

## **Intermediality and Visual Orature in Modern Nigerian Poetry in English**

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### **Abstract**

The intermedial practice of incorporating visual art in verbal texts of Nigerian adult literature is a very recent and postmodern practice, dating from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. As an artistic practice that has its origin in indigenous artistry, modern Nigerian visual arts draw imaginative resources from indigenous verbal art forms. Therefore, it is not a surprise for visual artists to make attempts in their work to represent some of these verbal art forms. This paper explores instances of visual textualisation of orature in modern Nigerian poetry as a postmodern engagement of postcolonial experiences. The idea of visual orature is conceived from the observation that some of the visual art illustrations incorporated in modern Nigerian poetry in English were derived in essence from the pre-colonial traditional oral arts and imaginations. In some cases these artistic works are direct transpositions of oral history and narratives. Used as texts of indigenous collective episteme and consciousness, visual orature serves as a tool or semiotic system for outlining modern and postcolonial strategies for negotiating contemporary reality for the purpose of self-apprehension. This paper explores these instances in modern Nigerian poetry in English.

**Key words:** Visual Orature, Intermediality, Postcolonial turn, Postmodernism, modern Nigerian poetry

### **Introduction**

The idea of visual orature is arrived at from the observation that some of the visual arts used in the verbal text of modern Nigerian poetry in English were derived in essence from pre-colonial traditional oral arts and imaginations, and in some cases these artistic works are direct transpositions of oral history and narratives. While some visual arts employed in most of the texts identified in this category of Nigerian literary text are abstractions and are obviously foreign-looking, a few of the visual arts incorporated in some of these collections of poems, namely Niyi Osundare's *Village Voices*, Remi Raji-Oyelade's *Shuttlesongs: America*, Ademola Dasyilva's *Songs of Odamolugbe* and Toyin Falola and Aderonke Adesanya's *Etches on Fresh Waters* are embodiments of distinctive oral narratives that are rooted in the Nigerian/African verbal art repertoire.

While these visual arts may serve as integral or supplementary parts of the poetic texts, they also provide separate narratives that are only understood when they are analyzed within the context of the Nigerian/African indigenous cultures to which they belong. They are thus described as visual orature because of their quality as visual texts that embody dimensions of Nigerian oral traditions, epistemologies and system of indigenous wisdom and consciousness. In the case in which this visual orature is derived from the visual textualisation of mythical figures and deities or divinities, they become embodied texts of oral memory and history. According to Oha (2009, 187), this is admittedly so because such divinities and legendary personages constitute "texts of collective consciousness, which are now used in framing the post-colonial presence of the past"; they serve as a 'semiotic system' that is useful for the purpose of re-apprehension and re-

articulation of social experience.

Orature as the concept used to describe the literariness of the verbal art forms and its creative borrowing or deployment by African writers in written texts has been described as part of African writers' response to the colonial experience and as a decolonizing strategy (Bodunde, 2003, 273). It has also become an aesthetic marker of postcolonial African literature. The logic behind the reference to the indigenous oral artistic practices as inspiration for modern African writing is borne out of the fact that orature is seen as the "reservoir of the values, sensibilities, aesthetics and achievements of traditional African thought and imagination" (Boniface 1985, 52). Thus it is seen as the artistic point and historical signpost from which modern African literature derives its essence and uniqueness. In fact it is an identity marker of African literature and culture both on the African continent and in the diaspora.

Overtime the idea of orature has moved from the simple art of textualising the Nigerian verbal arts to their strategic use for the purpose of postcolonial social and political engagement as particularly evident in works of second generation Nigerian writers such as Niyi Osundare, Femi Osofisan, Tanure Ojaide and a host of others. The dimension of this weaponisation of oral resources includes the use of myths, and legends, as narrative foundations for modern African writing. This practice becomes elaborate in the introduction of oral performance in which case traditional songs and dance performances accompanied by drums are incorporated into poetic rendition. These oral resources are employed as tools for the construction of social visions and ideologies. One thing that is basic to all these deployment of oral resources is that they are postcolonial practices. They are a marker of the postcolonial turn in Nigerian

literature serving either aesthetic or political functions.

