Oral Poetics of Anticipation: Okun Yorùbá *Èẹ̀pà* Songs and the Literary Significance of *Òẹ̀wè* (*Ọghẹ*) Pre-Processional Lyrics

By

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Abstract

This paper examines Òẹ̀wè (also known as Ọghẹ), the pre-processional songs of the Okun Yorùbá Èẹ̀pà masquerade as a distinct and sophisticated corpus of oral poetry that performs crucial aesthetic, ritual, and social functions. Often treated as ancillary to the masquerade spectacle, Òẹ̀wè songs are repositioned in this paper as generative threshold texts that construct anticipation, authorise sacred movement, and mediate the transition from everyday social time to ritual performance. Drawing on oral literary theory and performance studies, the article undertakes a close literary and contextual analysis of selected Òẹ̀wè lyrics, focusing on their poetic language, performative contexts, and embedded moral and historical consciousness. The findings reveal that Òẹ̀wè employs metaphor, hyperbole, repetition, and proverbial expression to encode communal memory, ethical instruction, and cultural identity within sound and performance. By foregrounding anticipation as a poetic strategy, the study paper demonstrates that meaning in the Èẹ̀pà masquerade is actively produced before physical spectacle emerges. The paper contributes to

Yorùbá oral literature scholarship by highlighting the literary autonomy of pre-processional songs and emphasising the importance of aural and pre-performative forms in African ritual aesthetics.

Keywords: Oral poetry, anticipation, Okun Yorùbá, *Èẹ̀pà* masquerade, *Èẹ̀pà* songs, *Òṣùwè, Ọghẹ,* literary significance, pre-processional lyrics

Introduction

One of the fundamental components of oral literature that is deeply embedded in the social, cultural, and ritual life of many societies, particularly in Africa is oral poetry. It is a poetic expressions that are composed, performed, transmitted, and preserved primarily through speech, song, and performance rather than through written texts. According to Finnegan (2012), oral poetry operates as a living performance in which meaning is produced through the interplay of delivery, situational context, and active audience engagement. Oral poetry is a fluid, performative art form recreated in each performance, with meaning shaped by voice, rhythm, gesture, music, and audience participation.

Employing devices such as repetition, tonal variation, and metaphor, it enhances memorability and aesthetic effect, especially in tonal languages like Okun-Yorùbá. Beyond prowess, oral poetry preserves history, transmits moral values, reinforces communal identity, and mediates between the human and sacred realms, functioning as a sophisticated literary system that integrates language, performance, memory, and social meaning (Bauman, 1977; Barber, 1991). Thus, oral poetics refers to the study and practice of how poetic meaning is created, performed, and transmitted through spoken and sung forms within specific cultural contexts.

However, anticipation could be described as a heightened state of expectation through which individuals or communities prepare mentally, emotionally, and symbolically for an impending event. Kaya and Öner (2019) define anticipation as the process of predicting future actions or behaviours based on any kind of information from the current or past. In cultural and performative contexts, anticipation is deliberately produced to orient attention, intensify emotional response, and frame how the forthcoming event will be experienced and

interpreted. It operates as a transitional condition between what is absent and what is about to appear, creating readiness for engagement and meaning-making.

The concept of oral poetics of anticipation, therefore, refers to the ways in which spoken and sung verbal arts function to create expectancy, emotional readiness, and symbolic orientation prior to the occurrence of a significant ritual or performative event. Within oral performance traditions, anticipation is not incidental but deliberately crafted through language, sound, repetition, and performative timing (Bauman, 1977; Turner, 1969). Among the Okun Yorùbá communities of north-central Yorùbáland, this anticipatory poetics is vividly expressed in processional song forms that announce and authorise ritual performances, preparing the community psychologically and spiritually for sacred encounters such as the *Èpà* masquerade.

