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# Navigating Oral and Literary Strategies in Hope Eghagha's Poetry

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## Abstract

The written and oral literature in Africa have a common tradition of drawing nourishment and inspiration from oral culture. They are also vehicles of expressing personal experiences, ideas on morality and ethics, human and political relationships, socio-cultural problems in the continent. The assertion of black values or Africanness and nostalgia for his roots pervade Hope Eghagha's poetic trajectory. As a contemporary poet, he has appropriated the resources of his oral traditions and subject them through an individual creative forge, into varied new and interesting forms. Apart from infusion with a strong sense of orality, his poems also serve as an avenue for dissipating animosity against the social ills of the society. The study investigates the use of oral resources and devices of repetition used by Hope Eghagha and how he has justified these important aspects of the poet's work in his poetry's collection; *Rhythms of the Last Testament*; *This Story Must Not Be Told*; *The Governor's Lodge and other Poems*; *Premonitions and other Poems*; *Mama Dances into the Night and other Poems* and *Pepper in My Throat and other Poems*.

## Introduction

Oral literature influences written literature including contemporary African poetry in profound ways. It affords a poet clear and transparent examples of different strategies for creating symbols,



metaphors and motifs. Walter Ong (1982) demonstrates how literacy has penetrated oral discourses, but it is also possible to see elements of orality in written texts. Pedrosa (2003) views oral tradition as the source of all of the world's literary traditions. In navigating poetic or literary strategies in any given piece of literature whether oral or written, we must look for stylistic attributes-features like heightened language, metaphorical expression, structural repetitiveness and prosodic features.

In addition to exploiting oral resources, some of the poems in Eghagha's texts appear to be verbal duels used to vent anger against the social-political systems. Correspondingly, Karel Van Der Toorn (1991) looking at ancient Near Eastern poetic duels, explains them as vehicles for critical reflection on social and political changes and underlines their political importance. In Eghagha's poetry the insult to individuals is veiled as shown in 'Fregene and adjarho' p. 24 from *Mama dances into the Night and other Poems* and in the words of Valentinal Pagliai (2009) insults are not necessarily threatening, and cannot always be interpreted as aggressive or violent behaviour or even as 'causing offense' to the other party.

The modern African poet strives for original expression of his or her individual vision and the better he or she is, the better the text bears the mark of his or her personal signature. Folklore however, is anonymous, its signature is collective and its essence is not to be found in the artist's solitary act of creation, but in everyday life. The folklore act, image or motif in itself is autonomous, crosses the boundaries of language and time, and finds a local context in the soil of whatever culture it happens to take root. But folklore elements, once they are used in a poem, lose their autonomy and become identified with the poet's work and his cultural background. So, while folklore fragments can be transplanted-and can be traced and classified according to motif indices-the literary image derives most of its value from its context in the soil into which it has been transplanted. For Bernth Lindfors (2002) accomplished works of art communicate in such a universal human idiom that they are capable of transcending their particular time and place and speaking to all mankind. In the words of I. A. Richards (1936),

words and images are animated by their relation to surrounding words and images, and the lights and shadows cast by the second can shape and transform the first in ways that are not possible for folklore units. And if a literary image or metaphor happens also to be a piece of folklore, then it carries into the poem an additional level of meaning which originally belonged to the folklore tradition. At its simplest level, the function of folklore element in a poem is identical with its function in the cultural group, it is a rhetorical device and serves to affirm some collective belief of the group and to unite them for religious, national, or political purposes.

For example, the poems in *The Governor's Lodge and other Poems* (ix) explore political and religious intrigues, corruption and bigotry as well as problematic inter-personal relationships and societal interactions.

### **Oral Heritage in Poetry**

Paul de Carvalho-Neto's concept of folklore is that it must be cultural, anonymous, non-institutional and pre-logical. Eghagha dips into the collective store of Urhobo folklore to find materials for his imagery. As Nabofa (2004:37) puts it:

For the Urhobo, all manner of entities can assume symbolic religious significance. Living things like plants and animals, sacred persons like priests and priestesses, natural objects like stones, molehills, anthills, valleys, river rapids, sun, moon, stars, wind, water, and fire, human properties like saliva and blood, man-made things like boats, and abstract things like numbers, the square, or the circle can be considered sacred religious objects. An Urhobo can transform any object or form into a...symbol, both consciously and unconsciously, endowing it with religious importance and using it in...art



