

Popular Poesis: Language and the Pleasures of Everyday Creation

Karin Barber 

Abstract: Pleasure in language arises from the creativity of everyday life. Africa's historical and ethnographic record is full of striking examples of linguistic play. Three scenes of Yorùbá linguistic creativity illustrate this: praise poetry in a small town, a traveling popular theater, and early Yorùbá newspapers. Each yields distinctive pleasures, but central to all of these is the act of mutual recognition of forms of words and attunement to the linguistic production of others. Barber suggests that verbal arts bring to consciousness the fundamental processes by which sociality is constituted and may thus provide a potential starting point for social theory from “within.”

Résumé : Le plaisir de la langue naît de la créativité de la vie quotidienne. Les archives historiques et ethnographiques de l'Afrique contiennent des exemples frappants de jeu linguistique. Trois scènes de créativité linguistique Yorùbá illustrent cela: la poésie de louange dans une petite ville, un théâtre itinérant populaire et les premiers journaux Yorùbá. Chacun produit des plaisirs distincts, mais au centre de tout cela se trouve l'acte de reconnaissance mutuelle de type de mots et l'harmonisation avec la production linguistique des autres. Barber suggère que les arts verbaux prennent conscience des processus fondamentaux par lesquels la socialité est constituée et

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Karin Barber is Visiting Professor of Anthropology at the LSE and Emeritus Professor of African Cultural Anthropology at the University of Birmingham. Her research focuses on Yoruba oral performance, popular culture, and print genres. She has also worked on African arts more widely. Among her recent books are *A History of African Popular Culture* (2018), *Print Culture and the First Yorùbá Novel* (2012), and *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics* (2007). Email: k.j.barber@bham.ac.uk

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peuvent ainsi fournir un point de départ potentiel pour la théorie sociale de « l'intérieur ».

Resumo : O prazer da linguagem nasce da criatividade da vida quotidiana. Os registos históricos e etnográficos da África estão plenos de exemplos paradigmáticos de jogos linguísticos. Na língua iorubá, há três casos de criatividade linguística que ilustram isso mesmo: a poesia panegírica das vilas, os teatros populares itinerantes e os primeiros jornais em iorubá. Cada um destes casos envolve prazeres distintos, mas no centro de todos eles está o ato de reconhecimento mútuo da forma das palavras e a sincronização com a produção linguística dos outros. Barber sugere que as artes verbais geram uma consciência dos processos fundamentais através dos quais se cria a socialização e, por isso, pode constituir um potencial ponto de partida para uma teoria social construída “a partir de dentro”.

Keywords: Yoruba; linguistic creativity; popular theater; praise poetry; print culture; pleasure

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When I was studying for Latin A-level, our teacher used to reminisce about one of her former students, a girl who had loved Latin so much that “she even used to read Lewis and Short in bed.” I too had a copy of Lewis and Short’s Latin dictionary, a large, hard, black cube of tiny print that seemed to us at the time, laboring over Tacitus and Livy, as the most unpleasant bedfellow imaginable. But only a few years later, there I was in Òkukù, a small town in western Nigeria, poring over R.C. Abraham’s *Dictionary of Modern Yorùbá* by the light of a kerosene lamp. Abraham was a storehouse of marvellous words, words to memorize and try out on the old men and women who called me over to their verandas to exchange greetings as I went about the town. What is it about words that gives such pleasure? If words, just words in a dictionary, can be a source of joy (Maleska 1981), words in a conversation can be a thrill—and words in a conversational context where language is enjoying a period of intense vitality the greatest pleasure of all.

Sociolinguists have recently paid increasing attention to everyday creativity in language (Swann & Maybin 2007:491). At its most striking, such creativity makes a mark; it creates a moment, a focus of attention, a hot spot in the conversation. In Africa, it has long been remarked that pleasure in such moments is ubiquitous. It arises from exchanges in the street, the motor-park, the bar, and the backyard. The historical and ethnographic record is rich in examples of linguistic invention so striking that even outsiders did not fail to notice them. In a Copperbelt town in 1950s Northern Rhodesia, migrants from many backgrounds adopted Bemba as a lingua franca, infusing it with loan words, and christening it CiCopperbelti. It was used in ingeniously humorous acts of naming and describing. The residents of the early style of

