

Chin Ce: Riddle and Bash - The Creative Wit of Alaa's Children

LITTLE HAS been written about the riddle genre of Africa's oral art apart from scattered references in some research efforts by western scholars. Yet the riddles of African oral literature still survive as a literary genre in its own right with short diction and imposed meanings, stock devices and stock answers repeated almost word for word in communities where they flourish.

Among the children of Alaa¹ the value of the riddle and bash contests is not just in the educational or entertainment motif. There lies some superabundant wit in the prolific deployment of imagery, epithets and symbolism from the repertoire of Alaa tradition and culture. Alaa's progeny themselves are regular contestants and have, over time, cultivated so much artistry in this artistic form that they must generally come to be recognised as bards in their own right.

The creative genius in African literary tradition is often indebted to his immediate environment or larger society. It is the society that provides him with linguistic and literary traditions in terms of a common language or dialect, metaphor, imagery, and proverbs. But this in no way dims the creative vision that drives the spirit of his art and the genuineness of his work. 'Genius' here implies the artiste's ability to effect some variations on this body of existing traditional sources at his disposal. 'Some traditions allow for considerable individualistic

expression,' says Abdulkadir. '(So) the poet must however rely to some extent on traditional forms and structures... and traditional materials in (his)... composition. (Abalagu, et al, 1981) Thus the evidence of performance reveals that it is the personal dynamics that must coalesce acceptably with the artiste's traditional repertoire in order to make the final piece a unique and aesthetically pleasing experience.

This is what makes the elaborate riddle contests of Alaa a richer concatenation of expressions of intrinsic poetic value than ordinary riddles and one can agree no less with Jack Mapanje that 'the person who can complete the metaphor (and symbols laden in this art genre)... is well equipped to understand (great) poetry.' (Mapanje, 1983))

No riddle was ever established by any particular individual. African riddles rise with communal linguistic heritage and take their place among the idioms, proverbs and poetic expressions of the people. The great don John himself once said of the riddle and bash contests during his own time:

after the farming season when children had little to do,
this contest was there to keep them busy, or when they
grow rather restless they are called together and
riddles are thrown to them. (1986)

If those games were consequently borne out of the educational need of the community -the need to educate the children and improve their sense of observation of lives around them, contemporary social events take their place as sources of innovations. For example, a drunkard, a habitually late cook, a scandal or legal tussle would easily form a most entertaining

allusion-laden bash.

Creative Riddle and Bash Action in Alaa

Agreeably 'performance is a doing art, (Hagler, 1981) 'an overt behaviour as a realisation of an underlying knowledge on the part of the speaker.' (Hymes, 1986) For Alaa's children, knowledge implies the traditional wisdom to interpret and recreate riddles, realised by elaborate dramatic enactment.

Earlier, this was usually performed among age-grades during the moonlit frolics. De Joe of Okpula,² explains this enactment in detail:

One age-grade would sit in a corner, split into two groups. Each group sits in one line, side by side, and facing the other group similarly organised. Now one member fires the first shot at his counterpart. If the answer proffered is correct, it's one point for the side, otherwise it is one point against the side. At the end of it all, are records are reviewed to determine the winner, (de Joe, 1986)

The bash is organised in a similar way usually involving boys on the one side and girls on the other.

Girls stand in a row, facing the boys who swagger defiantly before them. This usually marks the end of the session. The bash begins when one of the boys makes some rude advances to a female counterpart, and she retorts with an abuse. The other boys remonstrate sharply and a battle of wits begins. It

usually ends with all returning to their homes,
claiming victory over their opponents, (de Joe, 1986)

Nowadays however, moonlight plays and dances have virtually disappeared from most African villages. But this is in no way a limitation to their enjoyment of an art that has become a way of life for the people of Alaa. Public performances are more spontaneous. Two youths engage themselves in the riddle context and take notes to determine the winner where there is no audience.⁴ However, the presence of an audience enlivens the bash performance more. Here is a typical occasion of bash performance: A cluster of small groups in a public tap. There are few adults, a number of young people with an admixture of male and female sexes. There are less conscious polarities of participants into opposing camps, in other words, a free-for-all session. So members of the audience are participants at the same time. Typically, a player finds his supporters among those who mock his opponent. Quite dramatically, one supporter might turn around to be an antagonist, pitching his tent with the group that is fast gaining the louder ovation. This *volte face* adds boisterous laughter to the game.

Challenger (1):

Chidi
Maka mkpuru rice Ka iji
gbaa nna gi Ekpuruke
n'ahia ukwu taa

Translation:

For one grain of rice, Chidi,
You threw your father

In wrestling match today.

