes is evident in court poetry performance.[14] These include: *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.[15] 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." Saussure's position does not take cognizance of human subjects that are involved in the process of coding and decoding of signs. However, these human subjects are crucial to court poetry performance.

Umberto Eco's 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 position corroborates Eco's assertion that a sign function communicates ideas through a message when "two functions: expression and content enter into a mutual

correlation."[17] 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 the meaning-making process. 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."[18] He emphasises 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 the intelligibility of texts-in-context.

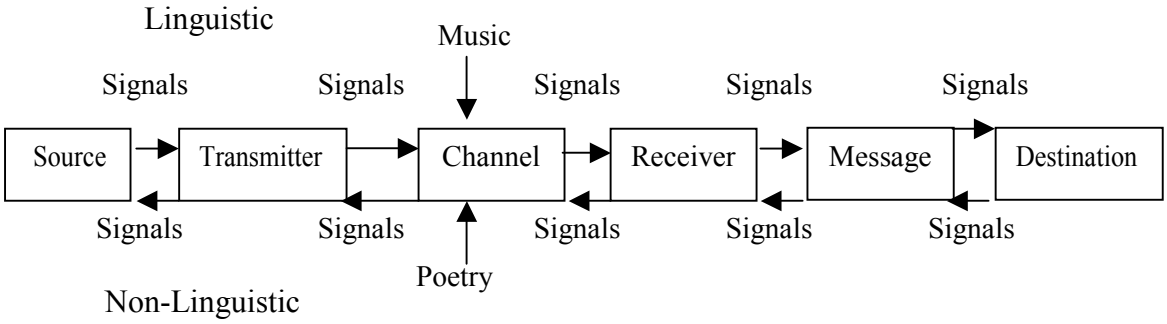

Fig. 1: cf Eco[19]

In general terms, this transaction can be described as the 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."[20] 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 chant) by the chief's wives in Bomo, Hausa community. This feedback system and inter-communication between performer and audience is one of the major features of court poetry performance.

The performance of court poetry shows a dialectical inter-relationship between content and code. One must assume, therefore, that the 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, Victor Shklovsky, poetic speech uses formal devices in such a way that our perception of the sound texture of ordinary language is renewed. When this is done, the familiar becomes de-familiarized. It is for this reason that Shklovsky asserts, "*de-familiarization is found everywhere form is found."* [21] 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	Those who do not know the great Oba
Ne I ma ere re	Let me show them the Oba
Oba hin ukpo	The great one who sits on the throne
O mu ukpo yan ukpo	He sits on the pavilion,
Ikueken nu ke aro ne	Many servants sit before him,
Ikueken nu ke iyeke nee	Many servants sit behind him,
Nikere gha gbe ezuzu	While many others fan him

In the Igala example below, the poet likewise makes strange through the use of repetition. This kind of repetition accounts for redundancy. The greater the redundancy, the more significant is the communication:[22]

Ojo gwo Atta	God greets Atta
Amideju Ogbe	Let me live
Ogbe gwo Atta	Ogbe greets Atta
Amideju	Let me live
Eju gwo Atta	Eju greets Atta
Amideju	Let me live
Ocheje gwo Atta	Ocheje greets Atta
Amideju	Let me live

In the Benin example, attention is drawn to the monarch through the content of the poem, while in the Igala example, attention is drawn to the monarch through its style of repetition, thus, it becomes self-focusing. The message gives the impression of saying something semantically rich, but ambiguous. The semantic richness derives from the feeling of sense one gets each time an expression is repeated that 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 Oyo (Yoruba):

Kinni yii, kinni yi,	This thing, this thing,
Kinni oniyeye yi,	This shameless thing,
Kinni alabuku yi,	This dishonoured thing,
Afolabi.	Afolabi.[23]

The verbal index *this* is a semantic code which denotes *closeness*. In its usage in these lines, it excludes physical connection with the referent, Afolabi, 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,	Alhaji Salihu, the son of Salihu,
Sarki mai ba da riga,	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*.

Fig. 2: Alhaji Makama heralding the appearance of Sarki of Bomo, Alhaji Salihu Dahiru (arrowed).