Èpà masquerade occupies a central position in ritual performance, communal identity, and artistic expression. Scholarly attention has often focused on the monumental carved headdresses (Ojo, 1978; Kalilu, 1987, 1991; Abokede and Ayinmode, 2018; Ayinmode, 2022; Adebowale, 2023; Abejide and Ogunjimi, 2024), the embodied choreography of the masquerader (Ojo, 1981; Ayinmode and Abokede, 2016), and the ritual symbolism embedded in masquerade movement (Famule, 2004; Kalilu, 1993; Ayinmode, 2005). However, preceding the physical appearance of *Èpà* is a soundscape of anticipation constituted by *Òṣwè* (*Ọghẹ*) pre-processional songs. These songs announce, prepare, and authorise the masquerade's entry, functioning as verbal and musical gateways to sacred performance.

This paper contends that *Òṣwè* songs are not merely introductory or decorative elements but complex oral literary forms deserving focused critical attention. It highlights *Òṣwè* as a genre that shapes audience perception, mobilises communal memory, and inscribes meaning onto the masquerade event before it unfolds.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This study is anchored in oral literary theory and performance theory, which together illuminate the nature, function, and meaning-making processes of *Òṣwè* (*Ọghẹ*) pre-processional songs. Oral literary theory is concerned with the study of

verbal art forms that are composed, transmitted, and performed through speech rather than writing. Central to this theory is the understanding that oral literature is not a deficient precursor to written literature but a complete and sophisticated artistic system shaped by performance, memory, and communal participation. Vansina (1985) and Finnegan (2012) emphasise that oral poetry is a performative and dynamic phenomenon rather than a fixed textual artifact. Meaning emerges through voice, rhythm, repetition, and audience engagement, making oral genres context-dependent and adaptable to social realities. This framework enables the paper to analyse *Ọ̀wè* as a living poetic form that constructs anticipation, encodes communal memory, and transmits moral and aesthetic values.

Performance theory is an interdisciplinary framework that examines human action as culturally and socially meaningful behaviour. It emphasises that meaning is not produced solely through texts or artifacts but through embodied actions, gestures, speech, and interaction in specific contexts (Schechner, 2002). The role of ritual and performative structures in shaping experience is the threshold process of performance, where ordinary social order is suspended, and ritual meaning is enacted (Drewal, 1992). Applied to *Ọ̀wè,* this theory frames the songs as pre-performative acts that mediate the transition from mundane to sacred time, regulating and correcting behaviour, invoking ancestral authority, and preparing audiences for the *Èpà* masquerade spectacle.

Within these theoretical spaces, the concept of oral poetics of anticipation emerges as a useful analytical category for understanding pre-performative verbal forms. These poetics function by deliberately constructing expectancy, invoking ancestral or institutional authority, and regulating audience behaviour before the main spectacle unfolds. Through carefully structured language, rhythm, and repetition, anticipatory oral performances prepare participants psychologically and symbolically for the forthcoming event. Such oral forms also serve as repositories of collective memory, moral values, and communal identity, drawing on historical references and ethical codes that situate performance within a continuum of shared experience. In this way, anticipation is not merely emotional but culturally produced, ensuring that performance is framed and interpreted within intelligible and socially sanctioned meanings (Vansina, 1985).

Oral literature extends beyond written documentation as a form of artistic verbal expression transmitted through speech and performance, encompassing genres such as songs, chants, praise poetry, and narratives. It is a dynamic cultural medium in which meaning is produced and sustained through context, performance, and communal participation. Ajakaye (2024) submits that literature is a conscious and responsive channel that stimulates individuals and groups towards certain activities on which the nation (nations) would be the central receivers. Literature has an authentic responsibility of weighing the conditions of individuals, groups or society; with equally reporting uncommon or unknown activities through the secondary and realistically presented experiences which it makes available to readers.

The relationship between the historical, vital and instrumental concepts in the world is being coordinated by the appropriate comprehension and reaction of literary texts. Finnegan (2012) argues that oral literature should be understood as a performative art form whose meaning resides in delivery, context, and audience interaction. This position challenged text-centered literary criticism and opened space for analysing songs, chants, and ritual utterances as dynamic cultural expressions. Vansina (1985) further expanded this understanding by framing oral traditions as historical sources that preserve communal memory, values, and identity through narrative and poetic forms.

