

# Centering the Peripheral: A Case for Poetry in Africa

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## ABSTRACT

This paper grapples with a frequently asked question: Is there a case for poetry in Africa? Though not necessarily a polemical rooting for recognition of African oral poetry, the paper stands in contention with assertions that have tended to dismiss the said artworks as non-poetry, while at the same time attempting to confer superiority of the written poetry over the oral. In particular, the paper contests the arguments by some pioneer researchers into African literature that posited that what was usually touted as poetry in Africa did not qualify as true poetry, but rather, simply songs and chants. In an attempt to address the nitty-gritty of this subject the paper tackles the crucial question of what constitutes poetry and whether there is a significant difference between a song and a poem.

The paper employs the theory of ethno-poetics which takes interest in the aesthetic components and poetic structuring of oral poems. Ethnopoetics gives guidelines on how to organize an oral text in lines to render its fullest charge of texture: rhythm, nuance, phrasing and other components that allow full poetic meaning. It is intended that the poetic restructuring will particularly help realize the poetic qualities in African poetic works. Besides, the paper also tries to underscore "narrato-centric" approach, an application I used elsewhere in my discussion of theory in the study of oral literature. The approach encourages the study of oral literature material that puts emphasis on performance and the dynamics dictating the performer and his role in the performance.

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## Introduction

Before the advent of Western education, poetry in Africa was largely oral and almost invariably rendered as songs, chants and declamations. Indeed, some early scholars such as Hegel and Long dismissed the poetry simply as mere songs and chants. They saw it as not qualifying to be poetry, insisting that there was nothing of true poetic merit in African oral literature. This begins to raise the question of whether songs and chants cannot be poetry. Is there a significant difference between a song and a poem? This is a question that I shall come to later. However, in dismissing the threshold of African poetic works, the scholars argued that poetry is a mark of an advanced culture and civilization, and an art only possible through high skills and training. They further argued that poetry is aesthetic and serious and only achievable from highly developed languages – all of which qualities African languages were seen to lack. Besides, there was the view that African communities would be still too deep into the elementary problems of existence to engage in any meaningful poetry.

Has this view of African poetic works changed? Of course one would be justified to argue that a discussion based on Hegel and Long could be outdated. Yet, whether this view has changed remains a matter of conjecture, but many pundits of this subject still want to insist that poetry must enjoy elevated status and quality; perhaps the type – as they often want to argue – that goes beyond what African poetic indulgence is capable of offering. Indeed, it does not help matters the fact that many African countries are still struggling to establish real quality institutions of learning or training and levels of illiteracy are still high. Besides, many countries in Africa, for example, Somalia, Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, to name only but a few, are indeed still engrossed in the struggles of political, social and economic stability. This could give credence to the claim that African communities are still deep into the elementary problems of existence.

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A pertinent question, however, that this paper would want to ask is whether political, social and economic instability can hinder the creation of poetry. On the other hand, one may also want to know at what point an art work may qualify to become poetry. Are African poetic works incapable of passing as true poetry, or if they qualify to be poetry, are they inferior poetry?

It is the view of this paper that Hegel and his contemporaries looked down upon African poetic works, not because the poetry was inferior, but because they, like many other cynics before and after them, were as usual simply engaging in what the paper wants to call the politics of “superiorizing” and “peripherizing” that has always characterized the interaction between Africa and the West. Perhaps to throw some light onto our view of the principle of “peripherizing” we could use the following illustration: a region like, say, Europe will want to look at Africa as inferior in many aspects, and if that be the case, the latter’s culture including literature will be seen and treated as peripheral. On the other hand, the sub-continent of India is seen as being slightly ahead of Africa, yet not comparable to Europe. In this order, Europe sits as the “superior” end with India as its periphery and Africa as a periphery of India, the periphery of Europe.