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, according to Tony Bennett, bears resemblance to the Russian formalists' notion of "ostranemic" or de-familiarization.[24]

In Oyo (Yoruba), the process of mentioning and introducing monarchs in old and new Oyo Kingdom involves this linguistic shifter. This is what Robert Scholes in *Structuralism in*

Literature calls "code of puzzles."[25] It is used as an aspect of narrative syntax which consists of hermeneutic code:

O wa dori taa ni?	Whose turn was it?
O do ri Aseeperi, Giwa,	It was aseeperi, Giwa,
Suulola, Mowanwa…	Suulola, Mowanwa …
O wa dori taa ni?	Whose turn was it?
O dori Afolabi…	It was Afolabi…
O wa dori taani?	Whose turn was it?
Adeyanju o ku o Deji?…	Adeyanju, how are you Deji?…
O wa dori taa ni?	Whose turn was it?
Layiwola nbe nle Layioye…	Layiwola is at home, Layioye …

The question-intonation is a vectorisation 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 Ayoola 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.[26] 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[27]. In Bomo, Alhaji Makama started his performance with an indexical sign from his drum, *gangan noma,*[28] 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 another performance by the royal wives in Bomo, the musical instruments that are used include a specially designed calabash with an open mouth turned upside down in water. It is beaten with silver cooking spoons. In Igala, music is produced by a team of male instrumentalists and female vocalists.

In a male/female binary opposition complementarity, the women sing, and dance round in circles while the men beat the drums. The men beat with drum sticks, two big round drums, called *okaga*[29] and beaten only for the monarch. In Oyo (Yoruba), musical instruments that accompany court poems include specially made calabashes of two types. The first which has a wide mouth is turned face down on the ground. It is beaten with hands by royal wives who serve as choruses. The second has a narrower mouth and is turned face down in water. It is beaten with two long sticks by a singer who doubles as vocalist and drummer. In Benin, the *Isikhuian* women's guild shake beaded gourds to the rhythm of their chant. In Oyo, the musical instrument called *aaro* is an important one. It is iron cast into a shape like that of a nymph. Two of them are struck together at intervals during the performance. In an oral interview with the court poet, Ayoola Babalola explains that *aaro* has a spiritual connection with the procreation of the monarch.

Fig. 3: *Aaro* musical instrument used during performance at the palace of Alaafin of Oyo, Oba Lamidi Adeyemi III.

The instrument, *aaro,* is a symbolic and personal code which, physically, has an arbitrary relationship with the procreation of the monarch.[30] 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, "*aaro"* exists for him as a source of procreation and he ensures its weekly usage. Thus the instruments used in different performances produce signs with explicit denotative and connotative values.

The women performers in Oyo and Bomo insert and inscribe themselves in the performance by using instruments such as spoons, calabash and gourds. These are domestic instruments with which women are associated, so they are index markers which connote in court poetry performance the elocutionary force of rejecting male-constructed instruments. Through this singular act, these women assert themselves by doing their own things: drumming and singing in performance. Drumming in particular is usually associated with men. Thus, by drumming, the women subvert men's role. They turn the performance into a site of struggle for power with the men. In this case, they take over power from the men by establishing their own authority and independence. Within their world, men are relegated. Thus, women become the seat of consciousness, "are selves not others."[31] Feminist criticism is rooted in this fundamental intuition. Indeed, performances by kings' wives in both Oyo and Bomo, despite the distance between the two areas, show such cultural similarities. The performances confirm the diffusionic notion that culture is contagious and imitative.

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.

What Hawkes refers to as symbolic codes, that is, codes which give people recognisable groupings and configurations, fits Barthes' description of *syntagm*.[32] In the performance by the *Isikhuan* women guild in Benin, the lead singers wore a crown-like hair-

do and tied *aso-oke*[33] round their chests. This differentiates them from other singers. The other singers dress in a uniform of *ankara*[34] made into traditional *iro* and *buba.*[35] In Igala, the costume of the male performers is blue and red *ayala*[36] (flowing gown) with a cap of the same material. In Bomo, the court poet dresses in *babariga*[37] with a matching cap.

Fig. 4: Male instrumentalists and female vocalists in a group photograph with the researcher during a performance in Idah.

The *babariga*, *ayala*, trousers and *ankara* uniforms fit together to make a particular kind of utterance and to evoke the impression that the performers are professionals and significant subjects. Its absence does not necessarily mean the opposite. These clothes in general are replicable stylisations 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. They also connote the prestige and authority that is attached to each rank and function.[38]

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 a few semi-fixed ones such as drums, trumpets, calabash and other instruments mentioned earlier. The first striking factor is the physical organisation of the empty space in a semicircular/circular form. This removes every demarcation and restriction between audience and performer-audience hence no proscenium arch exists between them. This facilitates stage-audience closeness.[39]

Fig. 5: Alhaji Makama (arrowed) performing court poetry for Sarkin Bomo at Bomo Village, Zaria

This use of space represents a semiotically loaded choice, subject to powerful rules which generate a range of cultural units. Edward Hall refers to this arrangement and the interpersonal relation as proxemic.[40] Furthermore, as Ropo Sekoni observes about oral performance, in court poetry, the performer and the audience are united in their perception of

the world.[41] 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 *yungba* chant, s/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. In Bomo, during the performance of *kirari* (praise poetry) for the monarch, his wives and their audience sing.

