

THE COURT POET/PRAISE SINGER IN WOLE SOYINKA'S DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN AND OLA ROTIMI'S OVONRAMWEN NOGBAISI: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

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Oral artists are a common sight in traditional African societies and were most prominent in old empires such as Oyo, Benin, Songhai and Mali. They also existed in the Zulu empire, northern Nigeria and among the Akan in Ghana. Their place is integral to the social and political well-being of these empires. In the Oyo empire, court poets are known as Olohun-Iyo. They are called griots in Senegal and Mali and among the Akan of Ghana, they are called Kwadwumfo. Modern Nigerian dramatists such as Wole Soyinka and Ola Rotimi have appropriated the image and roles of the court poet in *Death and The King's Horseman* and *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* respectively. This paper defines who a court poet is, his role as a maker and wordsmith, and the nature of his work and patronage. It examines the qualities he must possess and the content of his poetry. In examining the place of memory and remembering in the discharge of the poet's duties, the paper investigates the various mnemonic and retrieval systems used by the poet to recall past accounts and great deeds of the kings. The roles of traditional court poets will be compared with the roles played by Olohun-iyó and Uzazakpo in the selected plays. The paper will also discuss what has become of oral artists in modern African societies. How viable is the art-form in the modern world with the advent of technology? Has civilization and modernity eroded their importance in society? While affirming their traditional advisory, prophetic, warning, motivational roles and as repositories of customs and culture, this paper concludes by stating the poet employs linguistic, para-linguistic and "medicinal" strategies to recall events at a given performance.

KEYWORDS: COURT-POET, PRAISE SINGER, TRADITIONAL AFRICAN POETRY, WOLE SOYINKA, OLA ROTIMI

Introduction

This paper takes a critical look at the functions of the court poet in Nigeria as an example of court poets in Africa in general. It explores in detail the nature of his work, the manner of the performances he engages in and especially his ability to recall, remember and animate past accounts and heroic deeds in the life of the king he serves. This work does not dwell on the poet's oral performance and the recording of such at a given occasion (as noted in such works as Akintunde Akinyemi's "The Yoruba Royal Bards: Their Work and Relevance in the Society" or Thomas A. Hale's *Griots and Griottes: Masters of Words and Music* rather, it focuses on the ability of Nigerian playwrights to appropriate the oral

potentialities of the art of the court poet in their dramatic works, and it attempts to isolate the linguistic and para-linguistic elements employed by the court poet to recall his subjects. Hale and Akinyemi's works are integral to this study as field works that helped to document the art of the griots or royal bards in African communities. Their analyses help to isolate the functions of the bards as employed and noted in the works of the selected playwrights for this paper. Again, their works validate the fact that oral literature is a veritable source for dramatic works as will be shown in the body of the paper.

The Court Poet: Then and Now

Court poets are a common sight in African societies (see Ruth Finnegan, Isidore Okpewho Oyin Ogunba and Akintunde Akinyemi). They are referred to as royal bards, griots, king's official poets and palace entertainers. In old empires such as the Zulu, Songhai, Mali, Oyo, Benin and Akan, they played special roles in the lives of the kings and in the society. Thomas Hale in "From the Griot of *Roots* to the Roots of Griot: A New Look at the Origins of a Controversial African Term for Bards" states categorically that they "served as respected advisors to rulers, as tutors for princes and as diplomats in delicate negotiations" (Hale 1997: 250). In other words, in chanting the praise of the king, they advise, prophesy, warn, and motivate their leaders. In discharging their duties, such griots are known as the repositories of the custom, traditions and mores of that society. In the old Oyo empire, the court poet was also referred to as the Olohun-Iyo or the Akigbe-Oba. Akinyemi (2001) lists their names in Oyo communities as *Akigbe-Oba*, *Arokin-Oba*, *Alusekere-oba*, *Onirara-Oba* and *Alaro*. Such names are derived from the work they perform. Bayo Ogunjimi and Abdul Rasheed Na'Allah (1994: 57) state that the art of the Praise-singer is salutation and "a form of oral composition which deals with invocation, adoration or condemnation of the objects of praise". Elucidating on this idea, they argue that "in praise poetry dealing with lineages, genealogical expositions of ancestral origin, social, moral, political, economic and spiritual life of the family are common" (Ogunjimi and Na'Allah 1994:59). Such poetry as chanted, sung or performed by the Praise-singer consists of encomiums and epithets. Akinyemi (1997: 96) opines that "the bulk of their chant is made up of names, appellations, attributes and oriki" which Wolff (1962:50) calls "an artistic form of name calling" and Adeboye Babalola refers to as "name praising" (quoted in Akinyemi 1997:96) It is important to state that in Yoruba lands praise-singers are not limited to the palace because prominent chiefs such as the Elesin-Oba (the king's Horseman) also had a praise-singer who sings the praise, the bravery and the courage of his master as seen in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (Soyinka 2002). The praise-singer's work is an obvious one; to sing the praise of his Master. What is not so obvious is that he must be versed in the history of the king's lineage, the courage of his dead ancestors and the spectacular deeds of the forefathers. He knows all the panegyrics of the king's lineage. He must remember and recall all of these as he chants the praise. Other than these, the Akigbe-Oba also acts as the king's alarm clock. Literally, his chants wake the king up from sleep (Ogunjimi and Na'Allah 1994: 73). As tradition demands, he must also herald the presence of the king

