The Yorùbá Indigenous Psychotherapeutic Healing System: 
A case Study of Oríkì

Qládélé Caleb Orímóògùnjé
University of Lagos, Nigeria
oorimoogunje@unilag.edu.ng

Abstract

This paper discusses the psycho-therapeutic features in Oríkì, the panegyric genre that focuses on changing people’s current way of life. It employs range of techniques based on relationship building, dialogue, communication, and behaviour changed that are designed to improve the mental among the users. We discuss its ability to increase sense of well-being as well as reduce discomfort of the addressees. In our analysis, we employed the socio-mythical approach, borne out of sociological and mythological approaches that made it possible for us to perceive cultural ideologies on which the attitude of the Yorùbá is based.

Keywords: Psycho-therapy, behaviour, socio-mythic approach, ideology, panegyric, genre.
Introduction

Abimbolá (1975:266-292) asserts that oríkì is a genre that possesses a record of the past and it spurs listeners by such recital to greater achievement in emulation of their ancestors. Gbádámọ́si and Beier (1959: 12) portray it as a poetic phrase used to describe or praise a given phenomenon. A lot of scholars have worked on various African genres which can be compared with oríkì. These scholars include Cope (1968), Grant (1927), Lestrade (1937) and Vilakazi (1938) who have worked extensively on the izibongo of the Zulu. Also, Morris (1964) has worked on the ebyevugo of the Bahima of Ankole. Works on the maboko of the Tswana chiefs and dithoko of Southern Sotho have been done by Schapera (1965) and Guma (1967:136-170) respectively. Nketia (1955) and Yankah (1983) also have elaborate works on mmbrane and apae of the Akan of Ghana. Barber (1979) views oríkì (1988) has probed into historical, social, cultural and economic aspects of oríkì of some lineages among the Èkìtì Yorùbá. Our salient duty here is to give an intent look at oríkì as a health-related genre that is endowed with psychotherapeutic features in this paper.

Socio-mythical Approach

While a lot of theories have been propounded, in this domain not all the theories are considered appropriate to this study. The socio-mythical approach explains how myths are used to explain certain hidden phenomena in the Yorùbá society. This approach called socio-mythical approach gives room for sociological theory and the mythological approach to be contrapuntally explored. It also also benefits from the psycho-analytical perspectives, since it is sociologically related.

The reasons for employing the socio-mythical approach in this discussion are enumerated as follows. The verbal arts in general and those used in Yorùbá indigenous healthcare practices in particular are products of society, and they are used by, and for the people in the Yorùbá society. Some of the Yorùbá verbal arts are mythical allusions in which myth can be used as a tool to unveil the hidden issues. Therefore, it paves the way for getting acquainted with valid information on issues like how diseases are caused, prevented and treated in the context of cultural tradition. We can then regard the approach as the embodiment of illumination over mysteries found in the various verbal arts among the Yorùbá. Furthermore, it has been observed that some of the Yorùbá verbal arts are tools that can be used to work on the socio-psychological condition of the people who directly benefit from the performance of the verbal arts under study. Since the socio-mythical approach accommodates the social aspect of other theories (mythological, sociological and structuralist approaches) as tools for the understanding of verbal arts in Yorùbá traditional healthcare delivery system, the sociological aspect of the approach is hereby discussed.

Eclecticism, as observed in the study of verbal arts in the Yorùbá indigenous healthcare practices is the interaction of the literary approaches as earlier discussed. In this regard, the perspectives in the socio-mythical approach, which are sociological, mythological as well as psycho-analytical, are all interrelated. The focus of any research in this domain is the society to which any of these approaches gives prominence. The genre, oríkì, is often made a social enterprise by the raconteur. This is because, the rendition requires a lot of skill and
knowledge, often acquired through apprenticeship or long experience. The mastery of such genres enhances the socio-economic status of the verbal art raconteurs, and this makes them commercialise their expertise.