But again in Africa itself “peripherizing” exists. For instance, South Africa is seen as being ahead of Kenya, which is seen as being ahead of Uganda since the latter depends on Kenya for many things, while Burundi depends on Uganda’s ability to depend on Kenya. This makes Burundi a periphery of Uganda, which is a periphery of Kenya, which is a periphery of South Africa – a leading member in Africa, which is a periphery of India, which is a periphery of Europe. Therefore, Burundi is a periphery of the periphery of the periphery of the periphery in the periphery of the periphery of Europe, of course not forgetting that Burundi itself could also have its peripheries, thereby further deepening this peripheral relationship.

What then would be the poetry of this peripheral relationship? If one was to recite a poem of this peripheral relationship between Europe and Burundi, one sees Europe on the towering throne of poetry looking down at India – its periphery, before seeing Africa further down; Africa itself housing South Africa, then Kenya, then Uganda, then Burundi, in that order. Burundi with its poetry, therefore, remains a periphery of the periphery of the periphery of the periphery in the periphery of the periphery of Europe.

It is to be noted that in the culture and spirit of “peripherizing” everything, including artworks will occupy the assigned peripheral position of that peripheral region. It would then be expected that Hegel and his contemporaries, having considered Africa as a peripheral region saw African oral poetry in that peripheral position. This is, thus, a biased standpoint that cannot be used as a serious basis for determining how much poetic or “non-poetic” African oral poetry is. Indeed one needs to fully understand the nature of African oral poetry to appreciate its poetic qualities.

### **The oral nature of African poetry**

Whatever reasons one may have for wanting to relegate African oral poetry or even declaring it as non-poetry, I am tempted to think that this is partly due to the fact that the poetry is largely oral. This view is given credence by the arguments by scholars such as Ruth Benedict in *The Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*, who, contributing to a debate on folklore posits that oral tradition has no place in this age of letters; that ‘orality’ cannot survive the onslaught of modern civilization and technology. If the oral tradition has no place in this age of letters, the logic here then is that African poetry which is largely oral has no place, hence, the tendency to want to dismiss it.

But can ‘orality’ be wished away even at the very height of poetic elitism? Can the poetry writer do without the oral aspect? Isn’t poetry itself just an oral subject? Notably, Hegel had earlier dismissed the very poetry as mere songs and chants. Apparently, the act of disqualifying African poetry was on account of two fronts: its form, i.e. oral (Benedict), and its method of rendition, i.e. singing and chanting, (Hegel). This paper attempts to argue that in fact ‘orality’ and the singing or chanting as its method of rendition are the very cornerstone of poetry, and that no poetry is poetry if it is divorced from ‘orality’. Poetry needs ‘orality’ even at the height of poetic elitism and this can be proved. In fact African oral poetry could be said to be the more true poetry, given its strength of ‘orality’ and its livening method of rendition – singing and chanting.

To start with, the process of composing a poem is in itself oral. A poet starts the journey of poetry writing with the oral process of first observing, reflecting, imagining and then creating words to express what has

been imagined. The words are then orally committed to the mind. The words can then be rendered orally, and if the poet so decides, write the words down. It is only at this point that writing happens in a poetic process. But still where the words are written down, these will not make sense to any kind of audience until the words have been 'oralised' through either reading quietly (silent sound) or sounding them aloud by reciting, singing, chanting or declaiming. This, thus, makes poetry itself largely an oral venture. Indeed, the effect of majority of the elements of poetry including rhyme, alliteration, assonance, consonance, repetition, just to name but a few, is only felt when committed to sound as opposed to when these elements are just in graphics.

In effect, therefore, a people's poetry ought not to be despised even if it may entirely depend on 'oracy'. In fact the oral element in poetry is what makes it real as we shall see. On the other hand, this oral element could be rendered through speaking, reciting or, as common in the African context, singing or chanting. The act of dismissing African poetic works as mere songs and chants should first consider the crucial role singing and chanting play in poetry and as well realize that what is sung or chanted could still be poetry. However, before I advance the argument of appreciating African poetry in spite of its extended dependency on 'oracy', let me briefly delve into what poetry itself is or ought to be.