in any given occasion. As Olohun-Iyo, he is equally an observer and a recorder of the events in the palace and provides entertainment.

Words are his stock-in-trade. In other words, he deals in words. Thus, he is a maker. These words are made up of messages and themes, figures of speech and poetic devices with which he conveys his praises. However, the words are rendered in a special way because his type of poetry in Yoruba oral poetry is called Ewi. Ewi is a type of Yoruba poetry that is chanted.

All of these are aided by the poet's gestures, facial expressions and gesticulations. These paralinguistic elements cannot be fully captured in a dramatic work but only in performance. A court poet must also have a good voice. His talent must include a voice that can be modulated to fit the theme, mood and content of his rendition. His voice must be laced with honey so that he does not irritate his audience with a croaky quality. Above all, as stated earlier, he needs to have good memory because he is not reading from a script. How then does he keep all the information, the history and scenes of the king's glories in mind without making mistakes or stuttering? This is the main focus of the paper.

What is Praise Poetry?

Praise poetry, according to Akporobaro (2012: 56) is

A form of poetry that is specifically designed for the eulogistic portrayal of the virtues of a given subject. The subject of the praise poetry may be a king, a chief, a war leader, an animal or plant. The most characteristic feature of the praise poem is the invocation of the noble and heroic qualities of the subject through the use of appropriately suggestive metaphors, symbols and allusion.

What is significant in Akporobaro's definition is the use of the word eulogy. The poet employs this to proclaim the virtues of his subject. In case of the court poet, his concern is the heroic qualities and virtues of the king. In doing this, he uses metaphors, similes and symbols to elaborate the goodness of his leader. Akporobaro also gives us an example of a praise poem in his book. This is quoted below:

Onikoyi, the warrior who never received an arrow in his back
 Child of the water lily, child of the squirrel. The bird' foot shall never touch the water,
 the river shall never be at rest
 Onikoyi, the warrior who frightens death himself
 Child of the eagle sitting on the silk cotton tree
 Child of the hawk waiting on the camwood tree
 When the vulture flaps down he will eat the intestines of a brave warrior
 Onikoyi loves nothing but war when others drink wine, he drinks blood
 When others plant yams, he is planting heads
 When others reap fruits, he is reaping dead warriors... (Akporobaro 2012: 56)

Akporobaro's illustration shows vividly the qualities of a praise poem. The poem above sings the praise of Onikoyi who we are to imagine is a warrior. It sings of his courage,

bravery, warlike nature and fearlessness. As seen above, such images employed may not be complementary for who will prefer a man who reaps dead warriors to the one who reaps fruits. However, in those days and in traditional society, those qualities are the hallmarks of a great warrior.

In modern Nigeria, praise poetry is not as common as it was in the past. Akintunde Akinyemi has this to say on the impact of modernity on the art:

Today, however, these responsibilities are changing as a result of the socio-economic changes taking place across Yorubaland. For instance, most of the male royal bards have become freelance minstrels in addition to their principal trades which they now practise. This is the result of economic change with its attendant social values, which has forced the attachment of bards to royal patronage to decline. (1997: 105)

He goes further to enumerate the settings where these royal bards can be found other than the palace. Such places include motor-parks, social gatherings, the streets, and so on. However, traditional institutions and families still retain the services of bards. Ewi and Oriki are still chanted but occasionally and at certain given performances. Modernity and the advent of technology have eroded their significance. Radio, television, mobile phones, satellite television, CDs and the like have taken the place of occasions that warrant their recitations. Although occasionally grandmothers still relish moments of reciting Oriki and court poetry still exists in the palaces of rural societies (see Akintunde Akinyemi 2001).