round house on the locations were nicknamed “Aba mu mabottle” (bottle dwellers). *Simyamfule* (“switch off the light while I undress”) categorizes your petticoat as a cheap one you’d be ashamed to let your lover see. With witty and imaginative epithets such as these, the Copperbelt migrants generated not only a vocabulary but also a means of ordering and evaluating new objects in their experience (Epstein 1959). In Ghana, mottoes and slogans may circulate across several popular genres and platforms—painted on the sides of *trotro* vehicles, voiced in popular songs, adopted as names of kiosks, or scrawled as graffiti. Jesse Weaver Shipley offers some memorable examples of such circulating, semi-detached formulations arising from hiplife: for example, Sidney the “Rap Ninja”’s *Scenti no!*—“the scent,” referring to body odors of big men. “The scent, the scent/Is everywhere/When the honourable removes his shoes/it’s the socks”—a phrase which passed into common currency to refer to the stink of corruption, until President Kufuor cannily bought the rights to the song for his electoral advertising campaign and reinterpreted the “scent” to mean the sweet aroma of ubiquitous progress and development (Shipley 2013:153–56).

It has been argued, in studies of everyday creativity in the English language, that the inventiveness, wit, and humor deployed in conversational exchanges are so pervasive that creative language could be said to be the norm, and non-creative exchanges an “abnormal departure” (Carter 2004:214). Verbal dexterity and playfulness have been shown to generate solidarity or support, align speakers’ points of view, defuse tensions, stimulate collaborative sharing of ideas, boost language learning, and promote the social cohesion of participants (Carter 2004; Cook 2000; North 2007; Pomerantz & Bell 2007). In a pioneering study, Deborah Tannen showed that linguistic strategies usually thought of as “quintessentially literary” are in fact “pervasive, spontaneous, and functional in ordinary conversation,” providing a resource which “more deliberately composed” genres including political speeches and literary works take up, shape, and elaborate (Tannen 1989:1). It has been suggested that rather than two distinct modes, there is a continuum or cline between everyday linguistic creativity and literary forms (Carter 2004). And if that is so, traffic moves in both directions along the continuum; just as the composers of elaborated texts utilize linguistic strategies forged and practised in ordinary conversation, so ordinary conversation raids and recycles “literary” texts in acts of quotation and allusion (Finnegan 2011).

The idea of an unbroken connection between informal, everyday creativity and the more specialized work by which socially valued and recognized textual forms are generated is appealing. It suggests that verbal arts are always bubbling up, always emergent, never closed off from generative processes participated in by all. But what requires equal emphasis is the widely attested aspiration of verbal artists to create forms that can be separated from the perpetual processes of emergence, forms that are memorable enough to be detached from the immediate context of here-and-now utterance and repeated or recreated in other places and times. Textual makers of many traditions affirm the capacity of texts to endure longer than individual lives

and longer than monuments or statues. Thus, on the one hand, linguistic pleasure is closely associated with verbal creativity and invention, and draws attention to text—including “literary” or artistic text—as continually coming into being, and arising from and feeding back into the conversational practices of everyday life; but on the other hand, it also highlights the fact that texts are very often created in the hope that they will achieve some kind of fixity or durability. The concept of entextualization, as “the process of rendering a given instance of discourse as text, detachable from its local context” (Silverstein & Urban 1996:21), suggests that texts are formed when stretches of words are deliberately demarcated, making them available for repetition or recreation in other times and places, but that this formation of durable texts is a continual process. Making stretches of words pleasurable makes them memorable; thus, it is the most pleasurable texts that are most likely to travel over space and to last over time. Looking at linguistic pleasure helps us to seize on this central nexus of human making—always emergent, but often yearning toward a condition of permanence.

In Yorùbáland, I’ve always been struck by people’s appreciation of the capacities and affordances of the language for its own sake. People remember conversations for years and quote them back at you. People generate novel sayings which are taken up and relished by others. People absolutely love expounding the origin and meaning of proverbs and names. The extensive corpus of Yorùbá-language novels contains hardly a single one that is not characterized by virtuoso marshalling of linguistic resources: word play, clever twists on proverbial sayings, and allusions to popular anecdotes. These texts take up and revitalize shared formulations, and in turn become a source for others to pick from. This seems to be a propensity of very long standing. Aríbilòṣòó was a singer from the Ègbá-Yorùbá region of Nigeria who was well known in the early nineteenth century. He composed topical and philosophical songs which were remembered for decades and collected, forty years after the poet’s death, by the clergyman E.M. Lìjádù. In his preface, Lìjádù comments, “It’s amazing to see how his sayings, songs and proverbs have spread among the Ègbá—just look, he himself has died and his life-story too has died with him, but the words of his songs and proverbs remain alive on our lips up till today” (Lijadu 1886, my translation).