Similarly, during the performance 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?	Solo: Is Waziri around I inquire?
Isah Waziri Babba	Isah the senior Waziri,
Dan maro ki jikan maroki	The offspring and grand child of the griot
An yi da kai jiya	You were actively
	Involved yesterday and
Shekaranjiya ma an yi da kai	also last year, you were actively involved.
Chorus: Isah Waziri Babba	Isah the senior Waziri
Solo: Limamin garin yana nan?	Solo: Is Imam of the town around?
Chorus: Iman dan liman hey!	Chorus: Imam the offspring of Imam
	Hey Imam the son of Imam.

The audience's response through the pointing of finger at the two chiefs informed its 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 its 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 an 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 into the performance.

Frost and Yarrow argue that improvisation is not just a style or a performance technique; it is a dynamic principle operating in different spheres.[42] It is a transformative way of being or doing, a skill of using body, space and human resources to express ideas. Court poets do this in various ways. They learn praise chants about monarchs and warlords largely from oral sources. They, in turn, transmit these through oral performance. Each performance involves both recitation and spontaneous composition. Materials from the past are repeated, elaborated and contracted through the selection and matching of relevant lines, while new ones are created at every performance. Thus, any performance of a single praise-chant is never verbally identical with any other. In my recordings, the praise chants of Lawarikan, a hero of old Oyo 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 worded, demonstrating the inventiveness of the performer.

In composing his text, however, the court poet does not rely solely on the oral information passed to him. He draws also 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. Ayoola Babalola, the *rara* chanter of Alaafin Lamidi Adeyemi of Oyo, informed this researcher in an interview that when the *Alaafin* took a new wife and bought a new car, or acquired new property, he added this information to his praise-chant.[43] 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	God greets Atta
Amideju	Let me live
Ogbe gwo Atta	Ogbe greets Atta
Amideju	Let me live
Eju gwo Atta	Eju greets Atta
Amideju	Let me live
Ocheje gwo Atta	Ocheje greets Atta

In the pattern here, the fixed words are *gwo Atta* or "greets Atta."

In y*ungba* (melodious) chant from Oyo Kingdom, the formula is different. The praise of each king begins with an opening proclamation which is followed by a metaphoric eulogy and then the name of the eulogised king. In praising Atobatele, the court poet has this to say:

Hin-in-in, Ara ojo ojo bara,	Oh! Yes, people, Rain does not burn melon in pod,
Ajimatii Aseeperi omo Olojo	Ajimatii Aseeperi, son of Olojo

Adedibu's praise chant begins with:

Hin-in-in asorobi nija	Oh Yes! One too dangerous to challenge to a duel
Baba Ajuwon, Adedibu	Father of Ajuwon, Adedibu

In these examples, the words are not fixed but the pattern is: it is into this pattern that the chanter weaves the substitute. Special attention is paid to discrete segments of the whole performance. This is often characterised by shifts in topicality and personality. All the substitutable patterns are negotiated in improvisation.

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 Oyo mix their linguistic codes. Ayoola Babalola, mixes his poem which is chanted in Oyo dialect with English words:

Kabiyesi se bee o bo saafin baba re,	His Royal Highness is king,
Won njoba lo, kini won o se	And still king, What will they do?
Atanda ti lo *twenty-five*.	Atanda has spent twenty-five years.

Besides, the poets invent generic codes. The underlying sub-genre 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:

Iba o o, mo juba o o	Homage Oh! I pay homage Oh!
Iba orisa, mo juba o o	Homage to the divinity, I pay homage
Koba o je oosa ,adua o da oo,	Let prayer be answered oh, The King be a divinity
Iroko e e e,	Eh eh eh iroko,
Koba o je oosa adua o da.	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 idiosyncracies and other ideolectal and dialectal influences serve as materials for the evocation of a poetic experience. The audience's attention is sustained

through the introduction of a 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:

O dori Afolabi	It was the turn of Afolabi
Aarinola Kabiyesi,	Aarinola, father I salute
baba kabiyesi oko Moyiola,	you, husband of Moyiola
Afolabi Boorepo	Afolabi Boorepo
Bolajokoo Alafin idera ni,	Bolajoko Alafin, the pleasant one
Oba l'omo Lawoyin…	Lawoyin's son was a great king…
Ote igboro, ote Oyo	Public conspiracy, the conspiracy in Oyo
O gbe Baba d'elesa nijosi…	Took father to Ilesa once…
Awon eeyan jankan	Important people
jankan, Afolabi	were expecting the King at home,
Won n reti ki baba	They were expecting His
Kabiyesi o wale…	royal majesty, Afolabi…
Aaro kan kutu kutu	One early morning,
feere ile n mo,	at dawn,
Aarinola nla gboku	Aarinola heard about the demise of
oko iya nikola…	the husband of the tribal marks maker …

Poetic images in the above lines 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 mood 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, stabilises and depresses the audience's sensibilities through this provocation of variegated emotions.[44] The poet uses his body, space, and other 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 recognisable to others. Thus, court poets embrace movement when words are not adequate.

The kinesics components of court poetry performance are movement, gesture, facial expression and posture. 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."[45] Such signals 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 come 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 Peter Barry calls "code of semes."[46] According to Hawkes, this is a code of connotations which utilises hints or "flickers of meaning" generated by certain signifiers.[47]

Makama announces Sarki's arrival:

Sarki ya fito	The king has come out
Alhaji Salihu dan Salihu	Alhaji Salihu the offspring of Salihu
Mai garin Bomo, Alhaji Salihu	The emir of Bomo, Alahji 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 *materialises* the poetic subject and his world, by asserting his identity with an 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 emphasizes or even defines the kind of speech act in the performance by the poets. During the performance of *Igbatiti* (hitting the calabash)[48] by the royal wives in Oyo (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: *A a Afolabi eke l'okunrin o e,* meaning "A a Afolabi men are backbiters."

This gesture serves to emphasize that the utterance is an ironical comment, a mockery of the character of Afolabi, one of the past kings of Oyo. On hearing this line, the *Alaafin* who understands that this private code refers to his father Afolabi, moves swiftly to the microphone and sings in response: *A a Afolabi eke l'obinrin o e*, meaning "A a Afolabi 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. During *Yungba* (melodious chant)[49] performance in Oyo by sixty-four year old queen Ramotu and seven year old Ganiyat, the older woman uses kinesics to engage Ganiyat's attention. When chanting was about to start, the elderly woman moved her head up and down in a fashion analogous to that of the lizard, suggesting readiness. Once the chant commenced and Ramotu observed that Ganiyat had

forgotten some lines, she called her to order by jerking her with her elbow. Similarly 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 Oyo 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 Oyo moves her hip to the left and then to the right during performance.

Fig. 6: Dancers during court poetry performance at Bomo Village

In Bomo (Fig. 6), the audience spontaneously formed a dance troupe, which changed hands from time to time. Each dancer has a hoe. The dancers raise up one leg in front, and then bend 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 *Yungba* (melodious) chant of different kings in the old and new Oyo Empire, queen Ramotu indexicates 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.[50] 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 chant 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 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 poet's familiarity and excitement with his chant. In Benin, the women shake their waists from left to right and from

right to left again. In Oyo, the women choruses take sitting positions with the calabash and shake their waists melodiously to the chant.

The lead chanters stand before the monarch and *throw* phrases at the *Alaafin* in unison. Ayoola Babalola of the court of Oba Lamidi, the Alaafin of Oyo, 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 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. Ayoola Babalola of Oyo palace chants at a loud, high pitch and fast rate.[51] 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 timbre. This is done on a regular rhythmical pattern.

During *Yungba* chant, when the spirits of past and present Kings in Oyo Kingdom are evoked, the royal wives chant with a moderate voice, on a low pitch, at a slow rate, in a resonant timbre and with irregular pauses. This is because of the feeling of sadness which the chant arouses. *Igbatiti* on the other hand is performed in an atmosphere of cheerfulness. Thus, it is rendered at a moderately high pitch and voice, at a moderately fast rate, with a regular rhythm and in 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.