Another aesthetic marker of modern Nigerian literature in English is the incorporation of visual arts in its various forms in Nigerian adult literature. This has been critically explored by Shittu (2017) and Falola (2019). Shittu (2017) described this aesthetic form as "Interart Aesthetics". Observed as a recent and novel practice in Nigerian adult literature, the incorporation of visual arts in literary text, also known as "Plurimediality", an aspect of intermedial study, manifests variously and in different degrees in modern Nigerian literature in English. While it involves the use of graphic arts, pencil drawings, charcoal drawings, pen on paper, painting and abstraction in some collections of poems, as is the case in Niyi Osundare's *Village Voices* (1984), Tony Marinho's *Engraved* (2001), Ademola Dasyuva's *Songs of Odamolugbe* (2006), Remi Raji-Oyelade's *Shuttlesongs: America* (2003) and Toyin Falola & Adesayan Aderonke's *Etches on Fresh Water*, (2008), it takes the form photographs of real life scenes as is the case in Toyin Falola & Vivek Bahl's *Scoundrels of Deferral* (2006) and partly in Tony Marinho's *Engraved* (2001). This practice which surfaced particularly at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been described as postmodernist because it marks a change in cultural and creative sensibilities that characterize previous creative practices, especially as associated with the first and the second generations of Nigerian writers. Essentially, the idea of genre blurring, blurring of disciplinary boundaries, hybridity and the interdisciplinary nature of knowledge production among other qualities, have become the emblematic features of postmodernity. Niyi Osundare's *Village Voices* which was published in 1984 can be considered to have come ahead of time and must represent the author's creative

cosmopolitanism.

Shittu (2017) observed that the functions of visual arts in modern Nigerian poetic texts, for example, ranged from integral to supplementary. That is, the presence of these visual arts serve mere ornamental functions in some cases, while in some other cases they are conscious postmodern means of cultural representation and construction of meaning in an age of interdisciplinary articulation of culture and social experiences. Thus, it can be said that while the deployment of orature in modern Nigerian literature is a postcolonial aesthetic marker, the incorporation of visual arts in modern Nigerian literature in English is a postmodern aesthetic maker which defines the interdisciplinary and transgressive nature of contemporary literary and creative practices. As an interface between these aesthetic forms, it is observed that there are instances of aesthetic convergence between the two practices in which case the visual art form serves the purpose of orature. This possibility is the interest of this paper. The paper explores such instances in modern Nigerian poetry in English in which case the visual arts components of the poetry text is itself a form of orature in visual form. For this purpose, Niyi Osundare's *Village Voices*, Remi Raji-Oyelade's *Shuttlesongs: America*, Ademola Dasyilva's *Songs of Odamolugbe* and Toyin Falola and Aderonke Adesanya's *Etches on Fresh Waters* are explored.

### **Modern Nigerian Visual Art and the influence of the Traditional Art Forms**

The fact that many modern African visual artists derived their inspiration from traditional African artistic practices is universally accepted. Falola (2019) noted that the artistic practices by Africans in the form of textile weaving, cloth dyeing, wood carving, brass casting, pottery, and blacksmithing which constitute a part of the

non-verbal aspects of the folk tradition actually took their inspiration from the "the autochthonous folklore of many cultural and ethnic population in Africa" and that they are as old and enduring as many oral literary forms" (702). This view was also supported by Elebute and Odokuma (2016, 11) who observed that "arts and crafts are the foremost traditional African occupations" which can be easily learned through workshop experience. Scholars such as Beier (1968), Willet (1971), Fosu (1986), Adepegba (1995), Kasfir (1999) and Buraimoh (2000) have extensively written about this. In fact, it is argued that traditional African art forms in all its richness and diversity of aesthetic features inspired many pioneers of modern arts such Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse and Georges Braque, and that they gave birth to art movements like Cubism and Expressionism (Tetteh 2013, 3).