Since Aríbilòṣòó’s day, Yorùbá has obviously been increasingly hemmed in, provoked, and demoted by the looming presence of English, not only for official, educational, and literary purposes, but increasingly over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries for everyday use. But this has not resulted in what some postcolonial theorists have referred to as glottophagia—the wholesale extermination of the “native” tongue. In some ways, the cohabitation of languages, though on unequal terms, may even have acted as a stimulant to new explosions of creativity in the Yorùbá language. The influx of new vocabulary and new textual models made possible humorous and creative appropriations, often poised between relish and mockery. There are parallels with the intense linguistic vitality of Shakespeare’s England, with its alertness to vocabulary based on Latin and French forms. In *Twelfth Night*, Sir

Andrew Aguecheek overhears a courtly speech and seizes on some choice new words: “‘Odours,’ ‘pregnant’ and ‘vouchsafed’” he exclaims, “I’ll get ‘em all three all ready!” Sir Andrew is a foolish knight, and his attempts to use fancy language fail to impress, but the interesting thing is the assumption that popular audiences will recognize and appreciate this highflown linguistic register. Similarly, Yorùbá fiction, drama, and poetry of the twentieth century continually showcase and delight in newfangled vocabulary, juxtaposed with cherished items of older, “deep” Yorùbá.

As the sociolinguistic work on contemporary, mainly British, linguistic creativity that I referred to above suggests, dexterity and creativity are features of everyday language everywhere, not the property of any one culture or continent. But particular historical circumstances do seem to give rise to exceptionally intense periods of linguistic productivity. In times of rapid social change, in situations where two or more languages are in competition, and where popular idioms are interacting with educated or courtly registers, a heightened consciousness of language may prevail, as was the case when Shakespeare’s theater company staged *Twelfth Night* sometime around 1601. In nineteenth- and twentieth-century Africa, there were and still are huge resources of common cultural knowledge, but these are open-ended, never completely shared by all, and constantly changing and incorporating new elements. In western Nigeria, as in many other parts of Africa, everyday poesis exists in close rapport with the vast field of oral genres nowadays regarded as “traditional literature,” a field that, in turn, is inseparable from newer popular performance genres and the sphere of popular print. If valued oral genres such as praise poetry, divination verses, and historical narrative are built up out of elements drawn from the vast resources of the “little genres of everyday life” (Bakhtin 1986), then conversely, everyday conversation frequently draws from, cites, and recirculates elements of valued oral and written literary texts. There is constant, closely linked, two-way traffic and mutual revitalization between everyday speech and a recognized but always proliferating field of oral, written, and mediatized textual genres.

The Pleasure of Exegesis

When I look at the Yorùbá verbal genres I have engaged with over the years, various kinds of linguistic pleasure come to mind. The pleasure of exegesis, which I encountered in its most striking form in the context of *oriki*, was a notable one.

Oriki (poetic appellations or attributions) are stunning, impressive, powerful concatenations of epithets and elaborated verbal sequences calling forth the potential or latent powers of an addressee. Every day in Òkukù in the 1970s, as I made my slow way from my lodgings to the center of town, I would be apprehended, enticed, and trapped by elderly men and women—no longer of an age to go to the “far farms” to cultivate cocoa—who would call me over to receive a full-blown recitation of the *oriki* of *ilé* Oba, the royal lineage, to which I

had been given an honorary attachment. Every day in the street, people hailed each other in passing with phrases of *oriki*. People soothed their babies with family *oriki* and invoked the *òrìṣà* deities with extended, intensive *oriki* chants. Brides on their wedding days went in procession around all of their relatives' houses, chanting *ẹkún ìyàwó* (bride's tears), in which they displayed their knowledge of the *oriki* of all the people who had brought them up and whom they were now leaving to face the unknown trials of the husband's house. A lot of the *oriki* that were continually in the air and very familiar to the townspeople were nonetheless tremendously obscure. As I sought explanations, it gradually dawned on me that the obscurity was a constitutive and deliberate feature of the genre. *Oriki* were often constructed precisely as if to provoke acts of exegesis. The information that explained them was not contained within the text itself, or even "implied" by it; it often could not be guessed at unless one had a parallel source of knowledge, which usually took the form of *ìtàn*, historical narratives.