However, in oral poetry, a proverb is a brief, metaphorical expression of communal wisdom that conveys moral values and cultural knowledge while enriching the poetic and mnemonic quality of performance. Dzekem (2024) affirms that the proverb as a genre of literature and as aspect of language portrays a society with greater effectiveness than other oral art forms. The meaning of proverbs emerges through performance elements like rhythm, repetition, gesture, and audience interaction. This approach is especially significant in ritual settings, where such performances facilitate social and spiritual transformation.

Research on Yorùbá masquerade traditions has largely focused on visual symbolism, costume, and sculptural aesthetics. Drewal, Pemberton, and Abiodun (1989) provide a comprehensive art-historical account of Yorùbá masquerade, emphasising the integration of art, ritual, and philosophy. Drewal (1992) further

highlights the performative dimensions of Yorùbá rituals, arguing that agency and meaning emerge through embodied action and interaction rather than static symbols. Scholars such as Olatunji (1984) and Barber (1991) present oral poetry particularly praise poetry (*oríkì*), chants, and songs as a sophisticated literary devices that include metaphor, repetition, tonal play, and allusion. Olajubu (1970) analyses Ìwì, an oral poetry genre central to the Yorùbá Egúngún masquerade, focusing on its structure, themes, and performance techniques. He highlights the chants' use of metaphor, symbolism, and allusion, which reflect Yorùbá cosmology and philosophy. Performers, typically initiated cult members, employ specific vocal and rhythmic strategies to enhance emotional and spiritual impact. The poetic structure includes *ìbà* (homage to deities and ancestors), *oríkì* (praise poetry), and *àrokò* (moral messages).

While these studies acknowledge the presence of songs and chants in masquerade performances, verbal forms are often treated as supplementary to visual and kinetic elements. This imbalance has resulted in limited literary analysis of masquerade-associated oral genres, particularly those performed before the masquerade's physical appearance. Recent scholarship increasingly recognises the importance of pre-performative and anticipatory oral forms. Barber (2007), Dzekem (2024) & Ayinmode (2025) emphasises that oral texts are embedded within social processes and public events, where anticipation and participation shape interpretation. Anticipatory oral genres such as proverbs, invocations, announcements, and processional songs function as threshold texts that mediate between everyday life and ritual enactment.

Despite extensive studies on Yorùbá oral literature and masquerade performance, Okun Yorùbá traditions remain comparatively underrepresented in scholarly discourse. Linguistic and cultural variations within Yorùbá sub-groups have received limited attention, and specific genres such as *Òṣwè* (*Ọghẹ*) pre-processional songs have rarely been examined as independent literary forms. Existing studies frequently treat these songs as part of broader ritual accounts, thereby neglecting their poetic structure, symbolic richness, and role in generating anticipation. This paper therefore, fills this gap by providing a literary-focused analysis of Òṣwè as a threshold genre within the Okun Yorùbá *Èpà* masquerade tradition. By combining

oral literary theory with performance studies and examining the songs' poetic language, performative context, and symbolic economy, the study positions Òṣwè as a generative form that actively constructs ritual meaning rather than serving merely as a prelude to the masquerade.

Òṣwè (*Ọghẹ*) as a Threshold Genre

Ọwẹ or *Ọghẹ* (Pre-processional songs) are preliminary ritual chants or melodies performed or rendered by young boys, girls, and masquerade custodians across some Okun-Yoruba communities during *Èpà* masquerade festival (Ayinmode, 2025). *Òṣwè* songs operate within what may be described as a poetics of anticipation. Performed before the masquerade's appearance, they occupy a liminal space between absence and presence, silence and spectacle. Their temporal placement allows them to prepare the community psychologically and spiritually, signaling that ordinary social order is about to be temporarily suspended. As a threshold genre, *Òṣwè* performs three interrelated functions: invocation, proclamation, and regulation. Invocation calls upon ancestral forces and spiritual authorities associated with *Èpà*. Proclamation announces the significance and prestige of the masquerade, often referencing lineage, history, and communal achievements. Regulation establishes behavioural expectations, cautioning spectators against taboo actions and reinforcing respect for sacred protocols. Therefore, this paper explored ten *Òṣwè* songs/lyrics that serve as preliminary ritual performances across various Okun-Yorùbá communities during the *Èpà* masquerade festival.