Makinde and Aremu (2014) observed that what is known today as contemporary Nigerian art was inspired and greatly influenced by traditional Nigerian art works which date back to the pre-colonial period. Although many contemporary 'Nigerian' art-works bear semblance to Western art forms because these artists learnt their craft in Western art schools, there are many modern Nigerian arts that are clear representation of Nigerian consciousness and world views. Many of these arts are the expressions of Nigerian oral values, episteme and history in visual forms. This fact was corroborated by Falola (2019, 758) in his observation that modern and contemporary Nigerian art combine both the traditional and modern qualities in style as hybrid product and that this started from the time Nigeria got its independence with Nigerian artists making efforts to infuse Nigerian culture and indigenous consciousness into their work thereby ensuring continuity. According to Falola,

postcolonial Nigerian art, “from early pioneers to twenty-first century creators... has continuously looked both forward and back” drawing inspiration from “indigenous customs and ancient stories, combined with ever-changing styles and techniques, to convey messages for the present day.” (2019, 758)

Evidence of this can be seen in the activities of various Nigerian schools of art such as the Onaist school of art which took roots in 1988 at the then University of Ife, now Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife, where graduate students of Yoruba extraction decided to turn to the rich Yoruba tradition such as is seen in ancient and traditional sculpture and shrine paintings. They were inspired by and borrowed forms and motifs from this tradition in their bid to “chart new creative trajectory” (Adésànyà 2016, 38-40). According to Ogheneruemu (2010), Onaism, as an artistic form, evolved as a revival of the Yoruba traditional heritage and concept of Ona, (an artistic process of designing, patterning, forming, and composing art). As such, Onaism is described as an “Artistic Model of Yoruba Civilization in Nigeria” which is characterized by “the use of significant symbols charged with related motifs to give verbal luminosity in such a manner that there is scarcely any surface of the picture plane without action” (234).

Another Nigerian school of art that privileges traditional art forms as a baseline for modern Nigerian artistic practice is the Zaria Art Society. This Art society was inspired by narratives from Yoruba, Igbo, and other cultures, as well as from Bible stories and local traditions to create a fusion of style in their artwork. This artistic practice was later known as “natural synthesis,” which created “a uniquely Nigerian aesthetic perspective by mixing indigenous art traditions and ideas with useful forms and techniques from Western

cultures” (Perrin Lathrop, “Uche Okeke: the Art Society of Zaria”).

Therefore, there are several modern artistic works that consist of elements of Nigerian indigenous and contemporary history, culture, and worldview. These artistic works create distinct artistic patterns which adopt local ideas and local art patterns and designs, but employ modern art and design technique. They thus project the philosophical content of Nigerian social, political and economic thoughts. Therefore, some of the visual art works that are incorporated into modern Nigerian poetry texts as identified above bear testimony to their link to the Nigerian indigenous art forms. As a cultural continuum, elements of visual orature are identifiable in these works.

### **Postcoloniality, Globalisation and Visual Orature in Modern Nigerian Poetry in English**

Modern Nigerian poetry in English is the product of the postcolonial and postmodern turns as are manifested in the aesthetic forms and various thematic thrusts associated with different stages of the development of the poetry. The deployment of orature in the form of verbal art forms and the recent incorporation of visual art are instances.