Proverbs are the most frequently used folklore category in various contexts. One finds proverbs being used in daily discussions to give more emphasis to claims or statements. A skilled speaker saturates his speech with pertinent proverbs, thus making it more enjoyable and effective. We feel the impact and profundity of proverbs in 'Mama dances into the night' 'The fire of revenge' 'You have carried it too far' 'How can they forget their garments' 'Let them remember' in *Mama dances into the night and other Poems*. Eghagha has used the proverbs as part of building blocks for most of the poems. As observed by Akporobaro (2004:8)

the poetic texture, form and quality of the Nigerian proverb, derive from the insistent vividness of the tropes, similes, hyperboles and metaphors which act as the communicative vehicle of the proverb. The Nigerian proverb belongs to the realms of poetical wit, and imagery, and in general to the mode of poetry...many poems are composed through assemblage of proverbs presented and welded together.

In many of the poems, certain phrases are repeated as in the oral performance. Helen Chukwuma (1976:16-17) stresses the importance of proverbs especially when they are borrowed and modified to project opinions in modern African writing:

Proverbs are used to express an essential idea. When they are used in verse, they are not usually subject to a rendition in their original forms. Rather they are modified and adapted according to the demand of rhythm and beat. Adaptation may take the form of adding a few words or of contrasting the proverb words while still retaining the essential image necessary for its identification.

Furthermore Ogunjimi and Na'Allah (2001: 65) define and highlight the properties of the African proverb as:

The oral compositions and their various thematic and stylistic constituents derived from all the layers

of what we described as the hierarchy of African values. Proverbs embrace the philosophical and socio-cultural value systems of the people. They point to the individual, domestic and collective patterns of the society from which they are derived...Chinua Achebe says that a proverb is the 'palm oil with which words are eaten' This shows that proverbs are essential ingredients to harmonize the life rhythm of any community.

In consonance with what Tayo Olafioye (2000:81) observes about Ojaide's poetry, the proverb in Hope Eghagha's poetry offers a literary tool that projects tradition, and rhetorics that illustrates socio-cultural realities. Besides, it highlights African contribution to universal literalism, regardless of the syntax being used.

### **Myths, Proverbs and Axioms**

In *Rhythms of the Last Testament* there is 'Labalaba'(33) an indigenous name for the butterfly. Humans are likened to the butterfly that would hover around plants with nectar for its food. In 'My burden' (p.41) there is myth of the snail that bears the burden of its shell whether it is heavy or light. A lot of people bear their burdens of worries, fears, hunger, poverty and so on. Omotete is also an Urhobo word for a child, which connotes innocence. 'Night call' (44) highlights the proverb about the testimony of pot as fire's prerogative. 'Dance of the naked mothers' (51), alludes to traditional protest by women who dance naked to protest grave injustice especially meted to one of them or an avenue of sending strong messages to those who have committed any heinous crime against humanity or the society. One can easily prevent an accident that has been foreseen hence 'an overflowing river/which gets pregnant in our eyes/must not drown us. In 'The cannons give way to rags' (52) traditional women's group (eweya) bare their buttocks to protest any injustice. This action is regarded as a taboo. Disrobing by women in public is considered a serious and permanent curse on those to whom the women expose themselves. The curse is related to mothering, agricultural productivity and fertility in general. Urhobo



traditional ululation is depicted e-e-e-! eye! 'Sun-god'(53) Sacrifice of dog to the gods is a traditional ritual. 'The call of Akpobrisi'(57). A strange call made from an unusual source, the *akpobrisi* tree which is supposed to be the abode of gods and only the notable medicine man can approach it.

*This Story Must Not Be Told* the second collection among the texts has many stories to tell. In the titled poem 'This story must not be told'(1) indicates a tradition of invoking any unpleasant thing into a calabash and made to flow away, thereby taking away the problem as the calabash flows away along the course of a river to 'obliterate traces of existence.' Marine sacrifices are a common sight in the riverine areas of the Niger-Delta. Sometimes problems recur like the image of the calabash, which flows back after we may have forgotten about it. 'The colour of rape' (3) has *Umuama* symbol of what has been kept away from prying eyes. 'Prelude to the great fall' (4) has the proverb about the fall of the elephant, when the elephant falls not even his brother can lift him up. 'You are just a memory' (45) depicts the proverb about the kernel and its metamorphosis to a palm tree. The beginning of a tall palm is a small kernel seed, which dies for a new life to begin, and the refusal of anything that has attained its height to give way can only lead to stagnation. One forgets easily the humble beginning of the plant when it starts flourishing. Similarly, those celebrated today are soon forgotten when they pass away, at best the individual becomes only a memory.