### **What is Poetry?**

Must poetry only be a mark of high civilization as Hegel has earlier argued and only possible through highly specialized training anchored on 'advanced' languages?

William Wordsworth (a renowned romantic poet) defines a poet simply as "a man speaking to his fellow men". Other than our own knowledge that speaking to people often invites some pertinent dynamics and possibly a particular disposition, Wordsworth's definition does not necessarily presuppose special talents. Instead, the definition prioritizes the aspect of conveying a message.

Amateshe, (1988) defines poetry as simply "a form of expression, either oral or written - a form of communication between the artist and his audience; a kind of speech". This definition, like Wordsworth's earlier one also appears to emphasize the aspect of conveying a message - a form of expression or speech by an artist to an audience. The only difference, however, as Amateshe acknowledges is that poetry uses special language, particularly figurative language. Figurative language refers to the use of words or phrases in a way that is different from the usual meaning in order to create a particular mental picture. In that case, the way the following Luhya oral poems refer to a woman could be said to be figurative.

- |    |  |   |
|----|--|---|
| 1. | Kano mauwa                             | These are flowers                                 |
|    | Kano mauwa ka ndadola khunjira         | These are flowers that I picked by the roadside   |
|    | Kano mauwa                             | These are flowers                                 |
|    | Kano mauwa ka ndadola khunjira.        | These are flowers that I picked by the roadside.  |
| 2  | Ne likina eterere Odundo, orekhuyakho  | She is a slippery stone, which is unclimbable     |
|    | Mukhasi ne likina eterere, orekhuyakho | A woman is a slippery stone, which is unclimbable |
|    | Mukhasi ne likina eterere.             | A woman is a slippery stone.                      |

Song 1, talks of flowers by the roadside in reference to a bride, perhaps signifying her beauty, while song 2 presents a woman as a slippery stone that requires caution if one were to climb it. In both cases, the image of a woman drawn in the mind of the hearer is transferred to a totally different imagination. Transference, whether through metaphors, similes, idiomatic expressions or any other, pervades performance of African songs, so that if figurative language was to be the mark of qualifying what poetry is, then the African songs qualify.

Incidentally, even the conventional definition of poetry does not insist on advanced culture or high language. Instead, a poem is "a piece of writing in which the words are chosen for their sound and the images they suggest, not just for their obvious meanings", (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary). Of course reference to writing here does not exclude 'orality'. as earlier noted. The very fact that the words are chosen for their sound in itself suggests the oral element. It is only when the written poem is 'oralized' by reading or sounding that the effect of the sound or imagery can be realized.

Besides, even if the measure of what is poetry were to be based on the merit of highly developed languages, we could say that even African languages merit in their own way. In fact, the speakers of these languages have never felt limited in any way when expressing themselves in the very languages. Moreover, poetry is not just expressed in language, written or spoken. Poetry can also be in the artistry of the performer, for example poetic gestures or even in the dance steps of the performance. Indeed, African poetry performances are often completed with highly patterned dances and skilled instrumentation, which themselves can be very poetic. This paper, therefore, looks for poetry beyond the words (written or unwritten) “not that there is no poetic value in the words, but the bare words cannot be left to speak for themselves”, (Finnegan, 1970).

Perhaps this is why Okpewho, (1985), seems to set a completely different threshold of what should qualify to be poetry. Okpewho asserts that “the essence of true poetry lies in its power to appeal strongly to our appreciation and in a way lift us up”. He adds that there are two ways in which poetry can make this appeal: one is by touching us emotionally so as to feel either pleasure or pain and two, by stirring our minds deeply so that we reflect on some aspect of life or some significant idea. Are African oral poetic works capable of arousing any emotions? Does the singing of the following poem, for instance, elicit any feelings?