Orature has been described above as the “reservoir of the values, sensibilities, aesthetics and achievements of traditional African thought and imagination” (Boniface, 1985, 52) and that these are discernible in various and different bodies and forms of indigenous verbal arts, such as myths and divinities which have become “texts of collective consciousness, which are now used in framing the post-colonial presence of the past”; and function as a ‘semiotic system’ that is useful for the purpose of re-apprehension and re-articulation of social experience (Oha 2009, 187). Nigerian

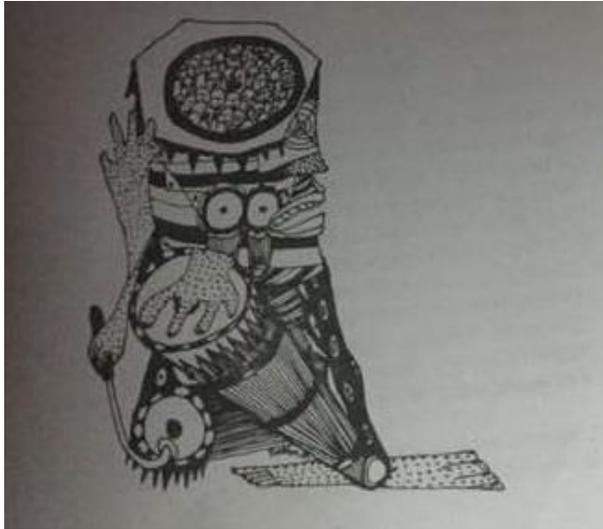
writers have deployed these forms of orature in varying contexts both as postcolonial entrenchment of traditional cultural values or as a way of bringing the past into the service of the present for the purpose of self-apprehension or re-apprehension. These forms of orature have also been deployed within the multinational or transnational and transcultural spaces as a means of interrogating cultural epistemologies and mediating knowledge. Of course, they serve different purposes within these different contexts.

While most of the visual artistic works employed in the collections of poems identified in this paper are postmodern in nature and are free expressions of the artists' hybridized consciousness and realist portraiture of contemporary society and relationships, a few are deeply influenced by traditional concepts or are implicit or explicit visual representations of myths, deities and oral narratives with deep and multilayered significations. While some are presented in modernized designs others are presented in their autochthonous forms; they are faithful but postmodernist portraiture of traditional cultural ideologies and consciousness. Instances of these are identified in modern Nigerian poetry collections with intermedial features. These texts include Niyi Osundare's *Village*

*Voices*, Remi Raji's *Shuttlesongs: America*, Ademola Dasylva's *Songs of Odamolugbe* and Falola & Adesanya's *Etches on Fresh Waters*.

The first example is taken from Niyi Osundare's *Village Voices*, the visual illustration that accompanies the poem "A Dialogue of the Drums" on page 5 and shown in figure 1 below. The visual art is an image of an ensemble of Yoruba drums with different drums identified, including the Talking drum (*gangan/dundun*), *omele* and a *bata* drum. A hand is seen beating the *gangan* while another is placed on the *bata* drum. The *omele* serves as the eyes of the drums facing the reader. These drums belong to an ensemble which is traditionally associated with or used for the dissemination of information, and for royal purposes. They are also used for entertainment. The talking drum provides coded messages which the initiates are trained to decode or understand. The illustration is monochromatic.

Drumming in Yoruba oral literature has been described as "drum poetry" and is a critical aspect of Yoruba oral performance. According to Sotunsa (2009, 6), "The esoteric nature of drum poetry deepens its aesthetic value such that only those acquainted with it understand its language and are able to derive special pleasure from the art of decoding its messages".



**Fig. 1: Yoruba drum ensemble showing *Gangan, Bata and Omele* from *Village Voices***

As Sotunsa further explained, the Yoruba drum poetry texts are derived from other forms of Yoruba verbal art forms, especially the traditional lore such as proverbs, praise chants, witty sayings, and maxims. (10). Therefore, a visual presentation of drums in modern Nigerian poetry is suggestive of a range of oral traditional practices. Drums thus become a repository of deeper cultural meanings.