As illustrated by the 'The story is an egg' (51), preserving the story is imperative, otherwise it can be likened to an egg that breaks with its content spilling. When it does, its content cannot be retrieved fully neither can its broken shell be mended. The damage is irreparable. 'the story is an egg that will break/if its contents spill out.' 'For the rampaging vice chancellor' (86) we have the proverbial saying of the ambitious goat. The subject's head is likened to the ambitious goat that indulged in an abominable act of climbing his mother at the funeral of his father. 'Cenotaph of the poor'(92) 'The rags of the old woman/ commands the respect of her age. This is akin to the proverb that says a young person may have as many clothes as the old but not equal number of rags. 'Your

sacrifice scares me'(96) 'Yet the food of the spirit/ does not fill the stomach' because sometimes all that is needed to be sacrificed to the spirit may be a lobe of kola nut which will not fill a stomach yet satisfy spiritually.

From *The Governor's Lodge and other Poems*, we have an array of proverbs and axioms incorporated in the poems. 'Nakedness of the naked'(8).The colours of trouble do not warn anyone. It is not the size/ of a man's head that determines the quality of his brain. I swear with the breast/ of my departed mother. A maternal link has spiritual implications, which can be used to bless or invoke curses, and it is believed that such curses are very efficacious. 'For Abiodun Adetugbo'.(16) When a big masquerade steps out/the lesser ones bow their masks. 'The feast is over' (44). It is not the shape of a man's mouth/that gives him sense. Okot has warned the world/no one must uproot the pumpkin. Worthwhile habits in a tradition should be preserved and not discarded in favour of modernity. 'The Colour of your canopy' (63).

If a man's eyes sees a snake/and the weak hands of a woman kill it/the heavens will not fall. What is imperative when there is a problem is for a solution to be provided regardless of gender. No matter how rich you are/You cannot feed the world. This is uttered to indicate the rich do not have solution to every problem 'The Woman's anger' (68) Hunger has no brother/ anger has no friend. Both emotions are felt by the young and the old, the rich and the poor. 'Against the grain' (73) How may you recall the/ word that has gone on air. It is almost impossible to recant words spoken especially when the hearer will be hurt deeply. We do not leave the world/through the road we came. Natural human movement is from womb to tomb and not vice versa. 'Status quo is sweet'(80). If we cannot scratch our back/with our fingers/we must rub our belly in consolation. This proverb indicates we can only do what is within our possibility and be ready to derive satisfaction from that 'The monkey man'(82). When a monkey takes a leap/it makes sure there is a tree nearby. A safe landing is what animals and human beings crave especially when faced with challenges. 'The Floods'(87). Even the watchful dog/recognises witches/in broad daylight/it barks at

them. There is a traditional belief that dogs are clairvoyant and can sniff out evil people then bark at them to show disapproval for evil deeds.

In *Premonitions and other Dreams* we have the proverb that counsels us to accept whatever life brings the way of a person in 'We must eat each day's yam/as it comes. And a true observation that a' stinging tongue makes enemies, (49) 'A salute to the King'(53) indicates the traditional reverence and myth of ogriki. 'Great king of obireko/ ogriki salutes you/if you cut it for firewood/your ancestors will send the rain'. In many communities in Urhobo land, as observed by S.E Erivwo (2005) ogriki is a particular tree planted on the compound, street, or town, and through which mother-earth is accorded worship It also indicates the ownership or founder of any particular compound, street or town. Ogriki is besought for the fertility of crops and of wives, for the blessing of wealth and health with which till the soil. Tradition proffers a reason for the restlessness of the monkey. 'The monkey knows it is ugly/that is why it dances always' (57). We are presented with one of the characteristics of death. 'Death comes to every hamlet/ wearing different banners beads' (61) and the mythic belief about the tiger, 'Tigers give birth when the sun/fights with the moon' (65). As we come into the wicked world/we carry our own book of life. This is an allusion to the Urhobo belief in destiny hence a dog that is destined for death/ ignores the call of his master'.