3	Ne litsuliza lia Omwami	This is in memory of our Lord
	Weru Yesu	Jesus Christ
	Luyavambwa	How he was crucified
	Vayuda vatsama Yesu	The Jews plotted against Jesus
	Vamuvamba	And crucified Him
	Vamuvamba.	And crucified Him.

Isn't the above poem capable of eliciting our sympathies at the suffering of Jesus Christ, while at the same time making us reflect on our own role in the betrayal and death of our Lord? This is what Okpewho seems to be talking about. The above composition is poetic because of the way the words have been selected to capture the act of crucifixion of Jesus Christ, while on the other hand causing imagination and deep feeling about what happened to the innocent Jesus Christ and what this portends for humankind.

The foregoing discourse puts aside the intention to determine the mark of true poetry premised on how advanced the language of poetry is, or even the people's culture and civilization. Rather, this paper moves to determine true poetry by the way it effectively responds to situations and impacts on people. Incidentally, the response and impact are only realizable in the event of actual oral performance of the poetry – just like is the practice in the African tradition. Through actual oral performance, poetry comes to life, achieving its forcefulness. It is actually the view of this paper that the emotional thrust that poetry is expected to have can only become evident when the poetry is performed, and particularly when sung. This brings us to our earlier question of whether songs are poems, and whether there is a difference between a song and a poem.

Amateshe, (ibid), emphasizes that poetry is music – particularly within oral situations. In fact, poetry has often been described as language on the verge of breaking into song. Indeed many poems can be sung and many songs are poetic. Poetry is actually music displaying features such as rhythm, metre, intonation and quite often even melody, which then make it singable, even danceable. Song on the other hand has several limbs that reflect the fundamentals of poetry like repetition, rhyme, assonance, consonance, alliteration, imagery and so on, including the supra-segmental features of rhythm, stress and intonation. As a demonstration, I first interacted with the following piece as a poetry recital by a group of school children:

4. Love at my heart came knocking  
Ah, but with bitter mocking,  
I said him no!  
Bowed and bade him go  
Far, far away, hey ho!  
Far, far away, hey ho!

Ah, but when love lay bleeding  
Pity to scorn succeeding,  
Turned cold disdain  
Into poignant pain  
Till I too loved again!  
Till I too, loved again!

Later I was to meet the same piece as a set song for school choirs. Notably, the very features that make this piece an effective poem are more or less the very features that give the piece its beauty as a song, as one listens to the sung version. As a matter of speaking, therefore, one may say that there is no fast boundary between poetry and music, or a poem and a song for that matter. In any case, if there is a boundary, it is the type that is difficult to pin down. However, the expression: "all music is poetry but not all poetry is music", suggests a difference albeit negligible, or perhaps this is just to point to the fact that some poetry is difficult to set to music, even though numerous music libretto are well known poems.

The argument here, therefore, is that if music is so much of poetry, or a song so much of a poem, then it makes no sense to dismiss African oral works as non-poetry but mere songs and chants, as songs also qualify to be poetry. In fact, what looks like a simple song, for example:

5. Cham kuon gibala  
Ong'er wang'olil  
Akondo, cham kwon gibala  
Ong'er wang'olil mayange.

still qualifies to be a poem given its artistic arrangement of words and sounds, rhythm, symmetric order, metre, intonation, repetition and the simple rhyme, assonance and consonance arising from repeated sections. Besides, the imagery used introduces the kind of figurative language we earlier associated with true poetry. So, the piece does not become less of a poem simply because it is uttered in an African language, or because the work is rendered as a song – singing being the most common style of rendering traditional African poetry. Instead, the strength and beauty of this piece of work is its 'performability'. Again I need to emphasize that the real impact of the poem will best be felt in actual performance as demonstrated in the next entry.