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

[1] Nigeria is a West African country that is inhabited by about 120 million people with about 200 different languages. Its three major languages are *Hausa, Yoruba* and *Igbo*. This paper is based on research into court poetry in Nigeria. It started as a Ph.D. project in 1999 but is still ongoing.
[2] Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Nairobi: OUP, 1970).
[3] *Ughoron*: *Edo* name for court poets.
[4] *Akigbe oba: Yoruba* name for court poets.
[5] *Maroka: Hausa* name for court poets.
[6] *Amachodochi Atta* and *Amafokakachi Atta: Igala* name for men who praise the king, Atta.
[7] The court poems quoted in this paper are some of those collected from the research.
[8] Adesola Olateju, "Yungba Royal Chant: A specialized Yoruba Oral Poetic Type" (*Oye: Ogun Journal of Arts* 1, 1988), 38-54.
[9] Akintunde Akinyemi, "The Aesthetics of Yoruba Yungba chant" (*Inquiry in African Languages and Literatures* 1.1, 1997), 34-44.
[10] Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1978), 247.
[11] Richard Schechner, "Collective Reflexivity: Restoration of Behaviour" in J. Ruby, ed., *A Crack in the mirror: Reflexive Perspectives in Anthropology* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia University Press, 1982), 39-81.
[12] Margaret Drewal. *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency* (Indianapolis; Indiana University Press, 1992).

[13] Pierre Guiraud, *Semiology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 3.
[14] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics,* (London: Fontana, 1915).
[15] Raman Selden and Peter Widdowson, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory,* 3rd ed. (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 105.
[16] Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press; London: Macmillan, 1976), 16.
[17] Guiraud, Ibid.; Eco, 49.
[18] Eco, 16.
[19] Ibid., 33.
[20] Guiraud, 5.
[21] Victor Shklovsky, "Art As Technique" (Lemon and Reis, 1965), 3-24.
[22] Guiraud, 15.
[23] In the full text of this court poem from Oyo, Afolabi Boorepo is said to be one of the former kings in Oyo kingdom who went into exile because of the conspiracy of his subjects. He stayed in exile, first in Ilesa, Osun State, and later in Lagos, Lagos State of Nigeria. He later died in exile. The poet concludes that the end comes for the hunchback (used metaphorically for Afolabi) whose request is not granted by the divinity. After this come the lines quoted in this paper. The derogatory remark about Afolabi in these lines as "shameless thing" is obviously a product of this situation.
[24] Tony Bennett, *Formulation and Marxism* (London: Methuen, 1979), 53-56.
[25] Robert Scholes, *Structuralism in Literature: An Introduction* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), 154.
[26] Charles S. Peirce, *Collected Papers: Philosophical Writings of Peirce* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1931-1958).
[27] Selden and Widdowson, 105.
[28] *Gangan noma:* a big round drum used in Bomo during court poetry performance.
[29] *Okaga:* two big drums used in Idah for court poetry performance.
[30] Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (London: Methuen, 1977), 117; Selden and Widdowson, 106.
[31] Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt, eds., *Feminist Criticism and Social Change: Sex, Class, and Race in Literature* (London: Methuen, 1983), 264.
[32] Hawkes, Ibid.; Selden and Widdowson, 108.
[33] *Aso-Oke:* locally made, woven, expensive material that is popular in the Yoruba-speaking areas of Nigeria. It is worn on special occasions.
[34] *Ankara:* Yoruba word for a locally made cotton material.
[35] *Iro* and *Buba:* Yoruba words for wrapper and top. This is a local style of attire worn by women in the South Western part of Nigeria.
[36] *Ayala:* Igala word for a flowing gown worn by men. It is popular among the Igala people of the middle belt zone of Nigeria.
[37] *Babariga:* Hausa word for a flowing gown worn by men. It is common among the Hausa people of Northern Nigeria.
[38] Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London and NY: Methuen, 1980), 62-66.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Edward Hall, *The Hidden Dimension* (NY: Doubleday, 1966).
[41] Ropo Sekoni, "The Narrator, Narrative Pattern and Audience Experience in Oral Narrative Performance" in Isidore Okpewho, ed., *Oral Performance in Africa* (Ibadan: Spectrum, 1990), 139-159.
[42] A. Frost and R. Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama* (London: Macmillan, 1990).
[43] *Rara:* a form of poetry that is common in the south-western part of Nigeria; *Alaafin*: title of the king of Oyo, a town in south-western Nigeria.
[44] Sekoni, Ibid.
[45] Ray L. Birdwhistell, *Kinesics and Context: Essays on Body-Motion Communication* (Mimeograph, 1971), 117.
[46] Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literature and Cultural Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).
[47] Hawkes, Ibid.
[48] *Igbatiti* is a kind of court poetry performed by wives of the king of Oyo.
[49] *Yungba***,** melodious chant, is a form of court poetry performed by royal wives in Oyo.
[50] Ferdinand Poyato, "Silence and Stillness as Sign Processes" in Tasso Borbe, ed., *Approaches to Semiotics* II (Proceedings of the 2nd Congress of the International Association for Semiotic Studies, Vienna, 1979), 1219-1227.
[51] David Abercombie, "Paralanguage" (*British Journal of Disorders of Communication*, 1968), 55-59.