From *Pepper in my Throat and other Poems* we have 'Eating the crow of the cock'.(12) which refers to a taboo about eating the crow of the cock that can result to several ailments. Proverbs are uttered to make foolish people learn and be made wiser hence 'warnings are for open ears/not for mountain-roaming goats' (22) It is a known fact one cannot be shaven in absentia. 'You cannot shave my head in my absence' (23) 'The fire is no friend to the bush' (30) because of its destructive nature. Valuable things ought to be kept properly to prevent them from being stolen or damaged. 'You do not hang fish on the rack and chase after lizards' (38) Nene is an endearing Urhobo name for grandmother.



In *Mama dances into the night and other Poems*, several traditional sayings have been used to intersperse the poems. For example, 'The persistence of angry rain drops can/reduce a mountain of stone to miserable sand... The stone in the marketplace /may land on your daughter's head' It is wisdom not to throw stones in a crowded market as one may unknowingly harm a relation or friend. (27) There is also a common traditional prayer here; 'when the callers call for a head/may we be absent from the gathering' (32) The need for mutual co-existence is shown proverbially. 'The tooth and the tongue quarrel/yet they do not go to court/before the next meal' (35) and that 'The tree of this life can be climbed from/different and many branches'. (60)

### **Rhythms and Relevance of Repetition**

Repetition is one of the most fundamental characteristic features of oral literature and it is a basic unifying device in all poetry. Repetition as expressed in the work of Okpewho (1992:71) has both an aesthetic and a utilitarian value:

In a fundamental way, the repetition of a phrase, a line, or a passage does have a sing-song quality to it...Besides this general aesthetic impact, repetition does have more stylistic values within the text. There is repetition of a sound, syllable, word, phrase, line stanza or metrical pattern. Sometimes repetition reinforces or even substitutes for meter (the beat) another controlling factor of poetry. Repetition found extensively in free verse includes parallelism and alliteration which contribute to rhyme and rhythm and these frequently supplement the use of other unifying devices.

Helen Chukwuma (1976:16) also locates repetition as 'a basic principle of oral art and can be viewed as a stylistic and fundamental grammatical form'. There are different types and functions of repetition. According to Persson (1974:10) there is lexical repetition that is used for intensifying, emphatic, imitation and purposive reasons. He identifies several types of syntactic repetition, such as

the exact repetition of a syntactic unit in the form of a substitute and syntactically parallel constructions. Another type of repetition is thematic which is composed of paraphrase, repetition with variation, reverse paraphrase and rewording...repetition is used for expansion purposes when the writer or speaker aims to provide new information or specific information. For Shepherd (1990) repetition serves as a means of intensification, humor, control in conversation, expression of anger/pleasure/displeasure, cohesion/coherence, emphatic, evaluative and thematic functions...exact repetition of words of emotions and perceptions that denote anger, fear sarcasm, happiness, pleasure, displeasure create cohesion. Cohesion is poetic and for Tannen (1991:30-46) '...all discourse is poetic, operating on systems of coherence in which form and meaning intertwine. Repetition is one of an array of dynamics by which conversation, like literary discourse, achieves this aesthetic effect'. He further opines that repetition may show up as self repetition or repetition of others, exact repetition or paraphrase, and as repetition with the variation which is defined as 'questions transformed into statements, statements changed into questions, repetition with a single word or phrase changed, and repetition with change of person or tense.' Eghagha uses a variety of repetition and it contributes immensely to the music of his poetry.

Repetition has been used for sarcasm. For example in *Rhythms of the Last Testament* we have sarcasm in 'The Song' to indicate how military rulers issue instructions:

they bark orders  
they ban orders  
they create organs (12)

This tone of mockery is also shown in 'The Dictator' from *This story must not be Told* where rulers are shown to undemocratically issue decrees:

i decreed you into existence  
i shall decree you out of existence  
i declared you a person

i shall declare you a non-person...  
armoured car  
armoured plate  
armoured food  
armoured wife...  
unarmoured lovers  
unarmoured apples  
unarmoured strangers (10)

In 'The telephone' from *This story must not be Told* we also have repetition to express anger and displeasure at the negative aspects of a telephone as well as expression of disgust about the brutal murder of an innocent citizen in 'wailing in the house of Ige':

you bring news...  
you do not celebrate  
you do not mourn  
you just do your duty...  
you do not prepare the ears...  
you do not know whether or not...  
you do not know whether or not  
you obey the voice spoken into you  
you travel into the bedroom late at night...  
you ignore the wailing that follow (20)