Song 1:

Amá ka di su egbèje,

The one who carries 1,400 tubers of yam with his bare arms,

Wè se tire láni

Are you a traIlér lorry or what?

Amá ka di su egbèje ooo,

The one who carries 1,400 tubers of yam with his bare arms,

Wè se tire láni

Are you a traIlér lorry or what?

The Lyric: *"The one who carries 1,400 tubers of yam with his bare arms, Are you a traIlér lorry or what?"*

According to **Chief Jacob Ifábire, *Àwòrò Agado* of *Òḍèḍè*, Takété Àmùrò** (personal communication, April 28, 2025), this lyric is embedded within a cultural tradition of *Èḍpà* festival, where songs serve as tools of moral correction. In this context, the statement targets yam thieves, using sarcasm and exaggeration to publicly shame those who steal from farms. In Okun-Yorùbá, culture, communal values are enforced not just through law but through performance, ridicule, and song. A lyric like this, sung in public, sends a strong message: "We know what you did, and we're watching." It discourages theft while promoting honesty and communal respect. In addition, the lyric protects agrarian ethics and condemns those who disrespect them.

The exaggeration of "*1,400 tubers with your bare arms*" is intentionally absurd. It mocks the greed and boldness of the thief. By asking, "*Are you a traIlér lorry or what?*", it ridicules the act and highlights its unnaturalness and shamelessness. This line is not a direct accusation but a coded message that communicates blame while protecting the dignity of the speaker and challenging the thief to reflect. It is humorous, yes, but meant to sting the conscience. It's a way of reclaiming justice through cultural performance rather than physical punishment.

Song 2:

Tendé Tendè mò bò,

Gently, gently, I crouched in hiding,

Àdibà ée gbò ni méjí.

The seeker cannot claim to have found two players in unison,

Tendé Tendè mò bò,

Gently, gently, I crouched in hiding,

Àdibà ée gbò ni méjí.

The seeker cannot claim to have found two players in unison,

The Lyric: *"Gently, gently, I crouched to hide, The seeker cannot claim to have found two players in unison,"*

According to Mr. Omoyele Ayinmode from Iyah Gbede (personal communication, April 30, 2025), in the *Èẹ̀pà* masquerade tradition and broader Okun-Yorùbá, oral heritage, song lyrics like this often serve as social commentary, advice, or coded messages. It reflects the communal game or hide-and-seek metaphor where one must be cautious and strategic to avoid being exposed or shamed. Culturally, it evaluate values of wisdom, prudence, and discretion, teaching individuals to tread carefully in social interactions or ritual observances to avoid disgrace. By implication, the lyric echoes the proverb "once beaten, twice shy," meaning that after a past mistake or humiliation, a person becomes more careful to avoid repeating it. The line implies that by staying "upright" or vigilant (crouching carefully), one cannot be "caught in the dirt" or wrongly accused/exposed. It conveys resilience and self-protection: no matter how much someone tries to tarnish another's image, caution and prudence can shield them from harm.

