

## **Oríkì: A Modified Oral System of Myth and Realism**

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### ***Abstract***

The aesthetic quality of man, especially Africans lies in the fact that they are a group of people who hold certain principles, opinions, beliefs and values connecting them to their environment. This can be historiographical exuded as a panegyric imitation expanding the horizon of myth and realism in Yorúbà praise poetry. Thus aiding socialisation as well as cultural appreciation of indigenous value system. Our concern is Africa; precisely, the oríkì of the Yorúbà extraction in Southwest Nigeria, WestAfrica. Etymologically, from the primitive societies the Yorúbà entrenched their beliefs system from one generation to another in the form of folktales, myths, story-telling, and dance as a modified oral system known as oríkì. This is to keep sacred realities employed in engineering socio-conditioning and cosmological interpretations. Oríkì as a concept captures the whole essence of an individual's personology in both terrestrial and celestial domains. This is further regarded as the whole essence of a person in connection with his/her origination, hence, if you want to know “someone ideological individualism as well as collectivism as related to an environment” then you have to understand his/her oríkì, premier facie. The quest to know this was motivated by the desire to access the extent to which myths and

realism are embedded in Yorùbà Oríkì and subsequently how it contributes to the element of assessment in praise-poetry. For possible investigation, archetypal criticism is employed to investigate the relationship between Yorùbà worldview of oríkì, praise-poetry, and its relevance to contemporary realities wherewith to interpret the philosophy, psychology and sociology of individual/collective existence.

**Keywords: Oríkì, Oral, Yorùbà, Myth and Realism**

### **Introduction**

Oríkì can reveal the history, psychology, sociology and the philosophy surrounding an individual, clan, family, community or generation. The system of oríkì transcends time by emerging from primordial times to serve as a way of reflection on the nature of a character as well as recounting his/her ancestral patrimonies which become an oeuvre to be traced to/from the individual. This is mostly done in an epistemological style of literary conversation known as oríkì.

The sensitivity and inquisitiveness to the world around us give the wherewithal to existence and purpose by formulating stories (myths), which arise from given occurrences in an environment and thus attributing praises as a historical corpus. These stories help philosophically, psychologically and sociologically to develop the humanistic repertoire that frames the socio-structure of an individual as well as collective. It provides the bases for caution and rewards for life whether to be rejected or accepted as a norm to educate the mind as a backdrop to realism.

These uniqueness are apparent in the behavioural patterns of humans which can be seen in their daily relationships. To explicate more on this, Abimbola sees myths and realism from the angle of communal culture and hence, he states that: “communal culture is at the level of

group psychology which I hereby define as the set of beliefs, doings, and practices that make up the communal bank of a group's achievement” (129). This establishes the fact that the communal psychology can be related to the mental characteristics of a group about certain conceptual framework on their existence, whether through assimilation, imbibing or absolving which can be seen in the peoples' socio-biographical studies. In this, we can find myth and realism projected as media of conveying the communal conception of space, time, and thought about individual, family or community.

It is a normal phenomenon that every society transcends the tenets that have been the straw that binds them together as well as helping them to survive. Over the years, values and expected behavioural patterns are being shaped into the minds of people, following how they are nurtured by their parents and guardians in oral form. Most common is the folklore in Africa that has been an intrinsic part of the Yorùbà society. In essence, the emergence of myths can be attributed to folklore which gives rise to stories used to buttress realities used by the older generation to the younger generations to keep the continuum of such realities. It is expedient to say that different cultures have various myths attached to their existence. Thus, we can have Greek myths, Roman myths, English myths, and African myths. However, in this research we are concerned with the Yorùbà myth, as enshrined in the reality of oríkì.

### **Defining Oríkì**

Oríkì refers to the praise poem that is used to honour an individual in relation to his/her existence. Akporobaro says, like panegyric, praise poetry is “a public speech or written composition that is devoted to the prolonged, effusive praise of some person, group of people, or public body.” Also, he adds that oríkì, praise poetry, is a form of poetry that is specifically designed for the eulogistic portrayal of the virtues of a given subject. The subject of the praise may be a king, a chief, a war leader, an animal or plant (56).” Mostly, this is done

through a succinct use of metaphors, symbols, and allusion.