Yoruba Nollywood (Nigeria video films industry) has aided the growth, dissemination and preservation of Yoruba oral poetry. This cultural item is utilised in video films especially when the setting is a rural community. The Oba is usually accompanied by his praise-singer who chants his praises and those of his ancestors before him. This rendition is intended to motivate him to make sound decisions and caution him from departing from the known virtues of his ancestors.

Wole Soyinka's Appropriation of the Praise – singer as the Memory of a People in *Death and the King's Horseman*.

Wole Soyinka, a renowned Nigerian playwright has appropriated this cultural element and its potentialities in his play; *Death and the King's Horseman*. The play dramatizes the fortunes of an Elesin-Oba who fails to meet the cultural expectations of the people. The play is at once a ritual drama and the cultural invocation of a people's tradition. Elesin enjoys the pleasures of life and he is "pampered" by the society because a great deed is expected of him at the king's death; a personal sacrifice. Elesin Oba must commit suicide to go on serving the king in the afterlife. Elesin is an important traditional chief whose heroic function facilitates the well-being of the society. His inability to perform this deed can derail the Yoruba world. Thus, Soyinka creates a character who has an epicurean nature. He is described as a man of "enormous vitality". He dances, sings and makes banter with his praise-singer even on his way to commit suicide.

This paper dwells mainly on the character of the praise-singer who is fondly referred to by Elesin as Olohun-Iyo. The praise-singer is shown as Elesin's companion to the market on his departure to the great beyond. Biodun Jeyifo (2002: 126) describes the praise-singers as "professional lyricists who compose and chant poems in honour of a great man or woman, for an important occasion". *Death and the King's Horseman* is a compact play that is written in five scenes. Significantly, the play opens with the praise-singer who is in hot pursuit of Elesin as he makes his way to the market. He is also seen at the climax of the play in its third scene and finally at the play's denouement. These crucial moments in the flow of the action of the play emphasise the importance of the Praise-singer in the scheme of things. By focusing on the praise-singer, Wole Soyinka seems to assert the importance of this traditional character as pivotal to the play's development and to the culture he represents on stage.

In the several scenes where the Praise-singer is viewed, he performs the roles of adviser, companion, a recorder of Elesin's legacies and a historian. He also warns Elesin against complacency and teases him by asking questions that will reveal his personality. The praise-singer also reminds him of the great task ahead of him and warns him against diverging from that purpose. However, the greatest of these roles is praise-singing.

On the way to the market, a conversation ensues between Elesin and the Praise-singer in which he says: "Elesin O! Elesin Oba! Howu! What tryst is this the cockerel goes to keep with such haste that he must leave his tail behind?" (Soyinka 2002: 126) In this metaphoric question about Elesin's haste, the Praise-singer establishes his relevance. He likens himself to the tail of a cockerel. The cockerel cannot move without its tail; it is his adornment. Therefore, Elesin should not be in any haste to abandon an important part of himself.

The praise-singer can also be objective even with his generous and exaggerated praise of his subjects. He warns him copiously about the negative impact of women in the life of a strong character such as Elesin. He says: "they love to spoil you but beware the hands of women also weakens the unwary". Again, Praise-singer warns Elesin against the women he wants to meet at this crucial time of his mission: "I know the women will cover you in damask and alari but when the wind blows cold from behind, that is when the fowl knows his true friends" (127). At the resolution of the conflict of the play, the reader can see the relevance of this warning for Elesin. In the question that he asks Elesin, the Praise-singer's trade or art is revealed. Elesin implores him to stay on earth in order to "sing these deeds in accents that will pierce the deafness of the ancient ones" (127). To Elesin, "my fame, my honour are legacies to the living...let the world sip its honey from your lips" (127). The praise-singer further emphasises his relevance in the following line by praising Elesin through the use of simile; a trope common to the art of the praise-singer: "Your name will be like the sweet berry a child places under his tongue to sweeten the passage of food. The world will never spit it out" (127). This is the height of the Praise-singer's hyperbolic recognition of the personal traits of Elesin.