Song 3:

Afẹ́ẹ́ré́ ẹ́ gbó mi,

The wind cannot raise water,

Abi yì yì, abi !.

it only creates ripples and a murmuring sound,

Afẹ́ẹ́ré́ ẹ́ gbó mi,

The wind cannot raise water,

Abi yì yì, abi !.

it only creates ripples and a murmuring sound,

The Lyric: *"The wind cannot raise water, it only creates ripples and a murmuring sound."*

According to Chief Kolawole Thomas the Àwòrò, Ìlokè of Ayede-Àmùrò (personal communication, April 30, 2024), the phrase "The wind cannot raise water, it only creates ripples and a murmuring sound" reflects a deep moral and spiritual lesson

in Okun-Yorùbá, wisdom. In traditional belief systems, water often symbolises peace, blessings, and divine protection. The saying implies that external forces (like the wind) cannot truly disturb or overpower what is divinely safeguarded. At most, they can cause minor disturbances (ripples), but the core remains unmoved. This aligns with communal values of resilience, faith, and trust in ancestral or divine guardianship. Apperently, the song lyric, carries a proverbial message that when someone is divinely blessed or protected by God or ancestral spirits, adversaries have no power to cause real harm. They may only murmur, plot, or cause slight disturbances from a distance, but they cannot overturn the person's destiny or well-being. It encourages steadfastness and faith during trials.

Song 4:

Akeke gho gégi Òhùn,

The axe that fells a Camwood tree (*Baphia nitida*),

Arun rẹ a pòn kẹ́

Will have its blade stained with a red dye.

Akeke gho gégi Òhùn,

The axe that fells a Camwood tree (*Baphia nitida*),

Arun rẹ a pòn kẹ́

Will have its blade stained with a red dye.

The Lyric: *"The axe that fells a Camwood tree (Baphia nitida), Will have its blade stained with a red dye"*

According to Mr. Oke Oloniyo from Iyah Gbede (personal communication, April 28, 2025), Camwood (Isin) in Okun-Yorùbá, tradition, is highly valued for its red dye, which is used in rituals, body decoration, and textile colouring. The tree represents wealth, secrecy, and transformation. Just as cutting Camwood naturally stains the axe, certain actions in life inevitably leave visible consequences that cannot be hidden. This lyric serves as a cautionary proverb during *Èpà* masquerade songs, reminding the community that deeds, especially those with moral or spiritual implications, always leave traces. The song suggests that engaging in secretive or shady dealings will eventually be revealed, just as the axe

cannot avoid being marked by Camwood's red pigment. It may also imply that true success or achievement comes with challenges or sacrifices; just as the axe must endure staining to fell a valuable tree, individuals must be prepared to face obstacles in their pursuit of greatness.

Song 5:

Pàndẹ̀rẹ́ se ohun Odídẹ́é́ ,

A pied wagtail that tries to soar like a flying lemur,

Asọ rẹ à ya.

Will only tear its own wings.

Pàndẹ̀rẹ́ se ohun Odídẹ́é́ ,

A pied wagtail that tries to soar like a flying lemur,

Asọ rẹ à ya.

Will only tear its own wings.

The Lyric: *"A pied wagtail that tries to soar like a flying lemur, Will only tear its own wings."*

According to Chief Sunday Joseph Olojo, (*Àgbàjogun*) Aiyeteju-Àmùrò (personal communication, April 28, 2025), *Pandẹrẹ* in Okun dialect is a pied wagtail ground-feeding white and black small bird, and *Odídẹ́é́* (the flying lemur), a small type of a bat, known for its gliding ability. The lyric reflects the Yorùbá cultural practice of using nature and animal behavior to teach wisdom and moral lessons. Within community life, it serves as a caution against abandoning one's natural abilities or traditional ways in pursuit of unrealistic comparisons or foreign influences. Proverbially, the lyrics warn that imitating others without considering one's own capacity or circumstances can lead to self-destruction. It implies that not all survival strategies are universal; what works for one person may become a trap or bring harm to another. Metaphorically, it teaches self-awareness, humility, and contentment, discouraging envy and reckless competition.

Song 6:

Àto' nígbàgbó, to ní mọ̀lẹ́,

Whether Christian or traditional believer,

O dẹ ja lọ́run.

We shall all reunite in heaven.

Àto' nígbàgbó, to ní mọ̀lẹ́,

Whether Christian or traditional believer,

O dẹ ja lọ́run.

We shall all reunite in heaven.