#### **Actual performance in oral poetry**

In a separate paper I made an attempt to give prominence to performance in oral poetry, thereby underscoring the role of the performer in what I termed "narrato-centric" approach, which I also interchangeably called "performer-centric". Propagating the approach, I argue that the only effective way of analyzing an oral work is to approach it from the narrator's or performer's world. This is because it is the narrator or performer who controls all the four arms of an oral performance: interpreting the context or occasion; choosing or creating the relevant composition; transmitting the composition as well as determining the impression the audience makes of the occasion, which means the performer controls the occasion, the content, the process and the consumer. In effect, I was putting performance at the centre of 'orality', and to some extent challenging the likes of Hegel for dismissing African works on account that they are mere songs and chants, thereby failing to appreciate the power of performance. To understand how poetry can achieve the power and forcefulness that makes it be considered a living subject, we need to appreciate how actual oral performance brings to life some of the following oral elements:

#### *Tone and Intonation*

Tone here is used to refer to the quality of voice, especially expressing a particular emotion, such as mockery, adoration, skepticism and so on, while intonation is the rise and fall of the voice in speaking. The two elements are extremely important in determining the meaning of words, phrases, tone units and even whole sentences. Some African languages are quite tonal, i.e. depending on tone variation to create varied shades of meaning of the same word. For example the Abakhayo, one of the Luhya sub-groups, makes different means of the word "omulosi" based on various intonations.

Omulosi - a wizard	Omulosi - whistling
d r r r	m d r d
Omulosi - a woman (usage borrowed from the Bukusu)	
d m d - r	Omulosi- one who makes peace
Omulosi- one who follows	d r t - d
d r r - r	

It would be extremely difficult in written poetry to recognize these variations of the word "omulosi" since the poet does not write his or her poetry with phonetic markers. The oral performer on the other hand would automatically bring out the variations as sounded by the sol-fa notes, where long syllables are

marked with a dash (-). This means that the oral performer would be a more effective communicator than one depending on the written.

Tonal variation also diminishes the monotony of repeated lines, allowing repetition to still develop the sense of the poem. The variations actually make repetitions happen without a feeling of retardation and boredom; take the example of the following dirge:

6. Ndekholendie omwoyo, ndekholendie omwoyo?	dddsll sffmff
Ndekholendie omwoyo, ndekholendie omwoyo?	dddsll sffmff
Ndekholendie omwoyo,	fffmrr
Ndekholendie?	mmmr
Ndekholendie omwoyo?	mmmrmm
Mwana wange mutoro,	fffmrrf
Mwana wange	mmmr
Mwana wange mutoro?	mmmrmmm

Considering the written version of this lament, one gets the impression of redundancy; the repeats even appear ridiculous. This stops to be the case when one hears the piece performed with each repeated line sounding different as represented by the varying tones presented as music sol-fa notes. One actually comes to find out that they are the repeats that help bring out the intended sadness.

#### *Dramatization*

Okpewho (1985), points out that an oral poetry performance compares with a stage play in which the performer has to support his/her words with the right movement of the body and the control of the voice so as to make an effective impression. The following recital from Sukuma bin Ongaro's song, *Tina* as translated from the original text can illustrate this:

7. The time I married Tina, I was rearing chicken in plural, There then she took it upon herself To demolish them	
But each time she served me chicken I would find <i>imondo</i> (the gizzard) missing So, Mh!	5
I'd ask myself For I, Ongaro If I don't eat <i>imondo</i> , my dear Then I have not eaten chicken!	10
So one time I said, no! I will bear this no more Let me ask her	
"Tina," That, "Ongaro" Every time you serve me chicken I never see <i>imondo</i> Where do you take it?"	15
That, "Mister, Stop your theatrics And bother me no more Are you not aware That the chickens you rear here Have no gizzards?"	20