In one of the first performances I recorded, the addressee was saluted by evoking a plethora of illustrious ancestors, one of whom has the laconic epithet "Kò rí n fún àlẹjò ó fi Fómiké ̀toro" (He had nothing to give the visitor[s] so he made a present of Fómiké). When I asked what this meant, the performer, Şàngówẹmí, added a second line: "Fómiké pulled a face and said he wouldn't go." Still baffled, I was advised to ask an elder of the compound for the story—and when I did so, this story was related to me: "Olúgbẹdẹ was a great man, a hunter, in the time of Oyèwùsì [the Oba who reigned c. 1888–1916]. Mofómiké was his younger brother by the same mother. Once they held a great hunters' meeting at his place. All the hunters came and saluted him, saluted him, saluted him [with *oriki* performed in the hunters' *ìjálá* chant mode]. He said he'd like to give them money, but money wasn't enough; he'd like to give them cloth, but that wasn't enough either. He said he would give them Mofómiké, to go with them and become an *ìjálá*-singer like them. But Mofómiké refused point blank; he said he wouldn't go. It was all a joke" (see Barber 1991:17–20).

In this case, the *oriki* alludes exclusively to one specific incident, details of which would be transmitted in family tradition. In other cases, however, people could take a well-known and widely-applicable formulation and attach to it a specific meaning of their own. "Omo bá-n-lẹbu/ Bénìyàn ò bá mi ní tìjòkùn/ Yòdó bá mi ní tájìgẹ́ǹú..." (Child of 'Meet me at the dye-pit'/ If people don't find me in the place where they boil *ìjòkùn* dye/ They'll meet me where we go early to pound indigo) is a praise formulation evoking prosperity, and by extension a great household and an imposing person. Dark green *ìjòkùn* dye is used to decorate the floors and walls of traditional compounds, and indigo is used to dye cloth (cloth is always a metaphor for wealth in people, as well as good looks worthy of splendid garments). It could be attributed to anyone rich enough to have their clothes and house frequently and lavishly re-dyed. But in one family in Òkukù, the epithet was given an additional, private, or sly meaning: there had been a scandalous incident when a daughter of the family, after becoming the oba's wife, ran away with a traveling musician and had to be fetched back in disgrace. The epithet is

interpreted to mean “If you don’t find me in one place, you’ll surely find me in another”—that is, in the house of some man or other. In examples such as this, the work of exegesis becomes highly inventive and productive, using the text as a trigger for the recall of narratives that would be unsuspected by all but those in the know.

Thus, the obscurity of *oriki* can demand and provoke active, creative exegesis. The interpreter is not merely commenting on what is in the text, but is often adding something substantial to it—a body of knowledge that is valued precisely because it is not known to everyone. In Òkukù there was often a division of labor; senior women tended to command repertoires of *oriki*, while senior men tended to command the *ìtàn*. Each depended on the other, for while the explanation of *oriki* lay in the *ìtàn*, a narrator of *ìtàn* could not proceed far without having recourse to *oriki* as springboards, stepping stones, and targets for the unfolding narrative. Episodes of the narrative would often end with, “And that is why we are called Such-and-such.” This suggests a kind of distributed knowledge in which composing and interpreting are not only symbiotic and mutually constitutive, but are actually facets of the same thing. An *ìtàn* might be narrated to illuminate an *oriki*, but an *oriki* in turn might be needed to facilitate the narration of an *ìtàn*. It depends on how you look at it—as with “Rubin’s vase,” the ambiguous image which could be seen either as a vase or as two faces looking at each other, it depends on which part you see as foreground and which as background.