The Lyric: *"Whether Christian or traditional believer, We shall all reunite in heaven."*

According to Mr. Joseph Boluse from Iyah Gbede (personal communication, April 28, 2025), this proverb-like lyric highlights the belief in ultimate divine unity and equality before God, regardless of religious affiliation. It suggests that spiritual sincerity, faithfulness, and good deeds matter more than religious labels or perceived superiority of one belief system over another. Within Okun-Yorùbá, thought, it reflects tolerance and the understanding that God (the supreme being) is above human divisions, and all souls eventually return to the same divine source.

Song 7:

Be re kútú pe, èẹ̀yò,

Smoothly without pause, the squatting kicks go.

Be re kútú pe, èẹ̀yò.

Smoothly without pause, the squatting kicks go.

The Lyric: *"Smoothly without pause, the squatting kicks go."*

This lyric carries a deep philosophical and cultural weight. Culturally, it highlights the physical endurance and grace embedded in traditional dance forms,

particularly those performed during Èẹ̀pà festival when masquerades dance *Obẹ̀rẹ̀* (squatting dance). The smooth, uninterrupted squatting kicks are not merely dance moves but also a display of strength, balance, and spiritual discipline, reflecting the deep-rooted connection between physical movement and cultural expression. Proverbially, this lyric can be interpreted as emphasising persistence and resilience. Just as the squatting kicks continue without pause, it suggests the importance of maintaining steady progress and composure in life despite challenges. Additionally, it may symbolise how traditional dance doubles as physical exercise, promoting health and vitality among practitioners while reinforcing communal bonds through shared performance. Thus, the song conveys both a practical and metaphorical message about perseverance, unity, and the embodiment of cultural heritage.

Song 8:

É̩ mè̩ mó kuń di èyín,

You cannot fasten an egg with a rope,

Ò̩ bòr̀ò̩ bòr̀ò̩ yọ̀.

it will simply slip away.

É̩ mè̩ mó kuń di èyín,

You cannot fasten an egg with a rope,

Ò̩ bòr̀ò̩ bòr̀ò̩ yọ̀.

it will simply slip away.

The Lyric: *"You cannot fasten an egg with a rope, it will simply slip away."*

The lyric metaphorically express the futility of attempting impossible or unwise actions. According to Mr. Idowu Elehire from *Òd̩èd̩è*, Takété Àmùrò (personal communication, April 28, 2025), egg symbolises fragility and delicacy, suggesting that certain matters must be handled with understanding rather than force or unsuitable means. However, the lyric aligns with Yorùbá teachings on prudence, moderation, and respecting natural limits. It serves as a caution against engaging in efforts that are bound to fail or bring unintended consequences (boomerang). It

warns against forcing situations that require gentleness or different approaches. Generally, it teaches practicality and discernment in decision-making.

Song 9:

Oní jó gha wọ̀ tuń de,

Our dancer has returned once again,

À mù nù Kè, Ijó!

beautiful performance, dance on !

À mù nù Kẹ̀.

beautiful performance.

Oní jó gha wọ̀ tuń de,

Our dancer has returned once again,

À mù nù Kè, Ijó!

beautiful performance, dance on !

À mù nù Kẹ̀.

beautiful performance.

The Lyric: *"Our dancer has returned once again beautiful performance, dance on."*

Pa. Ògúndele Osadare, the *Olorí Awo* of Ìtèdó-Irúndá, Ìsánlú (personal communication, April 30, 2024), afirmed that in Okun-Yorùbá, tradition, dance is not just an art form but a celebration of beauty (*ẹwa*), vitality, and community spirit. The phrase can be linked to à mù nù kè, a type of beans commonly called adalu among the Yorùbá people of Southwest Nigeria. He reiterated *à mù nù kẹ̀* symbolising beauty and admiration. When a performer delivers an impressive act, it naturally brings joy to those around, reflecting communal appreciation of talent and aesthetics. However, the lyric also conveys that "what is good remains good", that is excellence consistently attracts praise and recognition. Just as beauty (*ẹwa*) shines naturally without needing validation, an outstanding performance continues to draw admiration each time it is repeated. Psychologically, on a deeper

level, it suggests encouragement and reinforcement of positive actions. When one achieves something remarkable, it uplifts not only the individual but also those witnessing it, creating a ripple of joy and motivation within the community.