(Chidi's reply)

Ohoo?
Maka ibe akidi
Otu-ibe akidi
Igbara nne gi
N'ala

Translation:

Really?
For half a been-seed
You wrestled your mother
To the ground.

At this point, Uka, another participant wades in, pitching his tent with Chidi. This audience-narrator interaction provides a common spur for the creative ingenuity of the youths. It is now a free-for-all entertainment spree of verbal bashing and mockery.

Uka:

Eze mhuru gi n'onu
Dika foku ekwensu
H-ata ugba

Challenger (1):

Iya!
Obu ya kpatara
Iji eme onu
Ka ina-ami
Ndi opo avu.

Ma nti gi-a
Buchaa otua
Dika afo ime onwa asaa

Translation:

Uka:

The teeth in your mouth
Are like the roasting prongs
Of the devil.

Challenger (1):

Oh yeah?
Is that why
Your mouth looks
Like you had kiss
Of a leper's sores.

But your
chin bulges
Like a seven-month pregnancy.

A clever performance wins a loud complimentary remark 'heee!' a dull one meets with a universal 'kooo!' which confirms the assumption that for the performers 'their greatest appeal lies in their lively spontaneity and the performer's unquestioned familiarity with the traditional element of his art. (de Graft, 1970)

Ugbua kedu onye
Onu ya na-esi
Dika ogwe
N'ejula eju.

Translation:

Now who is it
That his mouth reeks
Like the latrine
That's filled up.

Ma ahu mhuru
Gbara okporo iji
Anya gharii.

You farted on the street
And even the flies
Went rigid with fright

Lee ka ukwu
Na-ahu gi ririri
Dika oche ndi
Anu odogwo.

But why does your leg
Shake so badly (ririri)
Like the rickety table
Of stale-meat butchers.

Dada, isi gi
yiri nke udele
Mmiri mara.

Dada, your hair
Reminds me of a vulture
Soaked in the rain.

Obu ya mere
Iji dowe onu
Ka mkpi na-esi
Mamiri ya.

So that is why
Your nose is hung
At that angle like a
he-goat on heat?

The test of creative wit is that one does not lack the verbal dart to throw at his opponent in this admix of imaginative improvisations. Even when core traditional imagery is exhausted, participants begin to improvise with contemporary incidents in the community. Such individual artistry differs among the youths, and it is this peculiar attribute in each of the participants that informs their different 'techniques of ornamentation.'(Abdulkadir, 1980)

Ezilam ukwu gi
Ukwu ndanda gi
Agaghi ekoli nke

Dee Mathias

Translation:

Now you do not need
To swing your hips to me
That ant-waist of yours
Cannot rouse old
De Mathias....

These techniques are prolific in riddles more so as the 'battle' itself is a spontaneous activity, demanding fast thinking. But behind all the continuum of spontaneity and innovation, traditional texts abound from the overflow of exuberant creative genius. In fact these young adults start from the familiar traditional sources to their own improvisations with exercise of their wide imaginative powers, aimed of course, at outwitting one another. This is because 'traditional African life in general is rich in poetic expressions... in a sense that is far reaching, for they are not only spontaneous and realistic but also beautiful.' (Egudu, 1979) One is correct to add that it is the spontaneity of its reaction that marks the beauty and liveliness of most riddle performances.

Patterns of Associations:

A discernible literary trait in the art of riddle performance is the pattern of association of images, objects and life. Parry's formulaic theory sees the formula as a group of words regularly employed under the same metric conditions to express a given essential idea. (Abdulkadir, 1980) This definition is implicit to the 'metric condition' of traditional songs or musical renditions. However, the formulaic theory of Parry is not only employed in terms of the 'metric conditions' but the epithet-formula, the

noun-formula and verb-formula could also be employed, not in relation to the metrical condition but for what Chukwuma Azuonye calls the 'semantic factor.' According to Azuonye, traditional epithet is not used for any metrical convenience... the use of formulas, especially epithet formula...is governed by the semantic factor of association rather than any of the mechanical metre.⁵

The latter's position is made more plausible with the traditional core epithets, symbolism and imagery from which the youthful bards of Alaa draw their sources adding their own individual talents and enhancing the process of creativity in a pattern distinctive of riddle and bash art. These patterns complement the formulas -usually transferred epithets combined with traditional symbolism in the course of performance. For example, 'ose' (pepper) 'oyogho' (plantain) and 'akummo' (coconut) are symbols of multiple blessings. The little pods of pepper on the plant, the heavy coconut pods and the cluster of plantains, are symbols of procreation and multiplicity.