“Ai, Tina! What are you telling me? Is there a single chicken in this world That has no gizzard, my dear?”	25
This made me, one day To give a chicken to my mother And told my mother “Do you hear mama? This evening I will want to eat But bother not with ugali Just serve me with chicken”.	30
I then took another chicken And gave it to Tina Least did I know That I had set a trap for her!	35
Come evening My mother, Joyce, arrived with her chicken On examining the stew dish What do I see? <i>Imondo!</i>	40
So, “Tina, “Come here this time. What is this?” That: “ <i>imondo</i> ”	45
“But you have ever since claimed That the chickens I rear here Do not have gizzards, Where has this one come from?”	50
That: “Darling in your kindness Find it within your heart To please forgive me The habit of eating gizzards Was taught to me By my mother”	55
“You hear Tina? When I married you You entered this home wearing slippers. So what you are going to do, Here! Take your slippers And be on your way.”	60
That: “ <i>Kumbe</i> Sukuma I had always been warned That you keep marrying people’s daughters And throwing them out In my case Joke with me And you will end up in jail!”	65
“What! I said take your slippers and go I, the one born of a woman Let us meet in court, at Khwisero.”	70

Like what one feels when reading Edgar Allan Poe's dramatic poem, 'The Raven' the performer is able to capture the dramatic effect in Ongaro's recital from the modulation of the voice punctuated by the pertinent body movements. This way one is able to bring out the different characters in the recital as well as the overall effect of the lines. For example, one is struck by the arrogance and contempt in line 22 when Tina poses that Ongaro's chickens do not have gizzards; the shame in line 47 on discovering that the chicken from the same stock that Ongaro's mother served has a gizzard; the humility and suppleness in line 53 as Tina begs to be forgiven for her abominable behavior of eating gizzards and the empty and desperate threat in line 69, to sue Ongaro if he divorces her. Indeed, none of these striking dramatic emotions could be brought out on paper.

#### *Repetition*

Repetition is a crucial element in poetry. To start with, repetition makes emphasis of significant points and highlights a pressing need, thereby focusing the message of the poet. Besides, from repetition, poetry achieves its identity through applying the unique features of alliteration, assonance, consonance, rhyme etc; features that have partly been responsible for the beauty of sound that characterizes the genre as we see in the following Abakhayo poem:

8. Khayoni khali khulule	A bird is on a millet stalk
Khayoni khali khulule	A bird is on a millet stalk
Khangaira khuteta	Preventing me from harvesting
khangaira khuteta olule.	Preventing me from harvesting the millet.
Oteto	The harvester
Khuteta	Harvesting
Khutetere	From harvesting
Khuteta olule.	Harvesting the millet.

From the above example, we can also see that repetition tends to develop patterns that create rhythms which greatly contribute to the musicality associated with poetry. On the other hand, repetition helps in enabling the poet achieve emotional build-up. This happens as the repeated lines adopt different tones that could rise, building tension or fall, creating relaxation.

9. Kaung'a yachee	Sin came	ssslsm
Kaung'a yachee	Sin came	sssd'tl
Kaung'a yachee	Sin came	lllr'd'
Ulumwenguni	Into the world	tttlf
Yadiredire makongo.	To cause us illnesses.	sslfsmm

In the Taita tune above, the line Kaung'a yachee is done three times. The tension is built by each successive line taking up increasingly rising musical notes, i.e. ssslsm, sssd'tl, lllr'd'. The rising notes help emphasize the devastating effects of sin, i.e. causing illnesses and the resultant death.

The rising and falling effects of musical notes could also be explained in the song:

10. Utukufu uwe kwa Mungu	Glory be to God
Utukufu juu mbinguni	Glory be to God in Highest
Na amani iwe duniani	And peace be on Earth
Kwao watu wa mapenzi mema.	To people of good will.

The musical notes for the four lines of the song above are: msd'tlsfmr, sd'm'r'd'td'd', sslfmsfmr, sfmrddt,dd. Notably the notes rise as God is glorified, rising to the peak to capture the effect of God up in the highest Heaven at end of line 2. The notes in line three then gradually fall back to earth, ending with the pacifying peace in line four to those people of goodwill.