The discourse surrounding the drum and drumming in Yoruba oral tradition is described as the drum lore. The significance of the drum lore in postcolonial Nigerian literature can be seen in its deployment in modern dramatic and poetic genres. Its use in literature is a reference to the oral traditional aspects of the culture. Some of the traditional functions of drum and drumming among the Yoruba are described by the poet in stanza 7:

I will not only give legs to my  
coiling words  
I will also give them the fang of  
facts  
When last did your hands touch  
*reso*,  
Which celebrates the coming of a  
newborn,

*Ogbele* which warms the grave of  
the dead one

Where were you when *adan* filled  
the night

With the shame of *Apeloko*

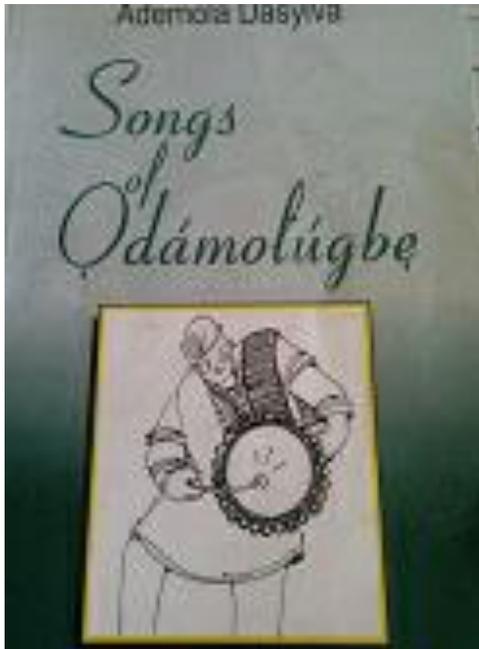
Who proved too sharp with the  
neighbour's yams?

According to the footnote to the poem, *bata*, *omele*, *gangan*, *gbedu*, *ibembe*, *reso*, *ogbele* and *adan* are all types of drums; they are also names of dances that are associated with these drums. For instance, *gbedu* is a royal drum while *adan* is a satirical drum, especially in the poet's town of Ikere Ekiti. The other types of drums are mostly used for entertainment (*Village Voices*, p. 8).

While the concept of drum and drumming is used by Osundare as a tool for communication and social criticism as explained in the poem, its use as the cover picture of Ademola Dasyuva's *Songs of Odamolugbe* (figure 2 below) and functions as the lens through which the text is seen and possibly read. Although all the visual arts used to illustrate the poems in the collection do not belong to this class of visual orature, its use as cover image is a form of prologue or introduction and

prefiguration of its postcolonial content. It represents the oral traditional past which is

essential in the comprehension of the postcolonial present.



**Fig. 2: The Talking drum & drummer: Cover image of *Songs of Odamolugbe***

It can be said, therefore, that these visual arts in the two collections of poetry are densely oral. They serve as texts of oral traditional wisdom and ideology whose meanings can only be understood in the context of its primary use. Their use alongside the original deployment of Yoruba oral resources in the poem as is the case in Osundare's *Village Voices*, and as cover image in Dasyva's *Songs of Odamolugbe* signifies the postcolonial condition, and increases the density of the orature.

Another example found in Osundare's *Village Voices* is the image of a mask which is used to illustrate the poem "To a Passing Year", on page 33 (and shown in figure 3 below). The mask is a very popular traditional object in Africa and it has different significations. In Africa, masks are created for various but specific purposes; traditionally, they serve two main functions, namely ritual/religious purpose and entertainment purpose. Within these two