The cultural aspect of life discussed in the sociological approach can also be given a comprehensive meaning in the mythological approach in an attempt to give the origin of such a cultural institution in the society. The psycho-analytical approach that ascertains human minds provides the analyst with the social meaning of a phenomenon such as bewitching or smallpox that springs up from the society.

One cannot discuss the social meaning of Yorùbá verbal arts through the psycho-analytical approach without touching the use of language of the verbal arts in the relevant texts as expressed in the sociological approach through which the social meaning is given. The psycho-analytical and sociological tools take the social meaning of the genres under study into consideration by giving a detailed discussion on language (of a text) which is the determining factor of the social communication. On language use, the mythological aspect of the study, explains the origin of all symbols of communication. Explanation is usually given on how Yorùbá society values orature as manifested in their language.

Furthermore, the socio-mythical approach used in this study gives an insight into the relationship of verbal arts and Yorùbá indigenous health knowledge. It also sheds some light on the meanings, values and functions of the health-related genres among the Yorùbá, either in health or disease. The approach weaves all its discussion around the society, in order to give a comprehensive meaning. The interrelatedness of all the chosen approaches has prompted us to label our own literary analytical approach the socio-mythical approach, so as to give deeper meaning to our discussion in the study. The socio-mythical approach to the study of verbal arts in the Yorùbá indigenous healthcare delivery system aims at finding out the social functions and meanings of the said verbal arts, and would bring into the limelight their relevance to the society.

The socio-mythical approach, borne out of sociological and mythological approaches, has made it possible for us to perceive cultural ideologies on which the attitude of the Yorùbá is based. Some excerpts in the oríkì (verbal salutes) have shown that man always wishes himself and his loved ones well.
Through the socio-mythical approach, it is detected that the Yorùbá verbal arts used in the indigenous healthcare delivery system address humanity, that is, they are the instruments used in the act of communication. There are a lot of messages conveyed through the health-related genres in the Yorùbá traditional milieu. This shows that verbal arts are endowed with social meanings and functions. Surveillance is made possible, because the approach does not separate the culture (of the environment) and the texts (under study in which the society creates its material lives) from each other. Therefore, the work has shown that the health-related verbal arts as a communicative procedure can be between the encoder/addresser who is/are usually human and the decoder/addressee who is/are usually either human, supernatural being or both. At times when the encoder/addresser addresses him/herself, he/she is part and parcel of the decoder/addressee group.

Among the Yorùbá, oríkì can be delineated as a stimulant to whom it is addressed. It inspires pleasantly the subject of address; meaning that, it has a strong connection with the psyche of its target. The addressee at times gets carried away with the sense of the marvelous things wrought in the days of his ancestors as expressed in the eulogy. According to Yorùbá belief, oríkì is capable of controlling man’s thinking faculty, because it can be used to achieve a lot in a tense atmosphere. Through it, one who is hot tempered or mentally demented can be cured. Through mere listening to their oríkì, the descendants of Balógun Ájọbo of Ìbàdàn could be compelled to comport themselves. Let us examine his oríkì as found in Qlátúnjí (1984: 87-88):

Ájọbo Òmírin  
Ògbóntarígi  
Eégún oniyèépanpata  
Abiyé gbóóró–gbooro  
Ìyádáṣè wa Ìbàdàn  
Ajísebè wa Ìbàdàn  
Órìṣà ti wón ñ jí sín níBádàn  
Ô-ná-omo-ní-lagbá–ná-omo-ní-lágbá  
Ô-na-omo-lòògùn-na-omo-lòṣé-irin  
A-f’ákárábá–já-bí-Ídáhòmí  
A-féékánná–já-bí-ógidáñ  
A-wú-tuttu-bí-Óṣòmù  
A-pón-lójú–já-seri-seri

Ájọbo, Swallower  
The important one  
The masquerade that wears thick feathers  
He that has broad feathers  
The Chief host at Ìbàdàn i.e. the generous one  
He that provides food at Ìbàdàn  
The divinity that everyone wakes to worship at Ìbàdàn  
He that lashes people with whips and lashes with cudgels  
He that beats people with herbal preparation and beats with iron rods
He that fights with the charmed padlock like
the Dahomeans (Beninois)
He that fights with his nail like the lion
He that puffs himself up like a surly person
He that is in battle exceedingly red in eye.