In the same vein, their manner of presentation in the riddle is laden with transferred epithets, for example,

Tell me who
is the rich housewife
with many many children?

Answer: The Pepper.

Tell me the torch
that makes the whole
world warm

The seasonal guest
Of all the world
(The Moon)

The coconut tree and the plantain acquire a peculiar character of aloof sequestration from all activity.

Tell me who
Is that queer woman
That keeps her children
In the heavens

Answer: The Plantain

Tell me who
Is the foolish maid
that breast-feeds children
over the rafters

Answer: The Coconut.

The association of 'breast-feeding' with the coconut differentiates it from the plantain, although both (plantain and coconut) share similar conditions of high sequestration. Ripe paw-paw fruits are represented as,

The fair bride who
must not touch the mat
(for her husband).

Just as the image of breast-feeding links the coconut with the riddle, so does the association of the fair bride 'who cannot touch

the mat for her husband,' traditionally indicate the ripe papaw that must not be allowed to fall on the dry ground from the tree. We equally see the sense of symbolic representations in the moon. The moon in riddles indicates inexhaustible universality, and infinity. In riddles there are ways in which the epithet formula of a yam slice, or fire, could be used to describe the moon, for example,

The slice of yam
That feeds the world.

The sun on the other hand is alluded as the firewood.

the firewood that burns
world without end.

Acoustics Improvisations

Some sounds in the riddle occupy a distinct traditional acoustic device used in representing particularly related phenomenon; for example, the sound 'kpam' is an acoustic formula that is usually employed for the breaking of wood.

Other acoustic device like the sound 'kpum' depict the sound of metal on wood. Generally, the acoustics of Alaa's riddles are rarely manipulated differently otherwise the meaning is lost.

Thus, the sound,

kon ti
kon kon kon ti.

(Crack not kernels
Near the pit.)

is usually recited along with the tonal recitation, in order that the meaning i.e., the verbal translation mimics fairly the sound, 'kon ti' which in itself is an allophone for the cracking of shells.

Similarly, 'tum tum, gem gem' is an acoustic device for the quick, lithe movements of rodents. In riddles it is the traditional Alaa onomatopoeia for the smart quick prance of the squirrel. In totality the acoustic formula of 'kpum' (for cutting), 'kon ti' (for cracking), 'turn turn' (for quickness), 'kpam' (for breaking) form part of the source repertoire of the riddles.

The Imagery of Bash Contests:

During the bash session of this literary fair, a range of traditional core images are deployed in performance. Alaa youths are mostly informed by their early or original knowledge of the traditional similes and metaphors acquired from many series of performances. The allusions are generally ludicrous, highly exaggerated but suggestive of underlying meanings, for example,

For one grain of rice
Nathan wrested the throne
from his own father

This abuse has a dramatic effect by its suggestion of greed and avarice, which is even aggravated by a more ludicrous 'offence,'

And, for one half been seed
You, Ekwedike, wrestled your mother
At the market square.

The latter counter fire profanes the conventional respect

for womanhood. The rice grain and bean seed are symbols of foreign taste. In a larger perspective, it means superseding foreign values (rice and beans) over our own tradition (of reverence for father and mother). The implication of greed is seen in the very mean proportion of the foreign diet - 'grain of rice' and 'half a bean seed.'

Furthermore the depiction of Ike's mouth that

...reeks
like the pit latrine
very nearly full...

or

a fart...
that shocked the fly dumb-

are metaphors of unpleasant health conditions or poor hygiene. The motif of ugliness is usually presented in these images that always recur in the bash:

old vulture
Soaked in the rain

chin
like the bulge
of pregnant Maria

teeth
the roasting fork
of the devil.

These, in their varied manners of presentation, are portraits of physical incongruity, Elements of Christian myths (fork of the devil) are sprinkled freely. They are allusions that the children have come to learn in the course of their religious exposures and they are drawn from the traditional repertoire which the people use to satirise the physical attributes and mannerisms of their opponents.

Antiphonal wit in Riddle and Bash:

The pattern of riddle call and the response is a traditional stock-opening device always observed in the recitations. The challenger rises to the initiative by calling the name of his chosen opponent. The opponent who then accepts the challenge replies 'Ehee!' along with the audience, who all anticipate the first 'attack.' It is an original device which is used to prepare the participants for the questions and abuses involved in the contest. Every participant begins in this way until the excitement gathers momentum, and the stock call-response is abandoned briefly. This especially occurs in the bash. Riddle poetry, through the years, has been greatly enriched by performers' excited contests. By their sheer power of imagination, and in their vociferous excitement, they display artistry and ingenuity, by exploring the original traditional patterns or formula, 'they also capitalise on incidents, recreating, refurbishing and enhancing their oral heritage. In this stock formula of opening call and response, ingenious children bring their talents to play. Deliberate prolongation of call is an art that achieves some dramatic Here, for example, Chidi not just takes on his opponent, but also invites the audience.