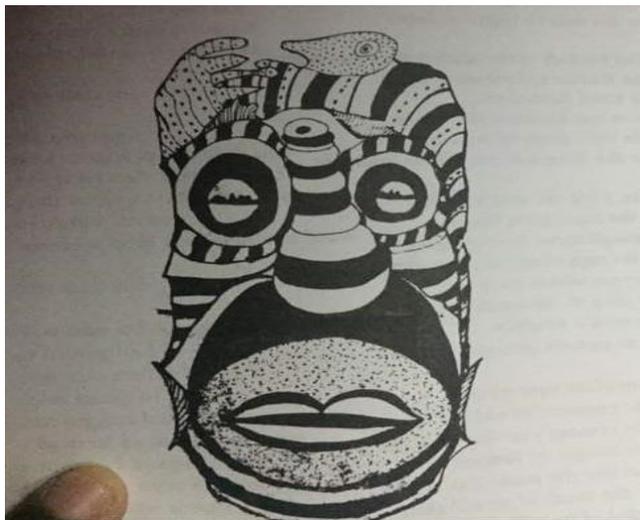
functions are various other functions including celebration of life; invitation or summoning of spirits; education and socialization of the young members of the society and to serve as charms for good luck. Other functions include enforcement of laws, representation of ancestors and a means of escaping reality and to enter the metaphysical world. Within the ritual and religious domain in Africa, a mask serves as a link between the natural and the supernatural worlds. It embodies certain secrets that are only understood by those who have been initiated into the deep and esoteric aspects of culture. As a result of this, masks are used only on special occasions.

In Africa, masks are used in masquerades and festivals that form parts of religious ceremonies. Many masquerades are very exceptionally sacred in their presentation, purpose and meaning, while others function solely for the purpose of

entertainment. Most African masks are associated with supernatural beings such as the spirits of the ancestors. A ceremony or performance in which masks are used may represent the visit of ancestral spirits from the ancestral world. A masked dancer in this context invokes the spirit and the identity which then becomes recognizable to the audience who is familiar with the oral, mythical and masked tradition. There are secret societies in Africa in which the use of mask is absolutely private. Within the context of ritual ceremonies, deities, spirits of ancestors, mythological beings, good and or evil spirits are depicted and these may take the form of masks of human or totemic

ancestors. It is in this vein that masks may be zoomorphic (having animal characteristics), anthropomorphic (having human characteristics), or a combination of both.

In the poem, “To a Passing Year”, Osundare addresses the passing of the year with all its goodness and negative experiences, as the title suggests, and the prayerful waiting for the coming of a new year. The cycle of life is an important aspect of African world view. This is why different stages of life are celebrated as in birth, marriage and death. During the year people pray for good harvest which is appreciated during harvest festivals.



**Fig. 3: Image of the mask illustrating the poem “To a Passing Year” from *Village Voices***

This importance of masks in oral traditional societies is underscored by Woodward (2000, 4) in her observation that masks function as means of socializing younger members of the society into the histories of family and community in general as initiation rites in masked ceremonies:

Some masks were used to mark transitions in people’s lives; secret societies and initiation

rites often employed masks in rituals welcoming young men or women into maturity. Important events in people’s lives have always been marked by celebrations and masks often played a large role on the occasions of birth, marriage, and death.

The poet echoes this in stanza 6, when he notes that he “felt the year’s ageing” and

therefore, stresses the need to pray for a renewal and the birth of a new year:

Let us plant new vows  
In the compost of old breaches  
So the coming year does not die  
Of the hunger of former days  
Let us like the snake rise resplendent  
From the death of an old skin  
Divested of its killing sting (Stanza 7,  
p. 34)

A good example is seen in the Gelede mask of the Yoruba people of Nigeria, shown in figure 4 below. The mask represents the Yoruba's believe in the power of older women whom they believe have powers that are equal to or greater than that of the gods. The mask is used to celebrate and honor older females and to show their importance.