There is a sense of proliferating endlessness and openness in this scene of textual production. Many genres are constituted so as to seem inexhaustible. “I could speak until tomorrow,” goes the bridal chant, “it never bores me, it never wearies me.” The corpus of Ifá divination verses is said to be limitless; anyone who tries to learn it all will surely go mad. Not only this, but every genre opens out into other genres, or incorporates them. A proverb can balloon into a narrative complete with dialogue between the characters, or allude—like an *oriki*—to a narrative that needs to be supplied by a knowledgeable person (Owómóyèlè 1988:310, 261). Some story types always include a song, and a song, like an *oriki* or proverb, may provide the starting point for an ingenious exercise in folk etymology. *Oriki* chants incorporate fragments of Ifá verses, proverbs, and even riddles, while Ifá verses incorporate folk tales, and folk tales may be adduced to explain proverbs. Thus, no text or performance is regarded as complete. Each one alludes to hinterlands of other texts and, as we have seen, may be symbiotically related to them. No text is thought of as being closed. Every text involves lateral tracking through vast, variably interrelated textual networks partially known, partially deduced, and partially created by participants as they go along. Textuality proliferates and provides continual new springboards for further creativity. If all texts by their very nature exist in webs of intertextuality, as twentieth-century critical theory comprehensively demonstrated, Yorùbá oral genres bring this condition to the surface and consciously exploit it. As Olabiyi Yai memorably observed, Yorùbá poetry is a matter of “constant departures” (Yai 1994).

The Pleasure of Tuning In

Yorùbá popular traveling theater, which flourished from the 1940s to the late 1980s, afforded a vivid demonstration of the pleasure of performers and audience tuning in to each other. This involved the joint production of linguistic texts through the interaction of a whole team of performers. Their plays were oral and improvised, though infused with ideas of school and writing and associated with “modernity.” During the 1980s, I traveled with the Oyin Adéjòbí Theatre Company and played small parts in their plays. Adéjòbí had founded the company in the late 1940s to produce musical dramas on Biblical themes for church congregations. In 1963 he re-established the troupe as a secular, professional, commercial traveling theater. The company of around twenty male and female itinerant professional actors mounted long, complex, coherent but unscripted dramas, some of which would remain in the company’s repertoire for twenty years or more, gradually evolving in response to audience taste and changing theatrical fashion. As I associated with the group, I gradually became aware of an extraordinary degree of linguistic attunement among the members of the company and, by extension, between them and their public.

Adéjòbí and his manager and right-hand man Alhaji Karimu Adéṣòjù devised the narrative of each play and worked together to break it up into scenes and sequences of action. They would then “tell” or “teach” the actors what they had to do. Experienced actors were allowed to generate their own dialogue, within broad guidelines, whereas the novices would be instructed line by line by Alhaji Adéṣòjù. Even with very experienced actors, Alhaji (as everyone called him) said there were certain essential lines he had to make sure they spoke. “You see, some lines are more important than others. There are key sentences here and there that I really don’t want them to lose. The rest, they can do it as they like.” These key sentences were often the stepping-stones by means of which the play progressed to its correct conclusion, or which structured the highly artful set-pieces leading up to a comic climax. Alhaji did think deeply about the most effective phrasing and was triumphant when his efforts produced the desired effect—as was demonstrated when the audience picked them up, anticipated their next occurrence, and loudly offered cynical or funny variations as well as laughing and shouting their appreciation.

In general, each actor conceived of him- or herself as bringing a unique individual resource of personality, experience, and gifts to the collective enterprise, and to some extent the actors were in competition with each other, each striving to expand his or her own part, fueled and vindicated by audience acclamation. However, in the course of participating in the activities of the company, including live stage performances, over a number of years, I came to understand that the actors collectively improvised a linguistic medium suited to the subject matter of each play. The style, consistent throughout the performance, could vary markedly from one play to another, even if the two plays were being improvised by the same

actors on successive nights. *Folájiyò*, a folkloric play set in a traditional kingdom, abounded in homely proverbs and idioms referring to a familiar rural and domestic environment. “New water has flowed in, new fish have entered it.” “You have eyes like the eyes of a frog.” “He’s piled his ragged clothes on in layers like the palm frond.” There were no instances of modern slang or English loan words. But *Moráwò*—which was created around the same time as *Folájiyò* and co-existed with it in the repertoire for a number of years—had a noticeably different style, suited to its theme of a young white-collar city woman playing one man off against another in her pursuit of wealth and security. The first words of this play, uttered by an *aládúúrà* preacher, were “Gbàdúrà! Gbogbo ẹ̀yin ọ̀lmoḡe tí bọ̀ifùrẹ̀n dì yín jà yín jùùlẹ̀bí típà bá ja ẹ̀èpẹ̀ẹ̀ lẹ̀—ẹ̀ gbàdúrà!” (“Pray! All you young girls whose ‘boyfriends’ have dumped you like a ‘tipper’ dumping soil—pray!”) Thus, in the first sentences, we hear two English loanwords and a contemporary metaphor, and *Moráwò* went on from there to unleash a cornucopia of slang, neologisms, Anglicisms, and novel turns of speech (Barber 2000:404–16).