Again, it may be debatable, but it would be – we suppose – impossible for the poetry in print to achieve this. As Okpewho notes, perhaps the written poetry enjoys the luxury of being meticulously planned and very logical, but it obviously lacks that emotional touch of the oral. Worse still, it lacks the warmth of audience participation. The oral poet can afford to be impromptu and respond to the dynamics of his present audience, making poetry a living experience, something the writing poet cannot enjoy however much s/he may try to anticipate the intended audience.

The oral poet often takes advantage of his/her live audience to make his/her work memorable by emphasizing parts of the performance through repetition. Each time a part or the whole poem is repeated, this creates both unity and familiarity that makes the audience feel the sense that they too know the poem, and own it. Repetition, therefore, makes the poem communal, which should be the essence of true poetry.

#### *Musicality*

Part of the beauty of poetry lies in its musicality and in particular its rhythm. Perhaps we enjoy the rhythm in poetry because we delight in movement and dance and we are rhythmic, as evidenced by our own body symmetry and from the rhythmic processes that go on in our bodies such as the heartbeat or breathing. We could, therefore, say that some of the emotional delight that we get from oral poetry comes from the musical quality that is contained in the performance of the song or chant.

Musicality in oral poetry manifests through vocal and instrumental renditions. Vocal rendition comes with regulation of the pitch to create the required tension or relaxation; the higher the pitch the higher the tension and the higher the level of excitement for the words. Besides, the words carrying the message of the song are uttered vocally with modulation on each word or phrase to emphasize the intended impression and creating the intended mood. Vocal rendition also heightens the level of excitement through tremolo, ululation, incidental anecdotes and non-linguistic sounds; features that the written poetry is incapable of expressing.

Instrumental accompaniment may happen by the playing of drums, strings, aerophones, percussions and even idiophones such as hand-clapping or foot-stamping, all of which are intended to inspire into the singer and audience a general liveliness and emotional excitement. Accompaniment also helps regulate the words of the song into measured segments emphasizing the pulse and fixing the time of the song. Besides, accompaniment makes the feature of repetition that is so rampant in African oral poetry, to happen without drawing undue awareness of the participants to the repetition. Besides, instrumental accompaniment is often applied to provide preludes, interludes and postludes, which are a popular feature in African oral poetry. Unfortunately, there is no way the written poetry will accommodate these aspects that make such an appeal to a poetry audience. By dismissing African poetic works as mere songs and chants, Hegel and group were in fact saying that musicality in poetry can be done away with, which could be a fallacy.

#### **Can African oral poetry sit on the poetic pedestal?**

Whether African oral poetry can sit, or in fact sits on the poetic pedestal is a question that can be addressed by making comparisons between the poetry and other conventional poetry types recognized universally, namely: the lyric, panegyric and elegiac.

To start with, are there significant deviations between majority African songs and chants and the lyric poetry? The traditional lyric poetry has commonly been connected with, or written for singing. This is a feature that is quite popular in the presentation of African poetry related works. Ruth Finnegan, (1970), seems to have no doubt that these African works are in fact poems when she states: "In the sense of a short poem which is sung, and which involves elements of improvisation, lyric is probably the most common form of poetry in sub-Saharan Africa. It is not always recognized that these songs, in which the musical element is of such obvious importance, are in fact poems", (p.24). It is actually notable that the verbal content of the conventional lyric poems is normally short while the performance involves a lot of improvisation. These are the very features that are observable in the songs we come across in this presentation. Consequently we conclude that every time you look at Kaung'a yachee, above, or Cham kuon gibala, you are in fact looking at lyric poems, just like those Rudyard Kipling or Robert Browning wrote, only that the former are presented in an African language; a language that Hegel and company attempted to discount.