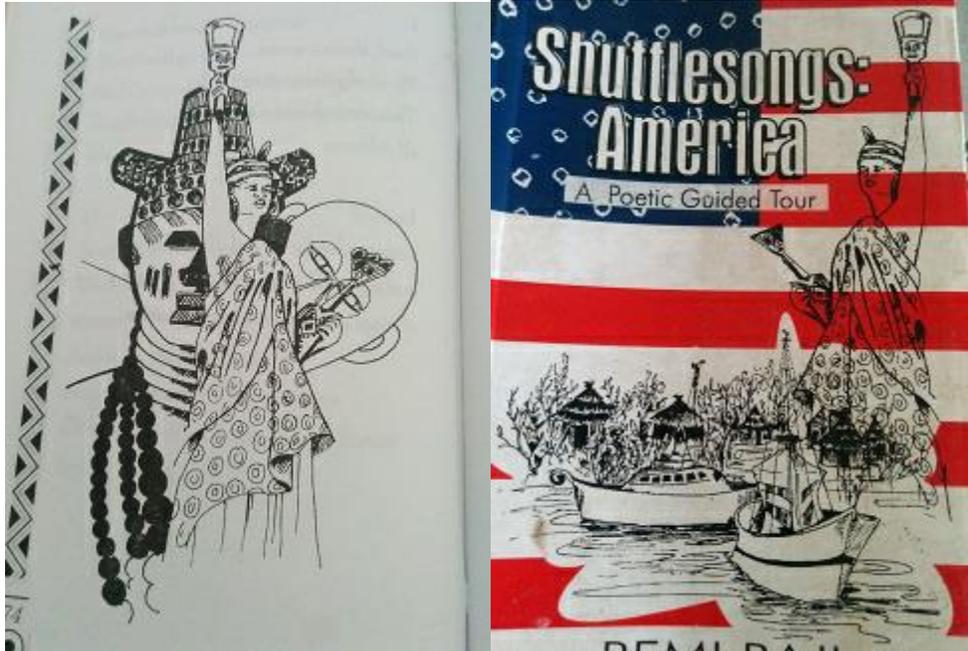


**Fig. 4: Gelede Mask of Yoruba**

Therefore, taking the subject of the poem into consideration, the deployment of the visual image of the mask by Niyi Osundare as a supplement to the poem “To a passing year” is very significant. It provokes a whole memory of a practice that speaks to the heart of African/Nigerian religious life. The visual art is itself a text of oral history and traditions.

Both Remi Raji-Oyelade and Toyin

Falola & Aderonke Adesanya deployed the visual images of two Yoruba divinities, Sango and Oya, in their collections, *Shuttlesongs: America* and *Etches on Fresh Waters* respectively and as are shown in figures 5 & 6. Of interest in these separate use of the images of these deities is the fact that they are both deployed outside the cultural domain of the deities.



**Fig. 5: Images of the Yoruba deities of Sango and Oya in *Shufflesongs: America***

Remi Raji-Oyelade employed the visual image (figure 5) as a postcolonial tool that is derived from his Yoruba oral tradition to interrogate another cultural space as a form of historical revisionism. It can be said that the poet's replacement of the original statue of liberty with the Yoruba cultural and religious symbols signifies the poet's historical memory and how this memory influences his reading of the American cultural space. It suggests that the poet's reading or viewing of the American culture and history would be subversive. The images of the two Yoruba divinities, Sango and Oya, become the lens through which he would see. In other words, the poet re-employs the Yoruba mytho-historical properties and oral resources as a new mythography. The poet decided to subvert the historiography of the status of liberty as a way of interrogating the history of America and her grand narrative and the history behind the status by juxtaposing it with American history.

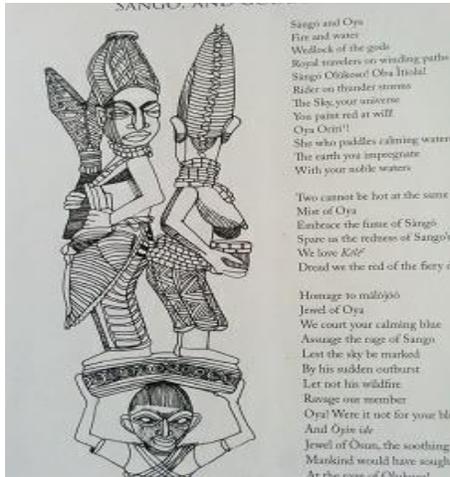
The features of the poet's version include those of Sango, a Yoruba god of thunder and those of his faithful wife, Oya.