Oríkì is so essential that praise-singers use it as an opportunity to gain the favour of those being praised. Olatunji Olatunde says oríkì is, “the most powerful of Yorúbà poetic forms. Every Yorúbà poet therefore strives to know the oríkì of important people in his locality as well as lineage because every person, common or noble has his own body of utterances, by which he can be addressed” (97). Barber Karin regards, “Oríkì and its variants as essential oral forms which cuts across most African cultures” (1991). Oluwole Coker opines that “as an aspect of Yorúbà poetry, oríkì relies heavily on the knowledge and mastery of its subject by the performer” (2). UlliBeier, a distinguished and pioneer Yorúbà researcher adds that “Oríkì is a poetic phrase that is used to describe or praise a god or a person. Every Yorúbà has his own oríkì, which he inherited in the course of his life.”

Sometimes, the oríkì may be sung by professional bards or played by drummers. For instance, a set of drummers could be placed at the entrance of the gate, who announces the presence of a visitor to the king by chanting their oríkì. This means that the drummers must know the praise names of every family in the town. Beier adds that ‘on certain days, they go about the streets, addressing each passer-by with his oríkì.’ Then those being praised give the drummers an amount of money. This act of singing the praise names of individuals by these singers also serves as a means of livelihood to them and as entertainment for the listeners. Examples of musicians that benefitted from such acts are Shina Peters, Ebenezer Obey, Sunny Ade, amongst others.

Oríkì in Yorúbà land is performed by different categories of people for various occasion. Okpewho (1990) observes in his comprehensive study of the audience that, “Performance relationship in oral performance affirms this constitutive value of oríkì in diverse performances.” Furthermore, instances abound in the rendition made by ijáláorìrè̀mòjé (Hunters chant/dirge) as the exclusive preserve of the

lineage of the hunters. We also have the iyere Ifá rendered by the worshippers of the Ifá oracle. There is also the Èkún Ìyàwó sung by brides and is handed down from generation to generation.

Coker notes that, “Yorúbà, like any other human society, believe not only in celebrating humanistic achievements or landmarks, they also attach great importance to human innate tendencies for praise singing.” Here, oríkì then becomes a means of personally appreciating a person for the good deeds that is been done. Most times, the person being praised utters that “his head is swelling” as a result of the delights he gets from the oríkì.

Another dimension of oríkì is also seen in religious situations. Akinyemi notes that “Besides major Yorúbà deities like Ògún, Şàngó, Ifá, oríkì serves as the basis of the religious chant used in the worship of the Òrìsà in Yorúbà communities.”

Oríkì is also used as a way of describing a character. Olatunji suggests that “naming is a significant factor in oríkì. This is because a name assigned to an individual transcends identity but extends to other pedants as the situation warrants” (68). Coker also observes that in contemporary times, a name often becomes the easiest way to describe and celebrate a person. Oríkì is used as well to describe the personal traits or physical appearance of a person. To this, Babalola opines that:

There are various oríkì of people of diverse classes therefore for every individual, there is likely to be an oríkì that describes him in totality, taking into account physical, structural and even the natural construct or mien of the person. In contemporary times, names which are part of a person's identity usually reveal individual's traits (125).

Amongst the descriptions used in identifying a person includes,

agùntásoólò used to call a person that is very tall. Ìbàdíàrán for a beautiful lady. Abólóunjekú used to call an individual that is a glutton. Abiwátútù for a calm and cool-headed person. Abifèrèsélénu for an individual with a gap-tooth. Ọkùnrinméji for a voracious person. Coker adds that “these descriptions are essentially direct assessment of the individuals concerned as oríkì employs descriptive metaphors in doing this.” He also attests to the fact that “Oríkì is also used as a worthy tool of satire and social reformation. Contemporary social and political developments have been subjects of folk musicians’ approach to praising individuals involved in identifiable scenarios.”

Barber describes oríkì as “attributions or appellations: epithets, elaborated or concise, which is addressed as subject and which are equivalent to, or alternatives to, names”. She also adds that:

All entities in existence are said to have their own oríkì. Oríkì are felt to capture and evoke the essential characteristics of the subject: to have the most profound and intimate access to its inner nature. In utterance, therefore, they evoke the subject's power, arouse it to action, and enhance its aura. They are always in the vocative case, and in utterance the performer always establishes an intense, one to one bond with the addressee as long as the utterance lasts (315).