This production of a specific linguistic medium was not imposed on the actors by Alhaji or Adéjọbí. Through hours and hours of hanging around backstage and hearing the plays over and over again, I began to be able to pick up the subtle transit of verbal ideas through the texture of the play—a kind of ripple effect, where a key word or expression introduced by one actor would be registered and echoed in different ways right across the performance, even by bit-part actors who had no on-stage interaction with the originator of the expression. Through this sensitive mutual stylistic awareness, the actors seemed to arrive at a sense of the appropriate medium as they went along, with the more experienced and dominant actors taking the lead. This was all made possible by the actors’ sense that each of them, though endowed with distinctive gifts and competences, could potentially play any part; all listened to everyone else’s words as if they could potentially be their own. Here then, we see how a form established its own space in which to provide for innovation of a particular kind. Although the improvised dramas often appeared exuberant, freewheeling, and at times bordering on the chaotic, their improvisations were actually both inspired and regulated by a medium of the actors’ own joint making.

When this was working well, there was a definite aesthetic pleasure in the way the actors’ speeches picked each other up and “clicked,” as Alhaji put it in a rare comment on his art. This was when he felt satisfaction. Sometimes the actors seemed to be out of tune, not picking up each other’s cues, and at such times Alhaji would express displeasure: “Ah, they’re all over the place, nothing is clicking.” And the pleasure afforded by the performers’ mutual alertness to language was hugely boosted when the audience also picked up on particular phrases and sequences—sometimes anticipating them, or echoing them, or offering variants, shouted from the auditorium to much general laughter. This, at times, amounted to a collective linguistic euphoria.

The Pleasure of Reaching Out

Textual pleasures that arise from co-creation by participants in live, face-to-face communication are easily seen in the relish with which people react to each other's verbal efforts. But the sphere of print, where writer and reader are not in each other's physical presence, calls forth other kinds of pleasurable creativity. The challenge of print is to address a putatively anonymous and indefinitely extensive public, while simultaneously establishing rapport with the actual readers. In the Yorùbá-language weekly newspapers that enjoyed a surge of activity in 1920s Lagos, this challenge unleashed in writers an ebullient linguistic productivity. It involved a creative oscillation between referencing local knowledge which was assumed to be shared, producing generalities which unknown readers could be expected to understand, and imparting the very knowledge which was then alluded to as if it were already known—a mobilization of inclusivity and exclusion, knowingness (the wink) and didacticism (the lecture), which highlighted the peculiar and exciting properties of print in all its definiteness and indeterminacy, its authority and evasiveness. What is most striking about these early Yorùbá publications is their inventive and experimental mobilization of multiple genres and styles of direct and indirect address to the audience. While the English-language press dominated by the core Lagosian elite maintained a magisterial aloofness, in keeping with the preservation of their privileged status, the Yorùbá papers reveled in inclusivity, and exhorted, cajoled, and enticed their readers into a kind of virtual participation (Barber 2016).

The earliest of the new 1920s papers was *Èkó Àkète*, edited by Adéoyè Dénígà, “the Professor,” searcher after esoterica, autodidact, indefatigable humorist and sardonic moralist. Dénígà never failed to give his articles and columns (which made up the bulk of the paper) an idiomatic or proverbial heading, which was often ingeniously twisted to make a novel or humorous point, in this way flattering his readers while also challenging them to follow his turns of thought. For example, in an editorial exhorting his readers to value schooling, he begins by quoting a popular contemporary poet, evokes the bilingualism of educated Lagos society, references urban slang and jokes, and quotes an established poetic saying. Here is the text of that editorial:

ÈKỌ GBE NI NIYI, ỌGBỌN NGBE NI GA GÒGÒRÒ

Bayi ni Šobọ Aro-bi-odu ọkan ninu awọn Akewi Ẹgba wi nigbati o nso ti anfani to wa ninu iwe-kikọ, ko si si ẹniti o jẹ ko iyan Ẹkọ to ye kọro (*Sound Education*) kere, papa ni aiye isisiyi: nitorina lo se to ti o si ye gidigidi lati sapa lopolopo ki a le ni anfani nla yi, tabi ki a fi fun awọn ọmọ wa.