We also want to ask if there are significant deviations between majority African songs and panegyric poetry. Panegyric refers to a poem of effusive praise - related to the eulogy and the ode. It may be argued that in the sense of being pieces of work meant to praise, majority African songs and chants comfortably fit in the above definition of panegyric poetry. There is no doubt that African songs and chants praise as ably as Western panegyric poems, in fact even often praising same subjects. Take, for instance, Anne Bradstreet's praise for Queen Elizabeth, in the poem "In Honour of That High and Mighty Princess, Queen Elizabeth," in which the writer extols the Queen's virtues, and calls her "the great Queen, great is thy glory and thine

excellence..." This praise is not any different from similar praise below, for the same Queen by a group of Abakhayo women, just before Kenya got its independence from Britain.

11. Omukhaye omuyinda omwene loba	The rich lady, the owner of the land
Kwini Lusabeti	Queen Elizabeth
Omukhaye omuyinda omwene loba	The rich lady, the owner of the land
Kwini Lusabeti	Queen Elizabeth
Omukhaye omuyinda omwene loba	The rich lady, the owner of the land
Kwini Lusabeti.	Queen Elizabeth.

The praise in its full rendition continues to refer to the Queen with different addresses: the magnificent; the lady of the armour (being in charge of the armed forces); the giraffe (perhaps because the Queen would oversee the African colonies from such a distance) and so on. Apart from the repetitive nature of the song above, the performance ably praises the Queen, introducing her different virtues or abilities and qualifying to be panegyric by all standards.

Can the same be said about elegiac poetry, commonly described as poetry that expresses sadness, especially about the past or for somebody who has died? Perhaps, yes. Compare Nikolas Fantocone's poem, (*The Lost Boy*), below:

12. There was a boy I used to know.  
He never let his feelings show.  
Turns out he wanted suicide.  
When he died, I cried.  
Why did he have to go?  
Was that why he never let his feelings show?  
He hung himself like a criminal.  
That's not what he was like at all.  
He still had time to grow.  
Maybe he should've let his feelings show.  
There was a boy I used to know.

with poem 3, "Yesu Vamuvamba" (above), which is in memory of how Jesus Christ was crucified, or poem 6, "Ndekhohendie Omwoyo" (also above), mourning the death of a son. Therefore, in the sense of being poetry expressing sorrow and often performed for the dead there are many African songs that qualify to be elegiac poetry.

### **Conclusion**

The concern of this paper has been the position of African oral poetic works among the universal poetry. The main thesis of the paper has been that there has been a tendency to want to relegate African poetic works to the periphery, either as inferior poetry or non-poetry altogether. The main reasons for this, as the paper observes have either been on account of the largely oral form or its method of rendition which is majorly singing and chanting, both of which reasons are perhaps deemed inferior, in consideration of serious poetry. The paper, however, argues that these very aspects that are seen as the weakness of African poetic works are in fact the strength of true poetry. That orality and actual performance: the very hallmark of African poetic works are indeed what gives poetry its life and that even at the height of poetic elitism, orality and performance cannot be wished away.

The paper dismisses as a fallacy the tendency to want to decide what true poetry is based on the complexity of the poetic language and the cultural advancement of the poetic community. Instead, as Okpewho (1985) suggests, "the essence of true poetry lies in its power to appeal strongly to our appreciation and in a sense lift us up". This is by touching us emotionally, or by stirring our minds deeply so as to reflect on some aspect of life.

We conclude the paper by comparing African oral poetic works with the universal conventional poetic types: lyric, panegyric and elegiac. The comparisons reveal such similarities that cause justification to qualify African poetic works as true poetry. This then disqualifies the intentions that scholars such as Hegel had, treating African works as peripheral. If this be the case, then even the poetry of a supposedly peripheral

community like Burundi is not a mere periphery of the periphery of the periphery of the periphery, in the periphery of the periphery of Europe, but rather an integral of the integral of the integral of the integral, in the integral of the integral of Europe. This is on the understanding that the performer of African oral poetry is intelligent; the performance intellectual and so the poetry itself integral.

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