The Praise-singer also acts as a recorder of the people's culture and history. This is illustrated in the following:

In their time the great wars came and went, the little wars came and went, the white slavers came and went, they took away the heart of our race, they bore away the mind and the muscle of our race. The city fell and was rebuilt; the city fell and our people trudged through mountain and forest to find a new home but- (Soyinka 2002: 127-128)

In the poetic statement rendered above the Praise-singer calls to remembrance the great Yoruba wars, the slave trade and slavery era when many able-bodied Africans were carried away to Europe and America and the rise and fall of many kingdoms. Apart from being a historian, the sheer lyricism of his presentation above is pleasing.

Again, there is the use of repetition and allusion in the conversation with Elesin. He says:

There is only one home to the life of a river-mussel,
 There is only one home to the life of a tortoise;
 There is only one shell to the soul of man;
 There is only one world to the spirit of our race.

If that world leaves its course and smashes on boulders of the great void, whose world will give us shelter? (Soyinka 2002:128)

The beginning of the speech shows the use of a formulaic arrangement...because of something, therefore a result is expected. The Praise-singer implies that the existence of one home to the items he mentioned, therefore, the Yoruba world must not be destroyed. The allusions to the qualities of the animals infer that the Yoruba world will follow its course. This poetic rendition is a response to Elesin's affirmation that the "Yoruba world will not be wrenched from its true course" (128). This rendition corroborates Ogunjimi and Na'Allah's view that the "the rhythm in traditional poetry is achieved through the use of repetition, antithetical juxtapositions and rhetorical formula" (1994: 74).

When Elesin in his characteristic ebullience begins the "Not-I-Bird" anecdote, the Praise-singer exalts the ability of Elesin to couch the commonplace in poetry. Hear him: Praise-singer: "Elesin's riddles are not merely the nuts in the kernel that breaks human teeth; he also buries the kernel in hot embers and dares a man's fingers to draw it out." (128) The Praise-singer draws his images from everywhere and applies them appropriately to the discussions at hand. In the metaphoric analogy above, the Praise-singer notes Elesin's penchant for imagistic language whose meaning cannot easily be deciphered by his audience- like a riddle wrapped in an enigma.

The Praise-singer continues his praise of his master by saying that "Elesin is that rock which turns its open lodes into the path of lightning. A gay thoroughbred whose stride disdains to falter though an adder reared suddenly in his path" (130). This is in response to Elesin's boast that he is fearless in the face of death. The Praise-singer agrees with him by the use of the animal imagery noted above.

Significantly, the Praise-singer also employs rhetorical questions, exclamation and direct address as shown in the following lines:

Praise-singer: Elesin Oba! Are you not that man who looked out of doors that storming day

The god of luck limped by. Drenched
 To the very lice that held
 His rags together? You took pity upon
 His sores and wished him fortune.
 Fortune was foot loose this dawn, he replied,
 Till you trapped him in a heartfelt wish
 That now returns to you. Elesin Oba.
 I say you are that man who
 Chanced upon the calabash of honour
 You thought it was palm wine and
 Drained its contents to the final drop. 131)

The Praise-singer builds an anecdote around Elesin who is visited by the god of fortune. Although the first part paints Elesin in glowing colours that he is indeed an honourable man; the last part, paradoxically points to his excesses, he overdoes things. This point foreshadows his failure to take the plunge at the crucial point.

The Praise-singer's job includes keeping Elesin in check, especially ensuring he keeps in focus the task ahead and does not renege on the agreement. Praise-singer says: "The gourd you bear is not for shirking, the gourd is not for setting down, at the first cross-road or wayside grove, only one river may know its contents" (Soyinka 2002:133). The Praise-singer compares Elesin's duty to that ritual gourd that cannot be toyed with. It has its specific use and place. This, in itself is a reminder of the great task ahead of Elesin. In the same vein, the Praise-singer urges him on to do that which he is supposed to do when Elesin becomes enthralled by the beauty of a young girl on his path. Praise-singer: "Elesin Oba, why do your eyes roll like a bush rat who sees his fate like his father's spirit, mirrored in the eyes of a snake?" (Soyinka 2002:134) The Praise-singer compares Elesin's behaviour here to that of the bush rat who meets with death. This quote is necessary to show that the Praise-singer is a careful reader of Elesin's character; as a close observer, he can accurately assess Elesin's thoughts and state of mind.