The above excerpt possesses potentiality for stimulating the descendants of Balogun Ajobọ of Ibadan to be magnanimous, militant, bold and fearless. This type of oríkì is capable of curing one who is coward among the descendant of Ajobọ. Apart from the fact that the oríkì (verbal salute) is capable of making the addressees feel elevated, it is observed that it makes them remain bold and confident to get people convinced that they do take after their progenitors. Qalataunj (¶93:3) shows that oríkì is a genre that ‘evokes in people feelings of well-being and pride as the semantic component of the various names, and incidents alluded to, arouses this emotional response’ When an oríkì is chanted by a nursing mother/elder at the homestead to a crying or restless child, it has a positive psychological effect on the child that soothes and calms him/her down. This shows another health caring effect of oríkì having a soothing effect on the crying babies or restless children. Since oríkì controls the psyche of its recipient, we could therefore submit that it makes one feel mentally and physically healthy. It plays a significant role in the traditional healing system in the Yorùbá society. It gives a sort of confidence (to the users), gained through the historical heritage it provides for the society.

Genetics may be employed to explain the operation of oríkì (verbal salute). If the descendant of a heroic ancestor possesses the innate features, both physical and psychological, of the ancestor, it will be no surprise that when oríkì of the ancestor is rendered, the present addressee starts manifesting the said traits. The oríkì acts only as a stimulant. This is why a crying or even sick child is able to react positively to the oríkì said to it, though he is unconscious. The following Yorùbá proverbs confirm this view:

i. Omo ewure kọ ni lọ isọ aguntan ree mumu
The offspring of a goat will never suck the breast of a sheep

ii. Omo ajanaakọ kọ nii yarar, Ọmọ tẹkin-un bà bi, ẹkin ni yọọ ọjọ. The offspring of an elephant can never be like a hartebeest (Bubalis Major), The offspring of a tiger will always look like a tiger.

The Psychotherapeutic Features in Oríkì

Various scholars have worked on what psychotherapy is with their different views on the subject matter. Some view it as ‘one of those all encompassing terms that refers to the use tools or techniques that alleviate mental, emotional or behavioural problems’ the practice of which is typically undertaken by psychologists, psychiatrists, psychotherapists and counselors (See Reber and Reber, 2001). The work of some scholars like Jorm, Mackinnon,
Christensen and Griffiths (2005) into mental health believes that psychotherapy is a treatment that sits outside medical practice and lifestyle treatments i.e. complementary therapies and others.

**Oríkì**, the panegyric genre focuses on changing people’s current way of life. It employs range of technique based on relationship building, dialogue, communication, and behaviour changed that are designed to improve the mental among the users. It has the ability to increase sense of well-being as well as reduces discomfort of the addressees.

It identifies and changes behaviours or thoughts that adversely affects one’s life or the structure of the whole community. At this junction, we should take Ogundéji’s (2000) observation into consideration by seeing the genre as being objective in the sense that its objects of praise are not only are not verbally awarded for their good deeds and beauty, but it also extends its reference to their wrong sides, weaknesses and ugliness. This feature of oríkì allows people to know the repercussion or outcome of every endeavor they embark on.