Instead of the stola, the Yoruba woman, Oya, wears an obviously African-designed fabric; instead of the crown with the seven spikes, she wears what appears to be Oya's traditional head gear. Again, instead of a torch, the African woman carries the *Ose* of Sango (sacred Axe of Sango) and instead of the tabula ansata, she carries in her left arm what appears to be Oya's insignia. It is interesting to note here that both the torch and the sacred Axe of Sango symbolize light or enlightenment. The double implications of the sacred Axe of Sango are, however, indicated in the Oriki of Sango. An oriki of Sango is as follows:

I humble myself before the  
mysteries of Shango!  
You are the owner of the Mysteries  
of *Thunder and Lightning*.  
You are the *Wrath of God*.  
You are the lord of *instant  
illumination*.  
You are the lord of courage,  
boldness, fortitude.  
You are the owner of the Mystery of  
rain (My emphasis)

This can be compared to Falola & Adesanyan's oriki of Sango and Oya on the dedication page of *Etches on Fresh Waters* (figure 6). It is instructive that Falola and

Adesanyan dedicate their collection of poems to these same Yoruba divinities. In the dedication both Sango and Oya are praised:



**Fig. 6: images of Sango & Oya from the dedication page of *Etches on Fresh Waters*.**

Sango and Oya  
 Fire and water  
 Wedlock of the gods  
 Royal travelers on winding paths  
 Sango Olukoso! Oba Itiolu!  
 Rider on thunder storms  
 The Sky, your universe  
 You paint red at will!  
 Oya Oriri!  
 She who paddles calming waters  
 The earth you impregnate  
 With your noble waters  
 (Stanza 1)

According to the Yoruba tradition, Oya was the most faithful of the three wives of Sango and was said to have remained with him till the end.

Therefore, the adoption of the visual images of Sango and that of his wife, Oya, as the cover design, and as illustration on page 74 of Remi Raji's *Shuttlesongs: America* and the subject on the dedication page of Falola and Adesanyan's *Etches on Fresh Waters* is significant. They both invoke a body of very important Yoruba myths. Is it possible they are the gods and goddess of travelers as Falola and

Adesanyan describe Sango and Oya as "Royal travelers on winding paths?" Both Remi Raji and Falola wrote from the United States of America; as Africans in America, they were travelers too. The significance of the deployment of the images of these Yoruba divinities is described by Shittu (2020, 16) in the following words:

This juxtaposition of these icons and myths represents in a way the scars of colonial conquest and the post-colony's mask of resistance. But at the same time, it illustrates the consequences of the globalization of cultures and how it engenders a transformation of the semantics of culture and contexts of experience.

### Conclusion

The concept of visual orature describes the fact that despite increasing transformations in the social consciousness and creative imagination of Nigerian writers, there is a ubiquitous relationship between Nigeria's past and present culturally. It is also true to

say that there is a dynamic connection between the postcolonial and the postmodern in contemporary Nigerian ideology and consciousness. Although there is marked difference in the thematic interests and aesthetic engagements of the different generations and periods of Nigerian literature, the underlining issues in the literature is the interrogation of the implications of the colonial encounter and experience on Nigerian modern social, cultural and political conditions.

While globalisation and the resultant cultural liberalism have greatly redefined cultural expressions and construction of identities, there are evidence that ethnic consciousness still runs as an undercurrent in the literary expressions of Nigerian writers and artists either implicitly or explicitly. The interdisciplinary practice of incorporating visual art and illustrations in Modern Nigerian adult literature in English, though a postmodern practice, is still a postcolonialist engagement which represents Nigerian writers' artists and intellectuals' continual interrogation and mediation of the global and local for the purpose of self-apprehension. The ideas of Intermediality and visual orature underscore the eclectic nature of contemporary cultural expression and production of knowledge.

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