Elesin as the King's Horseman enjoys the honour the people give to him. As horseman, "the juiciest fruit on every tree was his. He saw, he touched, he wooed, rarely was the answer, no" (Soyinka 2002:134) Elesin's discovers beautiful women who are hidden from him and he ravishes them. To this self-adulation, the Praise-singer has this to say:

Who would deny your reputation, snake- on – the- loose in the dark passages of the market, who receives the thanks of the Vanquished! When caught with his bride's sister he protested- but I was only prostrating myself to her as becomes a grateful in-law. Hunter who carries his powder-horn on the hips and fire crouching or standing! Warrior who never makes that excuse of the whining coward- but how can I go to battle without my trousers? --- trouserless or shirtless it's all one to him. Oka- rearing – from – a camouflage- of- leaves, before he strikes the victim is already prone! Once they told him, Howu, a stallion does not feed on the grass beneath him; he replied, true, but surely, he can roll on it (Soyinka 2002:135).

Humorously, the Praise-singer employs war imagery to ironically depict Elesin's lustful character. The quote is full of sexual undertone to portray Elesin's excessive sexual prowess. He is the *Oka* who strikes a victim that is already prone! Even his in-law is not safe with him. He has a word to explain away his waywardness. The use of the animal images and allusions show Elesin's recklessness. The Praise-singer's ingenuity and inventiveness in creating the humour is aesthetically rendered.

Finally, Elesin fails in his duty. He attributes his failure to many things. First, to the colonial factor who stops him. Simon Pilkings does not understand why a healthy man should kill himself as ritual for his society. Second, his very nature as a man who enjoys life to the fullest is a hindrance. He does not know when to stop. The last reason can be attributed to the bride he took in the market scene. Also, Elesin seems to have corrupted and negated the potency of the charms and incantation by this singular "act of indiscretion" that weighed him down to earthly pleasure. So, he fails and Olunde, his first born who had just returned from Britain to bury his father, commits suicide in place of his father. The Praise-singer witnesses Elesin's downfall. He is disappointed by Elesin's inability to carry through that which is expected of him. This disappointment is couched in appropriate metaphors that convey the full weight of the emotion. Hear him:

Elesin, we placed the reins of the world in your hands yet you watched it plunged over the edge of the bitter precipice. You sat with folded arms while evil strangers tilted the world from its course and crashed it beyond the edge of emptiness- you muttered, there is little one man can do, you left us floundering in a blind future. Your heir has taken the burden on himself. What the end will be, we are not gods to tell. But this young shoot has poured its sap into the parent stalk, and we know this is not the way of life. Our world is stumbling in the void of strangers, Elesin (Soyinka 2002:175)

The gravity of Elesin's failure is couched in words such as plunged, tilted, crashed, floundering and stumbling, words that portend chaos for the Yoruba race. The use of images such as "plunged over the edge of bitter precipice", "edge of emptiness" and the agricultural image turned on its head with the young shoot pouring its sap into the parent stalk show disorder and portend danger for the people. The praise singer is thus, shown as capable of extolling the good qualities of his master as much as condemning it. As Hale (1997:251) elucidates praise-singing "is the most obvious and audible function they perform, griots and griottes actually contribute to their societies in so many other ways that praise-singer becomes a far too limited description". As it has been shown, he is a historian, genealogist, advisor, spokesperson, diplomat, interpreter, musician, composer, poet, teacher, exhorter, town crier, reporter, master of ceremonies and entertainer.

In this play Wole Soyinka helps to advance the place, role and culture of the Praise-singer. While the Praise-singer may have existed predominantly in an oral society, Soyinka has moved this cultural item forward by utilising his role in a modern contemporary situation. In codifying it, modern audiences can fully appreciate his role. In doing this, he has given us the Praise-singer as an important part of his dramatic work. Thus, Soyinka's example

is one major way by which dramatic works serve as a continual reminder of this cultural element. Again, by this example, we can infer from the Praise-singer used in this play how the artist works and is able to remember and recall all the information and images at his disposal at a given performance. He is quick witted, sharp, articulate and fast in responding quickly with appropriate words and images to a given event. In addition to using linguistic and literary words to respond, many praise-singers are known to have made recourse to extra-linguistic means such as native medicine to help refresh their memory. In Yoruba land, such medicinal aids are called *Ogun-Isoye*; medicine to help the brain to retain facts and recall at the appropriate time.