Song 10:

fẹ, wọ́ ti gbémi fò,

Mystic charm, take me soaring through the air,

Ọfẹ!

mystic charm!

Ọfẹ, wọ́ ti gbémi fò,

Mystic charm, take me soaring through the air,

Ọfẹ!

mystic charm!

The Lyric: *"Mystic charm, take me soaring through the air, mystic charm.."*

The phrase "Mystic charm, take me soaring through the air, mystic charm" symbolically reflects the Yorùbá belief in *Ọfẹ*, a mystical incantation or supernatural power capable of enabling instant disappearance and reappearance. Culturally, this chant highlights the deep connection between Yorùbá spirituality and the metaphysical realm, where humans can transcend physical limitations through divine or ancestral intervention. Proverbially, the lyric may suggests a desire for escape or swift resolution to challenges. Invoking such a charm metaphorically represents seeking a shortcut or supernatural aid to overcome danger, obstacles, or oppression; reflecting the Yorùbá narratives that spiritual forces can intervene to alter one's fate or provide protection.

Poetic Language and Performance Context: Moral and Historical Dimensions

Poetic language and performance context function as interconnected vehicles through which moral values and historical consciousness are articulated and transmitted. In oral traditions, meaning emerges not only from words but from their enactment, allowing poetry to encode ethical instruction and collective memory within lived performance. First, the poetic language of *Ọ̀wẹ̀* is rich in

metaphor, hyperbole, symbolism, and proverbial phrasing, which conveys meaning beyond the literal. For example, Song 1 exaggerates the theft of *"The one who carries 1,400 tubers of yam with his bare arms, are you a traIlér lorry or what?"* using hyperbole and sarcasm to shame wrongdoing. Song 4 uses metaphor with the Camwood tree: *"The axe that fells a Camwood tree will have its blade stained with red dye,"* illustrating the visible consequences of actions. Song 5 *"A pied wagtail that tries to soar like a flying lemur, Will only tear its own wings"* likens a wagtail to a flying lemur, conveying caution against overreaching beyond one's capacities.

Across all songs, figurative devices, repetition, and rhetorical questions reinforce emphasis, memorability, and audience engagement, aligning with oral literary strategies (Olajubu, 1970; Vansina, 1985). Recurrent motifs of movement, vision, and power metaphorically prefigure the masquerade's emergence, while praise epithets elevate it as an embodiment of ancestral authority and moral force. Such literary strategies do not merely embellish the performance; they actively shape the audience's perception and establish a framework for interpreting the ensuing ritual (Olajubu, 1970; Barber, 1991).

Secondly, the performative context of *Òṣwè* reinforces its threshold function. The songs are delivered collectively, often in a call-and-response structure, integrating drumming, gestural accompaniment, and spatial organisation to intensify emotional engagement. *Òṣwè* is inseparable from its performative setting, songs like song 7 *"Smoothly without pause, the squatting kicks go"* reflect dance movements performed during the *Èpà* masquerade, linking verbal expression to physical embodiment. Song 2 *"Gently, gently, I crouched to hide, the seeker cannot claim to have found two players in unison,"* illustrates the importance of strategic caution, delivered in a way that interacts with performers' spatial movement. Song 9 celebrates performance excellence: *"Our dancer has returned once again beautiful performance, dance on*" where lyrical praise motivates and encourages performers while eliciting communal admiration. Song 10 invokes supernatural power *"Mystic charm, take me soaring"*, reflecting the belief in divine assistance during ritual enactment.

Through these performative features, the songs mediate audience attention, heighten anticipation, and integrate communal participation, making the

performance a shared, socially reinforcing experience (Turner, 1969). However, audience participation is essential, transforming listeners into co-creators of the performance and embedding communal memory within the anticipatory act. This interaction aligns with Bauman's (1977) assertion that meaning in oral literature emerges through performance rather than through text alone.