Thus, the value of oríkì among the Yorúbà be it at home or in diaspora is part of their humanity, value that is upheld by their offspring as a source of interpretation to their existence.

### **Myth as a Contemporary Issue**

Myth means false stories that are recounted from generation to generation. The survival of myth despite its proposition as false makes it thrive more and deeper in contemporary times, because of its values and relevance to race, class and tradition. Myths remain a part of our daily values as it forms part of our consciousness. Some myths are stories

about beings that existed long ago and in the bid to strive to achieve some extraordinary feat, the lives of these beings are recalled and emulated. We cannot push aside or rule out myths from our contemporary times because they are old or archaic, it will only mean an attempt to shy away from the foundation/fundamental of our thought level which forms the microcosm of various ideologies.

In primordial times, some cultural practices that were regarded as important and necessary are now being put aside by young people in contemporary times. One of the areas is marriage which has continued to survive despite various odds and demands for change. In contemporary times there is an opposition that a woman should be duly committed to her husband despite being ill-treated. Thus, the contemporary woman believes she can be a single parent or even adopt a child without being necessarily joined to a man or woman in holy matrimony. On this, Idang opines that:

A look at the African reveals that marital rites and practices are usually carried out in line with the custom of the society concerned. The polygamous marriage was more preferred; not because the African is naturally polygamous as some would say, but because it was associated with wealth, power, influence, social status and the strong African desire to be surrounded by many children and relations (108).

In view of the above, it was expected that the woman should give birth to as many as she could. Some of the children would assist their father on the farmland as farming was the means of survival and sustenance. Hence, polygamy is encouraged as more children implied wealth, power, authority and strength. However, over the years, with the present economic condition, polygamy has been put under check as contemporary people have embraced monogamy as a way of life. Ologundudu posits that although Yorúbà men were mostly polygamous, the teaching of the Ifá stresses that it is suitable to keep one wife (97).

To this end, marriage is seen as an integral institution of the society because it is from there we have individuals who would change other institutions such as financial, career, health, etc. There are series of activities that are carried out before, during and after the marriage ceremony. For instance, in the Yorùbà parlance, the bride to be has her own oríkì chanted by her to separate her from singlehood. Saliu suggests that, “nuptial weep (Èkúnìyàwó) is an epitomic and nostalgic repertoire of joy and sorrow. The bride, in her euphoria, feels highly elated as she attains the crucial stage of marital recognition (38).”

In Èkúnìyàwó, the bride expresses her feelings of being relocated to another place entirely different from her parents' home. Such chant is a serious poetic ritual which signifies a rite of passage in a woman's life. In essence, the bride has little or no knowledge of the family she is about to go to and all the uncertainties that go with marriage. But in contemporary times, the couple to be are privy to the affairs they share and they interact freely without restriction to reduce uncertainties. In fact, the 21st century lady does not need to sing the Èkún Ìyàwó before she moves in with her husband. She is a self – dependent and never sees any significance in pre-marital cultural ethos.

Another integral aspect of the society that also distinguishes man from animals is bodily garment, which appear in various style. In primordial times, Yorùbà garments were Òfi, Kampala, iró and búbá, and the apparel of the king as well as the warriors were different amongst others. But now in contemporary times, the relevance of the garments have dropped.

Clothing has been an important part of daily lives and apart from it being a way of avoiding nudity, it also portrays the spirit of togetherness and depicts cultural essentialities among a set of people. Ajani suggests that,

“one of the cultural traditions that have endured despite modernization among the Yorùbà in Nigeria is the aṣọ ẹbí practice (108).” Precisely, the aṣọ ẹbí is a local and traditional sowed garments in various style. He adds that, “at the onset of the practice, aṣọ ẹbí was originally meant to be a family uniform, among the Yorùbà people to enable the guest to identify members of the family during an occasion. However, in recent times, it has become a medium of economic transaction and diffused into other groups in Nigeria” (116). There is hardly any social ceremony such as wedding, naming, birthday, burial and more recently clothing in political campaigns, etc., that does not warrant the aṣọ ẹbí practice. This practice has also spread to other cultures in Nigeria such as the Igbo who call it Ashebi, and Hausa where it is known as Yaye (vogue), Znkooor aṣọ ẹbí; and more notable to other African cultures such as Ghana, Gambia, and Liberia amongst others. This actually is an extraction from the Yorùbà mythical philosophy of togetherness and semblance.