Chidi: Turum ya nu Saa
 All: Saa!
 Chidi: Tuorum ya nu Saa
 All: Saa!
 Chidi: Tuorum ya nu Saa
 All: Saa! Saa! Saa!

Translation:

Chidi: All hail him 'Sir!'
 All: Sir!
 Chidi: All hail him 'Sir!'
 All: Sir! Sir! Sir!

This deliberate rolling and prolongation of the call might be accompanied by a dramatic battle-cry. The intention may be to create some comic effect that eventually wears down the other side and throws them off their guard when the shot is suddenly released. In some instances the stock call may be intoned in a familiar lyric which enhances the dramatic nature of the contest. Gesticulations might feature prominently, apart from the mock dance and battle-cry. A conscious attempt by a riddle participant might be made to dramatise,

what else that clapped
 'kpam' into the bush.

As a cue the exclamation of 'kpam' is followed by a clap. In the bash session, the 'ant-waist' or the nose that looks like that of the billy goat, the flatulent chin, could be acted out in a way that would enhance or aggravate the ugliness of the physical

attribute. Of course these effects are easily achieved by ingenious ones who have the peculiar ability to twist some parts of their bodies to achieve desired effect.

Poetics of Alaa riddle

From observations, the (riddle) is an elevated poetic game that demands hard mental exercise with its transferred epithets and symbolism. Since these riddles involve the teachings imparted by parents, both players and audience operate from a common source so the repertoire of traditional epithets and allusions are familiar.

(Call)

gwam nne umu hiri ahu
gburu gburu

(Response) Ose.

Gwam nwa bu nna ya uzo -
bu nna ya uzo
Taa Oji haa

(Response) Anya

Gwam okoro chara nzu-
okoro chara nzu
Baa n'ohia

(Response) Okpo Ugu.

tell me who

is the mother with children
round and round her side

Pepper (answer)

tell me who
is the son that took the cola
before his father did.

The Eye (answer)

Tell me who
Is the young man in the bush
Chalked all white

The Fluted Pumpkin (answer).

This group has thrown three darts. It is the turn of the other
opposing camp.

Gwam agbogho iru
Mmanu mmanu.

(Response) Okwuruegbe.

Gwam nwanyi kpo umu
Rigoo n'elu.

(Response) Oyogho.

Gwam otu ibe ji
Zuru oha afo

(Response) Onwa

tell me
who is the young girl
with the fairest face

(Response) The Paw-paw

woman with her children
hung up in the skies

(Response) The Plantain

The slice of yam
that feeds the world.

(Response) the Moon

The questions come in quick succession. If the answer given is incorrect the audience and participants may offer a loud correction. There is equally the riddle of sounds and their meanings, similar to what Finnegan calls 'acoustic analogy.' This is the ability of the participants to interpret the sounds and rhythms of unnamed objects or events. They are mainly tonal riddles '...in which there is a kind of rhythm in the syllables so that the questions are like two little verses balancing each other in a particular way.' (Finnegan, 1970) They provide poetic lyricism to riddles, for example,

Gwam, kon ti

Kon kon ti.

Answer: Crack not kernels
Near a pit (latrine)

The tonal rendition is done in such a way that it fairly corresponds to the verbal version.

Gwam ereghe re -
ti rere

Answer: anaghi agba
ose na-anya.

(Do not rub)
Pepper in the eyes)

Some of these tonal riddles are also ideophonic expressions of given objects.

Gwam kpom ti
Kpo.

(Response) Ikwe n'odu
(Mortar and Pestle)

Gwam kpum
Yoooo.

(Response) -aka nkwu
The (falling) Palm frond (answer).

Some are onomatopoeia that represent traditionally recognised sound effects.

Gwam ihe gbara 'kpam!'
Baa n'ohia

(Answer) ugba.

What made a noise ('kpam')
And ran into bush

(Oil bean seed)

Gwam tum tum
Gem gem.

(Response)

Oso mgbada
bu n'ugwu.