Here is a human character who has left a good legacy behind for the descendants can be found in oríkì (verbal salutes) of Abímbolá who was a renowned hunter and Ifá priest in Òyó town:

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Abímbolá ọmọ Ìrókò
Ìrókò lọmọ Adéyemo
Adéyemo n baba Ìrókò
ìgbà tí baba Ògúnwândé ń bẹ láyé
Tí baba rẹ ń bẹ ní yínbọnyinbọn
Bákátá ń sá ọ lọ bí ọṣèjẹ
Bótòló ń kunra rẹ ń kànnàkànnà
Àridòpó, mọ ní baba rẹ ọ bá a.
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Abímbolá, the offspring of Ìrókò
Ìrókò is the offspring of Adéyemo
Adéyemo is the father of Ìrókò
When Ògúnwândé’s father was alive
When your father was very active in the hunting expeditions
If a civet-cat was as swift as air
And if a waterbuck was as fast as the stone released from a Catapult sling
Àridòpó, I said, your father would catch up with it.

The excerpt above describes how good Abímbolá was in the hunting game. It can give the descendants a clue to life that one needs to know the technical-know-how of one’s profession, and it as well, teaches them that one should excel in any field one has chosen, in order to leave a remarkable legacy behind. The excerpt can be used to encourage the descendants to see their father as a symbol of excellence and fulfillment which can heal anyone who is melancholic or perhaps neurotic among that descendant. In other words, it has an ability to stimulate the healthy emotional development and stability in that descendant and the whole society. The above oríkì (verbal salutes) brings joy and hope to the offsprings of the main character mentioned. Joy and hope are usually the antidotes of hysteria, anxiety,
obsessions, depression and compulsions which are the symptoms of neurosis. This psychotherapeutic healing can be achieved, because, oríkì (verbal salutes) of this nature, works on the psyche of the target. Also in the oríkì (verbal salutes) of this same family, a human-ancestor of their character is depicted. Their progenitor was so generous that he is said to have even fed flies:

\[\text{Baba yín àgbà ló rà rà à, } \]
\[\text{Tó relégbó lêsè. } \]
\[\text{Ó ní kéeşín ò lè mó-ón róhun ğe } \]

*Your forefather procured uncountable things*

*That he bought a person with a sore in the legs*

*On which the flies fed*

The excerpt inculcated some moral into the members of the family in order to eradicate selfishness/self-centeredness that can destroy the emotion (human feeling) of the society. A human being with sores on his/her legs is the object in the above excerpt, while the main character in the excerpt symbolises generosity. Though at the surface level, this action is dehumanising, but the chanter is only demonstrating that their progenitor’s generosity is indescribable.

**Oríkì Raconteur as a Psychotherapist**

There is a vital question that who can really be a psychotherapist. The view of the orthodox medicine practitioners is that the adequately trained and certified psychotherapists are psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, nurse practitioner and minister or priest. With the psychotherapeutic features in oríkì, the raconteurs of the genre can also be regarded as psychotherapists. The genre is usually being rendered at the domestic, communal and inter-communal levels.

**Who Needs Psychotherapeutic Assistance in Oríkì**

The utilitarian nature of oríkì cuts across ages, levels, hierarchies and strata. Children at domestic, communal and inter-communal need oríkì to pave way for their greatness by tutoring them to adhere strictly to the societal norms. It is even useful to ba a teaching aid in various schools so that the mind of the younger ones will be prepared to face reality of life. This does leave the adolescent behind most especially in the issues of separation and peer relationship. In the area of career issues in life, young adults and mature adults also need it for them to think of how the can be useful for their thinking towards the issues of changing relationships, family alignments, health, work and social status in their community. Furthermore, the older adults can benefit from it by preparing them for end of life issues.
Conclusion

It is observed, in this study that, when oríkì (verbal salute) is recited, it is capable of healing the entire society of her social evils which have earned the society a great setback as regards her well-being. This could be possible if everyone can take after his/her worthy progenitor of whom he/she has knowledge of through oríkì. Emulating the good aspects as well as the ugly behaviour of the ancestor/ancestress as shown in any given oríkì can get rid of societal malady.
References

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