Akoko kan ti wa ri, ti o jẹ pe pupọ ninu awọn ara wa ki nbikita fun irufẹ nkan iyebiye yi, ti o si jẹ ede wa lati ma sọ pe ẹniti ko mọ 'we njeun, iwe wo ni Lagbaja tabi Temado mọ ti nwon fi di olowo? Šugbọn irufẹ ede be ko wopo mọ ni ode isisiyi: sasa ni ise to wa ti ko fe oye iwe mimo ibase die: enyin e wo ise-aranso bi enia ko ba loye Iwon-mimo (*Tap-rule*) bi oluware ba daso fun

ni, yio dabi agbawo ewu, bi ko fun o l'ese a so o: ewe, irufe aso alugbagba be le je ki a pe eniti o ba wo o ni Alapo'yo o le sure!!! gege be si ni Ise-Gbenagbena pelu: a ko le sese ma so ti Ise Akowe mo, eyi papa nfe iwe-mimo faufau, bi beko oluware yo "bo'le". ... ara e je ki a ji giri si Eko-Iwe to jire ni ilu wa yi, o si ye ki a mo nigbakugba pe ki otun we osi, ki osi we otun, ni owo fi nmo. (Owe ni o.)

(*Eko Akete* April 7 1923, p. 6. Orthography as in original.)

[Translation] Education Confers Prestige, Wisdom Raises One High.

This is what one of the Egbas poets, Šobò Arobiodu, said about the benefits of education, and no-one should underestimate the value of **Sound Education** [English trans.], especially nowadays; so it's right and proper to strive mightily to attain this precious benefit for oneself or for one's children.

There was a time when many of our people didn't care about this kind of priceless treasure, and it used to be said that an illiterate person still eats, and what books did So-and-So or Such-and-Such study before they became rich? But nowadays such sentiments are no longer common: there are few occupations which don't require at least a modicum of book-learning. Consider tailoring: if the tailor doesn't understand the **tape-rule** [English trans.], when they cut out your garment it will be like a borrowed gown—if it isn't tight at the knees it will billow baggily around you; or again, that kind of flapping garment might lead to people calling you "Salt sack wearer who cannot run!!!", and carpentry is the same, not to mention clerking, which requires real book learning, otherwise the person will fail....People, let us wake up to the importance of full literacy in this city of ours, and remember that if the right hand washes the left, and the left hand washes the right, that's how the hands become clean. (That's a proverb!)

Dénigà's headline is a quotation from Šóbò Aróbíodu, the famous Egbas poet who pioneered a new style of performed and printed poetry at the beginning of the twentieth century (see *Ọlátúnjì* 1982). Dénigà goes on to import English expressions (Sound Education, tape-rule) and to ventriloquize disparaging views on schooling which, he says, used to be common but no longer prevail. He urges the reader, "Consider tailoring..." and in expounding the pitfalls of tailoring without a tape-measure he echoes a traditional oral formulation—which originally had nothing to do with tape-measures at all, but was a paean to individual self-sufficiency, as in the following version I came across in an *Òkukù* man's *oriki*:

Ọmọ یشه ڤکو اڄومو تó bí mí
Baba mí, iyà ní sòkòtò àkítibò
Bí ò fún wòn ڤسسه á mú wòn doókún
Akintáyò baba mí ó ní ohun eni ní í mọni lára

Child of "Sharing the hot gruel's a misery" who bore me

My father, "Sharing a pair of trousers is a pain"

"If they're not too tight in the legs, they'll be cramped at the knees,"

Akintáyò my father, he said, "Having one's own things is really more convenient."

Dénigà then quotes a derisive epithet redolent of the schoolyard or the public street (Salt-sack wearer who cannot run). He ends with a direct exhortation to the reader (“People, let us wake up...”), identifies the reader as a local (“in this city of ours”), enlists him/her in the ranks of the enlightened by assuming their concurrence with his views on schooling, and appears to clinch his argument by reminding the reader of a well-known proverb—which, as in oral discourse, he immediately identifies as such, by way of paying respect to the elders who are the only people, strictly speaking, authorized to quote proverbs.