Ola Rotimi's Use of Uzazakpo as the Custodian of a People's Culture in *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*

In the historical tragedy that dramatizes the travails of Oba Ovonramwen of the Benin empire, Ola Rotimi attempts to correct the "biases of colonial history" which has seen the king as "the most abominable sadist" by creating a man who faced internal and external forces and ruled at a time of the British colonial aggression in Benin. The superior arms of the British finally crushed him. Ola Rotimi draws on oral history and tradition to create the character of Ovonramwen. He supports this king with a fragile character who had served King Adolo, Ovonramwen's father and is now serving the son. By this credential, Uzazakpo, the court jester is both an observer, historian and entertainer.

The focus of this paper is on the nature of the character of Uzazakpo and how he discharges his duty in the court of Oba Ovonramwen. It is significant that Rotimi creates a royal bard who is only seen at one event in the opening scene as he heralds the king's arrival. Traditionally, as a royal bard, he sings the praises of the king and acts as the royal historian. However, Rotimi gives the Court Jester more prominence than the royal bard. In traditional Africa, the court jester is a unique character and is close to the king as his entertainer. In humorous acts, he also acts as the king's conscience. However, Rotimi creates an Uzazakpo who is more of a Praise-singer and who warns the king of the consequences of his actions. Although a court jester, he performs the fundamental roles of a Praise-singer, humouring, cautioning and advising him on crucial steps to take at critical times in his life and most importantly, recording the deeds of the king. Much lower than the king in status, Uzazakpo as shown in the play takes liberty with the king. Since the present king was probably a boy when Uzazakpo served Adolo, his father, Uzazakpo knows everything that is to know about the court life more than Ovonramwen. Thus, at several times in the play, he reminds the king that he may be mad but, in that madness, he had served his father dutifully. With such statements, Uzazakpo establishes his relevance as a unique memory of court life.

Uzazakpo in Rotimi's play does more than the work of a humourist. He uses words creatively to sing the praise of Ovonramwen where necessary and uses his tongue to discipline him even though he is the king and master. For instance, the first occurrence of this is the king's high-handedness in the treatment of the chiefs who had killed Ovonramwen's favourite chief called *Uwangie*. The king in his anger shows no compassion demanding

the death of the chiefs in return. Uzazakpo tells the king that he has not acted wisely. While the king seems not to listen, he insistently repeats the opinion until the king responds. Hear him: “Bold one, that is not the way to go about it” and when the king ignores him, Uzazakpo reminds him that: “In my madness, I served Oba Adolo, your father. That same madness has helped me keep my body in this palace as jester under your full moon. If you will listen to me and my madness, I will tell you frankly that the way you talked to the chiefs was not the right way” (Rotimi 1989:8).

Uzazakpo calls the king the Bold one in recognition of his fearlessness. Yet, he corrects him. In anger, the king forgets the name of the person he sent to Oni of Ife, it was Uzazakpo who has the audacity to correct the king and set him straight. In the matter of the succession to the throne among the Ekpoma, Ovonramwen shows an understanding of the problem of a tyrannical son succeeding his father, and allays their fears by promising to remove the bad leader from oppressing his people. Uzazakpo as a keen observer commends the king afterwards for his mature handling of the case. “Uzazakpo: You handled that one well. But I will say you were still hard on your own elders this morning” (Rotimi 1989:12).

As Ovonramwen’s intimate adviser, Uzazakpo instructs him in the art of politicking where loyalty is preferred to instilling fear in his subjects. To him, the king’s subjects will fear him if he treats them with high handedness but he cannot vouch for their loyalty. He makes him realise that Ologbosere is a loyal chief who will be ready to die for him. He tells the king of the rare quality of loyalty and responsibility displayed by Ologbosere when the erring chiefs made rude remarks to the king. He advises the king to catch in on the loyalty and use it to his advantage. The king is seen commending Ologbosere and as a mark of honour, he gives him his eldest daughter to take as a wife in order to cement their friendship. The reality of Uzazakpo’s advice shows that he is more than a mere jester as his role combines entertainment with advisory.