Finally, *Òṣwè* encodes moral instruction and historical consciousness, reinforcing social values and communal identity. For instance, the lyrics in song 1 *"The one who carries 1,400 tubers of yam with his bare arms, Are you a traIlér lorry or what?"* targets thieves, promoting honesty and respect for agrarian ethics. song 2 *"Gently, gently, I crouched to hide, The seeker cannot claim to have found two players in unison,"* and song 5 *"A pied wagtail that tries to soar like a flying lemur, will only tear its own wings"* teach resilience, prudence, and humility, using natural and animal metaphors. Song 3 *"The wind cannot raise water, it only creates ripples and a murmuring sound"* conveys faith, steadfastness, and trust in divine or ancestral protection. Song 4 *"The axe that fells a Camwood tree (Baphia nitida), Will have its blade stained with a red dye"* reminds the community that actions have consequences, linking morality to visible outcomes.

Song 7 expresses spiritual egalitarianism: *"Whether Christian or traditional believer, we shall all reunite in heaven,"* reflecting tolerance and historical consciousness of communal coexistence. Song 8 teaches prudence through metaphor: *"You cannot fasten an egg with a rope, it will simply slip away"* reinforcing wisdom in human conduct. Song 9 *"Our dancer has returned once again beautiful performance, dance on"* emphasize readiness, power, and communal pride, echoing historical performance practices and cultural continuity. In sum, each song functions as a vessel of ethical guidance and social memory, ensuring that participants internalise cultural norms while appreciating historical and spiritual continuity within the *Èpà* masquerade tradition.

Imperatively, repetition serves both mnemonic and aesthetic purposes, enabling communal participation while intensifying emotional buildup. Call-and-response patterns blur the boundary between performer and audience, transforming listeners into co-creators of meaning. Tonal variation, shaped by the Okun Yorùbá linguistic environment, enhances semantic depth and musicality, reinforcing the

inseparability of sound and sense. Beyond anticipation, *Ọ̀ṣẹ̀* songs function as repositories of social memory. Moral instruction is subtly woven into the lyrics through proverbial expressions and cautionary statements. Themes of respect, courage, restraint, and communal solidarity are articulated, reminding participants that the masquerade is both a spectacle and a moral institution. The authority of these messages is heightened by their delivery within a sacred performative frame.

Conclusion

This study has repositioned *Ọ̀ṣẹ̀* (*Ọghẹ*) pre-processional songs as central texts within the Okun Yorùbá *Èpà* masquerade tradition. Through literary and performance analysis, the paper highlights their role as threshold genres that generate anticipation, encode communal memory, and articulate moral values. Recognising *Ọ̀ṣẹ̀* as a distinct oral poetic form expands our understanding of Yorùbá masquerade aesthetics and affirms the need for greater scholarly engagement with pre-performative soundscapes in African ritual traditions. Through their poetic language, performative context, and embedded moral and historical dimensions, *Ọ̀ṣẹ̀* songs do more than introduce the masquerade; they actively construct anticipation, authorise ritual action, and frame communal understanding of the performance. The analysis of selected *Ọ̀ṣẹ̀* lyrics reveals a sophisticated oral aesthetic grounded in metaphor, symbolism, repetition, and proverbial expression, through which ethical instruction, social regulation, and collective memory are communicated.

Furthermore, the performative enactment of *Ọ̀ṣẹ̀* characterised by communal participation, rhythmic intensity, and embodied expression reinforces their role as mediators between everyday social life and sacred ritual space. By embedding moral values, historical consciousness, and cultural identity within sound and performance, *Ọ̀ṣẹ̀* ensures the continuity of Okun Yorùbá cultural philosophy across generations. Recognising these songs as generative oral texts rather than peripheral accompaniments expands scholarly understanding of Yorùbá masquerade traditions and highlights the importance of pre-performative acoustic spaces in Yoruba ritual aesthetics.

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