Dénigà’s style of addressivity sets the tone for the whole paper. Regular columnists and anonymous contributors alike experimented with a repertoire of direct forms of address, exclamations, exhortations, prayers, quotations of well-known proverbs and new-fangled transformations of them, snatches of shared popular urban street lore and older oral genres, alongside displays of knowledge the reader might not be expected to be familiar with. In these artful forms of addressivity, where inclusion (“we”) is interwoven with exhortation (“you”), the implicit convening of a like-minded public is based, fundamentally, on the assumption of a shared joy in the language. Delight in the language is the basis on which this public is convened, irrespective of the reader’s religion, occupation, gender, or educational attainment. It is what people have in common—and this shared zone of creativity is always undergoing revitalization, expansion, and consolidation through the very act of evoking it.

The three genres I have mentioned—*oriki*, popular traveling theater, and early newspaper writing—all create pleasure through enlisting participants in generative processes. In all three, innovation and the incorporation of a variety of materials are highly valued. In *oriki*, performers allude to a huge field of oral genres, and acts of interpretation often involve adding to one textual formulation through a “departure” into another. In popular theater, the “key sentences” that provided the kernels for the actors’ improvisations were often marked expressions—slang, foreign words (Hausa as well as English), or phrases drawn from “deep Yorùbá.” In the newspapers of the 1920s, the writers were right on the colonial linguistic interface and constantly incorporated English expressions and offset these against Yorùbá sayings. The range and variety of materials which the creators drew on in their textual creations thus varied; what the audience could be assumed to know was not the same across the three genres, and as a result, the kind of compact that could be established between participants was different in each case. But what was true of all of them was that the compact yielded pleasure and satisfaction, and that each text or performance was generative in the sense that it expanded the resources at the disposal of all participants and increased their desire and ability to participate, a process that Yai referred to as “uninterrupted production” (1989:63).

Textual Co-creation and the Consciousness of Practice

Textual co-creation involves joint recognition of something that does not belong wholly to any one of the parties involved. The process of entextualisation

puts the text “out there,” in a space between people. Entextualization involves a kind of separation and a kind of convergence. It demarcates and presents a form of words for recognition, evaluation, and interpretation; in being separable from any one person’s flow of discourse, a text becomes a point of convergence, where participants jointly recognize something that needs to be taken note of. This becomes most apparent when feats of verbal creativity are in play.

The importance of textuality to wider social science is that texts make their own mode of constitution present to consciousness. In drawing attention to the creativity of their use of language, performers and writers of texts bring to the surface the nature of their generative processes. Textual pleasure tends to reveal this. When the bride affirms, with satisfaction, that she “could speak until tomorrow,” she is drawing attention to the value placed on an inexhaustible repertoire, an open-ended and potentially never-ending production of text. When she does exhaust her knowledge of a particular branch or corpus of *oriki*, she may say, “As far as I know your praises, my father, so far have I gone; this is where I turn back”—representing her performance, and her knowledge, as a journey. This is a conception of textual generation which seems to have affinities with Tim Ingold’s characterization of the material processes of “making”—in crafts, artefacts, or building—as “not a building *up* from discrete parts into a hierarchically organized totality but a carrying *on*—a passage along a path in which every step grows from the one before and into the one following, on an itinerary that always overshoots its destinations” (Ingold 2013:45). The bride’s lament brings to the surface the journey-like process of composition and also proclaims that this journey can be perpetuated without closure. A seasoned praise-singer such as Şàngówemí would proclaim her own power to produce transformative utterance, and would draw attention to the forking, proliferating knowledge that enabled her to praise so many branches of families, thus highlighting the value placed on diversity as well as profusion. She would also sometimes call attention to the praise as a form of gift to the addressee, using metaphors like that of different types of decorative woven mat—suggesting an idea of *oriki* as artefact, an object of attention or of value. The popular theater actors literally staged the incremental capillary transit of new phrases and formulations through a community of speakers, making them memorable and repeatable in the act of picking them up from each other. The newspaper writers of 1920s Lagos made visible the ways in which shared knowledge is consolidated and new knowledge is shared—and spliced into the old, so that the basis of communion is continually renewed and extended. In this way, each of these genres brings into view—and comments upon—the nature of its own constitution.

Textual creation participates in the fundamental modes by which sociality is constituted: mutual recognition, response, co-creation, attunement, and addressivity. With fleeting, oblique remarks, it heightens awareness of these processes, concentrates them, and brings them to consciousness. If these are the sources of textual pleasure, then textual pleasure is a clue to how

people (individuals and communities) understand their own generative processes. For anyone seeking a theoretical approach to social processes that is grounded in local concepts, this is a good place to start.

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