'Wailing in the house of ige'  
ige of the sharp tongue  
ige where is is ige  
ige whose siddon look...  
ige was not hobbled by disease  
ige's brother was ill  
ige cuddles his brother nursed him...  
ige who looked you in the eye...  
ige o ige...  
ige of ige's house  
ige husband of atinuke  
ige of the house of courage (41)



Repetition has been used thematically for expansion in many of the poems. For example, *In Rhythms of the Last Testament* we have:

‘The love of a lover’

i swim against the tide  
i will catch the moon of your songs  
i will cup your laughter...  
i will play the music of our first encounter...  
i will love with the love of a lover...  
i will continue to love you with the love of a lover(67)

Furthermore, we also have thematic repetition with variation for the purpose of expansion in *The Governor’s Lodge and other Poems* as indicated in ‘For Biodun Adetugbo’ and ‘The Prayer’

‘For Biodun Adetugbo’

so the fire has leapt up the trunk  
so the canon has been fired..  
the fire has gone off the trunk  
the embers give birth..  
post modern songs  
post modern English...  
post modern god...  
we unmask for biodun  
we shed our toga  
we climb the tree after him...  
although God hovers around biodun  
although biodun shuts his eyes to providence...  
the fire has leapt up the trunk  
the trunk has a baby  
the baby has many babies...  
the fire  
the trunk  
the fire  
the embers  
the fire at sixty five leaps on (16)

‘The prayer’

let all the governor’s enemies be vanquished  
let his opponents be confused at night...  
let the millions of naira rain in the state  
let us have our share of the national cake  
let it reach us here in this room  
the wife her share  
the friends their share  
the brothers their share  
the unmarried sisters their share  
the married sisters their share  
the children their share  
the priest his share...  
amen amen amen amen amen  
amen amen amen amen amen...  
amen  
amen  
amen  
amen  
amen (29)

Lines are also repeated for expansion in *Premonitions and other Dreams* as shown in ‘The face of your words’ and ‘End of Premonitions:

‘The face of your words’

words make the world  
words can make a day  
words can drive a knife into a day  
words can knock life out of a man  
words can knock out the spirit of a man  
words can light the lantern of a man’s life  
words can make a heart leap into the air  
words can make a man go to the moon (44)

‘End of premonitions’

alliteration in

iteration and reiterations fan the fire of fantasy

boredom of the kingdom...ignorance of the power

boredom of the boring king...bears a chalice...malice in the  
air...

holy ghosts and grotesque ghosts gain in stature

repetitions in

hirelings seek a way

hirelings seek the way...the way to heaven...

sorrows in the field...harvest of the last times

sorrows in the field...the backdrop goes asunder

sorrows of the harvester...pristine premonitions

sorrows in the field...

sorrows between the sheets...

the pyramid pirouettes into the depth of the altering altar

this pyramid...this pyramid...and the depth of the rush hour

this pyramid...this pyramid...and the death of the waving  
flag...

it is finished...

finished...

fini...

fi...

finally finalised from the finger of the first filament (81)

In most of the poems, we also find syntactic repetition that is exact repetition of a syntactic unit.

For example in *Pepper in my throat and other Poems*, we have the following poems syntactically repeated:

‘Buy me a bicycle’

buy me a bicycle

bicycle bicycle

bicycle to play with

bicycle bicycle

now i have a bicycle



bicycle bicycle  
i can ride like my mates  
bicycle bicycle

thank you  
mummy  
thank you mummy  
thank you mummy  
thank you daddy

but the bicycle has no support  
bicycle bicycle  
each time i ride it i fall to the floor  
bicycle bicycle

why did mummy buy this bicycle  
bicycle bicycle  
bicycle without support  
bicycle bicycle

i do not want this bicycle  
bicycle bicycle  
take the bicycle away  
bicycle bicycle...

did he carry a burden to bed  
did he carry the burden all night  
did he plan to make mummy happy...

let me ride my bicycle  
i want my bicycle now  
my bicycle my bicycle  
bicycle bicycle (56)

'In some poems we have lexical repetition for emphatic use and to create cohesion. For example, in *In Mama dances into the Night* we have:



consciousness of African oral tradition that makes Eghagha's poetry very lively, incisive and overly effective.

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