Because he served Ovonramwen’s father, Uzazakpo seems to be privy to many events in the palace. In his wisdom, he reminds the king that he cannot single-handedly change the society. To support his claim, he quotes Adolo, Ovonramwen’s father who used to say that “a single finger cannot remove a louse from the head.” This proverb reiterates the law of communalism, that there is greatness in unity, an idea he wants his master to digest.

Uzazakpo stays close to the King as his companion. Thus, at the visit of the Ifa priest from Ile-Ife, Uzazakpo interrupts the priest’s evil divination. The Ifa priest is unwilling to divulge the gods’ evil omens on the Benin Empire because he fears if the king will have the capacity to hear the truth. Uzazakpo interrupts the priest by confirming Ovonramwen’s propensity to absorb all facts even when they are not complimentary. “If he feared Truth, would he have sent for you all the way from Ile-Ife?” (Rotimi 1989: 14).

It is this rhetorical question that made the priest inform the King of the dangers ahead and to prescribe caution over all future endeavours in the land. It is also Uzazakpo who reminds the King’s eldest daughter to prepare royal gifts for the Ifa priest from Ile-Ife. The inability to present the Ifa priest with gifts from the royal home would have been a serious oversight. These acts show that Uzazakpo is more than an entertainer but the

King's adviser, companion, spokesperson and diplomat.

Ultimately, when Ovonramwen has to run into hiding from the Whiteman who had routed him from his palace, it was Uzazakpo who stood with him as his helper and friend in the bush. He advises him in the first place to escape from the palace to a safe place: Uzazakpo: "Son of Adolo, stop being stubborn ... let us take shelter in the bush – I pray" (Rotimi 1989:42, 44). He keeps at it until Ovonramwen yields to his advice.

In the bush, in hiding, both Master and servant have the same fearful dream of being over-run by the superior forces of the white. Carefully, but persistently, Uzazakpo reminds the king of the truth of life – "We were both tired, you know. I mean tiredness comes to the poor man, as it does to an Oba, you know" (Rotimi 1989:68).

When they are discovered by guards, Uzazakpo shows true friendship. He asks the king to hide while he faces the guards and at that moment, there was no distinction between Ovonramwen and Uzazakpo. Uzazakpo had to lie to the guards that Ovonramwen was his friend and they believed him. The full truth of his situation dawns on him when his subjects could not recognise him. Ovonramwen: They did not recognise me (70). The Jester in Uzazakpo comes to the fore here as he makes as if to call the guards back and introduce them to the King – "Let me call them back and introduce you" (Rotimi 1989:71).

Again, when Ovonramwen was tired and complained, Uzazakpo offers to carry him. The king is "tickled by the relatively frail physique" of Uzazakpo and has to laugh. These are the only two moments in which jesting/humour could be seen on the part of Uzazakpo. In actual fact, he works more as a companion, an observer, a historian and a praise singer than a court jester. He is too serious in his actions to be a mere jester. It is in this sense that one can see him performing the roles of a praise singer as we established in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*.

Conclusion

Wole Soyinka and Ola Rotimi are two renowned Nigerian playwrights who have gone into the traditions of their land to appropriate the potentialities of the Praise-singer as a cultural element in crafting their dramatic works. They have used the praise-singer/ court jester notable in the African palace as the custodians of the people's culture. These two roles are important in court life. Kings and important chiefs have praise-singers who observe their deeds and record them as legacies. As custodians of tradition, such figures are important channels for remembering court events and facts.

This paper has shown the roles of the praise-singer/court jester in the works of Soyinka and Rotimi and has argued that this artist must possess quick and sharp wit and be able to rise to the occasion as the king's historian and entertainer. In doing this, he employs imagery, highly linguistic apparatus and para-linguistic aids, repetitions, direct address, name-calling as mnemonic and retrieval devices as he performs his acts. Many Praise-singers are known to have employed herbal medicine to aid their powers of recall as they perform. Significantly, Soyinka and Rotimi have helped to codify this important cultural item of the court life by utilising their roles in the plays. They have, thus, helped to keep this act/art in people's memory by preserving it for a wider audience.

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