(The hare race
is best on a hill)

Other cases of modification of composition abound. The universe of moon, stars and firelight has been manipulated in a similar stylistic manner:

Gwam
Mpalaka

Zuru uwa nile

Onye ije
Nleta uwa

These are the ingenious improvisations that have been employed from the universal attributes of the moon. In the following presentation, the 'smart eye' in the riddle form, is modified from the well-known son that took the kola offering before his father to a brazen

(the) clever man
who first slept with
his brothers wife....

or the

wily man who
seduces a wife
before her husband

This variation still retains the formulaic symbolism of 'the clever man' which 'the eye' traditionally occupies in their riddle. Such variations frequently occur and are usually incorporated into the body of traditional texts. Ingenious performers would cultivate historical incidents into riddles:

Okpo nkita
Eje ikpe
(Mbama)

(He taketh a dog
To the law court)

Mbama (answer)

In this dart, Mbama, a man with the notoriety of frequent police cases, becomes the answer. The essential device is the satirisation of the eccentric who sees fit to take his dog to a lawsuit. There are further examples of local satires through the riddle art form:

Gwam
Okwa nka
Igbeogologo

Translation:

Tell me
Who is the carpenter
Of long boxes
Answer: de Mike.

The (exaggeration) epithet of the carpenter is part of the comic sense of humour of some Alaa's exuberant youths. Some allophones have been created out of past incidents of comic nature. The following satiric verse, for example, is a satire of two bed mates.

Gwam

'Piakam

Piaaa!'

(Answer: 'Theresa and John are on bed')

There are instances where riddles had emanated from some proverbs commonly used among the elderly members of the lineage. Here the clever children turn these special proverbs and idioms into some kind of evocation. For example, this riddle,

Kedu

Ahu anyuru n'elu

Mere anu gwungem

Translation:

what

is the fart from above

that stunned the bee

obviously comes from the traditional proverb that states that a proverb said to a woman is like a fart from a tree top (which no one can guess the direction it came). A deeper study of proverbs would reveal types the imagination of which is drawn from imagistic, as against the linguistic, parallels. These often combine to form derivations for the riddle genre particularly when they come as extractions from familiar proverbs of the community:

Linguistic type:

'A proverb said to a woman is like a fart from the tree top which no-one could guess the direction it came.'

Riddle:

gwam

sihu anyuru n'elu
mere anu gwungem

Translation:

the wine tapper's fart
that puzzles the bees.

(Answer: A proverb)

The above exemplifies some clever versification and allophonisation of the proverb. The riddle comes from the traditional activity of wine tapping and bees. Bees here represent the woman who, from the traditional point of view, is not capable of comprehending the 'profundity' of proverbs (even though some women are better at the art of proverbs than their male counterparts). In this way the long proverb itself has been adapted from its linguistic parallel to a rather 'compressed' or 'imagistic' poetry.

A further example could be drawn from these proverb and riddle.

Proverb:

Anwu ehie adighi egbu agwo

(The twilight is not enough for the snake to bask.)

Riddle:

gwam
Oku na-enwu
adighi achu agwo

what
 is the fire
 the snake doesn't fear

Twilight (answer).

Both samples trace the influence of proverbs in some riddles of the people. Ruth Finnegan was therefore correct in her observation that '...among some peoples, riddles may be particularly closely connected with proverbs so that either the answer or even both parts of the riddle are sayings accepted in other contexts as proverbs.' (1970) However, the difference between proverbs and riddles lies in the poetry of the latter, the personification of the inanimate, accordance of anthropomorphic personality to animal species and deployment of deeper levels of meaning (allusions) to otherwise simple ideas drawn from the general flora and fauna of the community.

All in all, the creative wit of oral riddles and bash forms, like oral literature in Africa, is a continually expanding and enhancing totality, with lots of opportunity for variations eloquence, dramatic devices and all the individual artistry which go with the performance of this most intriguing art. No wonder then that it is so deservedly prized among the people of Alaa till date.

Notes and References

¹Children of Alaa (or popularly Umuala) are part of a larger autonomous community, in Umuahia South local government of Nigeria's Abia State. They are believed to be offspring of one father called Alaa. Alaa himself was one of the many sons who emigrated

some nine hundred metres from Itu with wives and children to the present location. Alaa's motive of migration is uncertain, but is believed to have been due to land dispute and the need for expansion.

² Oldest living member of Alaa community.

³ Local bard from a lineage of master-performers.

⁴ There could someday be a computer program for riddle games with visual animations to provide a whole new breath of fresh air from the western junk that dominate the African market. But that would be when the people of Africa have learnt to take cultural dynamics more seriously than the penchant to simply assimilate whatever the western world throws at them with little or no regard for their genuine needs and sensitivity.

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