In the oríkì of Anike we are told that sometimes the clothes men put on, though used to cover up their nakedness becomes a snare and discomfort to them. The contemporary line of clothes has gone to the extreme that all forms of crazy designs are formed to the extent that it bears similar resemblance to that of a naked person.

Clothes we humans wear tend to conceal transparency and become a form of bondage. Yet without these clothes, without the expensive double strings of waist and hip beads. The buttocks will be exposed. Unlike you, others derobe and they resemble the fast and playful red colobus monkey. Some others derobe and behold resemble a plain monkey (Oríkì Àníké).

The above oríkì of Àníké shows the attempt humans make in clothing themselves. It is likened to that of dressing like a monkey, even though humans use beads around their hips and waist so as not to expose their buttocks.

Also, it is necessary to state that the act of avoiding nudity may be the reason garment is worn, but there are several garments that connote a particular symbol. It could be in the form of rags as seen in the oríki of Şàngó, where he is clothed in rag like that of a widow:

If you do not share your maize gruel with him. He will slip under your finger nail and take share. Şàngó takes by force! If you do not offer him a seat he will sit on top of your nose! He takes his neighbour's roof and covers his own head. He lends money and does not ask for it in return. His cloth is ragged like that of a widow. Şàngó does as it pleases. If he likes, he can make maize gruel from bananas. If he likes, he can wear his torn garment (Oríki Şàngó).

The above oríki depicts Şàngó as a person with authority and a philanthropist who does as he pleases, yet he is clothed in rags like that of a widow.

Also in the oríki of Èrinlè:

He owns something that cannot be found in the king's house: His cloth is full of lice! He refuses to pay for the beer, he refuses to pay for the kola. But we do not ask him for the money (Oríki Èrinlè).

This oríki shows that Èrinlè is dignified to be cloth with lice, possibly because he has some things in his possession that even the king does not have, and so he refuses to pay for some of his purchases because his fame/honour/integrity can stand for him.

Another contemporary issue that cuts across the society is the treatment of women. In primitive times, women were laden with the burden of child bearing and care of the family. Most importantly is the restriction on them to voice out their inadequacies. But it took the effort of some women who fought relentlessly to prove their worth. A notable example is Olókun, the goddess of the sea:

Come! Come! Come unto me. All you that need wealth. And I will give you the best. I am the goddess of the seas and oceans; Olókun, the very first woman to wear a crown. Olókun, three quarters of the earth, is mine. Olókun, infinitesimally small is earth's treasure, when compared to mine. Olókun, millions of yet undiscovered chest. Precious, I preserve for mankind. Olókun! You know the Atlantic; I was there as Olókun Sprawling the beds of the Atlantic. I am still Olókun millennia ago. I was senior to Olókun but I was created by your Olorun. Organism living Organism, non-living. All in my bosom. Precious stones, gold and corals, cowries, black gold and emeralds, all in my bosom. Come to me! Come to me! (Oríki Olókun)

This oríki depicts the fact that women cannot be excused from the affairs of the society. Olókun as a woman describes her territory, the sea, as having a vast amount of resources such as beads, precious stones, cowries, black gold, emerald and corals in her possession. And so, she speaks authoritatively, that anyone who needs wealth should come to her. Furthermore, as part of the values in Yorúbà existence, the reverence and worship of gods and goddesses is held in high esteem and that is why despite the advent of Christianity and Islam in the 15th century, the worship of gods and goddesses is still much viable.

Acquah observes that:

For many Africans and Ghanaians, in particular, it is religion more than anything else that shapes their worldview and participation in social life. The African traditional religious belief is that human beings do not live in this world alone; there is a sense of human beings' close relationship with nature. Humanity, animals, and plants have their own existence and place in the universe as independent parts of a whole. There are also spiritual beings that are more powerful than humankind and this opens up the African to the divine and to seeking affinity with these spiritual powers. Religious belief is thus diffused in all spheres of life filing them

with meaning and significance (10).

In the process of rendering the oríkì for a particular god, the worshipper is prone to making several promises and affirming their dedication to them. The worshipper profusely begs Šàngó as he makes his request known.

Profit is seen as a source for wealth. In other words, anyone can be wealthy such as the madman referred to in the oríkì below. If a madman could be made wealthy, it means anyone could attain riches and wealth as long as life is concerned. This is synonymous to contemporary time where wealthy people are often children from poor homes, destitute, etc., who wrestle their ways to the top. This philosophy of life is like the laissez faire economy where anyone is capable of being wealthy to become anything in any society. This oríkì shows that the contemporary position of capital-democratic nature of wealth is possible and there is no exclusion to success as long as the person involved is ready for the visitation of Àjé:

Àjé gave light to the war  
Of the city Àjé gave the  
Light to the boa  
Àjé you gave the light to Onipàsánòwèrè  
He went to the madman's house and made him a  
character  
Àjé, I greet you, ...  
Ifá so that you can come with me Àjé please,  
Come to me, stay with me and do not leave me.

In the contemporary world, profit usually comes to those who strive and work hard and not to idle people who prefer to sit and do nothing. So, it is always profitable to be hardworking as there is a reward attached to being hardworking.

#### **Yorúbà Worldview in Relation to Contemporary Realities**

The Yorúbà beliefs can be described as a rich cosmological endowment that has been active since the primordial times. The Yorúbà cosmology beliefs exude some of the tenets that are used to distinguish them as a people and such as are germane to sustaining a unique race. Soyinka captures this essence in the following lines:

For the Yorúbà, the gods are the final measure of eternity, as humans are of earthly transience. To think, because of this, that the Yorúbà mind reaches intuitively towards absorption in godlike essence is to misunderstand the principle of religious rites, and to misread as many have done, the significance of religious possession. Past, present and future being so pertinently conceived and woven into the Yorúbà world view, the element of eternity which is the gods' prerogative does not have the same equality of remoteness or exclusiveness which it has in Christian or Buddhist culture. The belief of the Yorúbà in the contemporaneous existence within his daily experience of these aspects of time has long been recognized but again misinterpreted. It is no abstraction (144).

As part of the cosmology of the Yorúbà worldview, there are three worlds known to them. They are the world of the unborn, the world of the dead and the world of the living. Soyinka opines that “the past is the ancestors, the present belongs to the living, and the future to the unborn” (148).

The world of the unborn refers to the world of the future where the existence of life springs from. This world is likened to the world of the innumerable germ cells that abound in the loins of a man. At the time of copulation, the cells are released and the race for the egg begins, upon which, despite their innumerable amount, only the lucky cell is enclosed and life begins. This is the world of the unborn. In Soyinka's Fourth Stage, he explains that “it is necessary to recall that the past is not a mystery and that although the future (the unborn) is yet unknown, it is not a mystery to the Yorúbàbut co-existent in our present consciousness(149)”.

The second world is the world of the dead which in the Yorùbà world view refers to the departed ancestors who are still ever present to provide assistance to the living. The Yorùbà believe the departed do not die but only ascend to the world of the ancestors to rest. Thus each individual's orí, destiny, comes with uniqueness in relation to the family, clan and community he/she is born. This uniqueness in relation to his/her ancestry forms an oríkì for that individual, the family or the community.

### Conclusion

This study has examined the reflections on Yorùbà socio-cultural realities of oríkì as a panegyric exposition revealing the unique fluidity of praise-poetry between the past and the present. Thus expanding the horizon in myth and realism as embedded in oríkì. It is no doubt that contemporary times seem to be delineated from the activities of the primordial times and one of the ways to investigate primordial time from the Yorùbà perspective is in oríkì which is an ancient philosophical, psychological, historical and literary corpus of an individual and collectives. Hence, some of the ancient and traditional values of socializations are embedded in oríkì to encourage appreciation and integration and intergration of cultural heritage into modern systemic existence.

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