

The Exordium of Adébáyò Fálétí's Poetry

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I

The background of Adébáyò Fálétí (1921 – 2017) was steeped in the Ọ̀yọ́ Yorùbá culture. He had a princely connection to the throne of Ọ̀yọ́ having been born by Dúrówadé Àyinké, a granddaughter of Prince Adéşòkàn, Bàbá Ìdóde, Aláàfin Àtìbà's son, to Àkànbí Fálétí. Àkànbí Fálétí was a royal oral artist in the palace of Aláàfin Šìyanbó'lá Oníkèkèpé Ládìgbòlù (1911 – 1944). He later practiced outside the palace, leading his own band, going about Ìlọ́rín and its environs and parts of Northern Yorùbáland. The late Pa David Adéníjì of Ìwó, we reliably learnt, was one of his followers. Adébáyò Fálétí spent his early life in Ọ̀yọ́ villages such as Àgbóóyè, Ọ́banànkò and Kúrángà (Ọ̀látúnjì 1982a). Adébáyò Fálétí learnt many Yorùbá tales and garnered other native wisdom from his father and other relations. Such relations include Jímò Ọ̀ládẹ̀jò, who was adept in proverbs, and his childless aunt, an *oríkì* (characterizational) poetry exponent.

The western education he acquired and the Christianity he embraced were also part and parcel of his background. His primary school education was at Ọ̀yọ́ (1939 – 1945), his secondary school education at Ìbàdàn Boys High school, Ìbàdàn, (1951 – 1955) and his University education at the University of Ìbàdàn (1965 – 1968). He took a bachelor's degree in English with a subsidiary in French. There is no doubt that Adébáyò Fálétí would have been influenced by Yorùbá literary artists of his time, all of whom he studied in school. Among such Yorùbá literary precursors were A. K. Ajíṣafé, D. A. Ọ́basá and D. O. Fágúnwà. Adébáyò Fálétí collected and transcribed oral poetic forms such as proverbs and *oríkì* following Ọ́basá's example before venturing into writing

his own compositions. Though he had been writing before 1955, he did not come into the limelight until 1955, when his 719 lines long poem, “È dá Kò Láròpin” won the Festival of Arts award. This time may conveniently be considered the beginning of his poetic career. The poem also marked the direction which Adébáyò Fálétí’s important contributions to Yorùbá poetry was leaning. He adapted many traditional stories for his poetic compositions. There are 35 poems in the two collections of Adébáyò Fálétí’s Yorùbá poems (Ọlátúnjí 1984 b & 1984c), 13 in the first and 22 in the second.

Adébáyò Fálétí’s poems, can conveniently be classified into two: the narrative and non-narrative. The narratives tell interesting stories, some of which are adapted from the Ifá corpus and other stories collected from his father, co-hunters and other sources. The non-narrative ones are made up of poetic discourses on various social and philosophical topics. There are eleven narrative poems in the two collections. The first contains ten, the second only one. It could therefore be safely concluded that the first is dedicated to narrative poems because only four of the thirteen poems in it are non-narrative. Since there is also only one narrative poem in the second, one could also assert that it is dedicated to non-narrative poems. Four of the eleven narrative poems, (‘Èlà Lọ̀rọ̀’, ‘Sàşọ̀rẹ̀’, ‘Alágbára Ilé àti Alágbára Oko’, and ‘Agbódóro-gun’) are adapted from the Ifá corpus and there are strong evidences that Ọlálá (Ogun poetry/hunter’s) is the original source of the story retold in ‘Adébímpé Ojẹ̀ dọ̀kun’. The poet was reported to have collected it from his father who informed him it was a true-life story (Ọlátúnjí 1982a). In our examination of the exordiums of Adébáyò Fálétí’s poems, we shall dwell more on his narrative poems than on his non-narrative poems and limit ourselves to the aforementioned two collections (Olatunji 1982b & 1982c).

II

As noted by Ọlátúnjí (1982a) in his monumental analytical study of Fálétí’s poetry, “A major device employed by him [Adébáyò Fálétí] is the use of arresting utterances that are designed to catch the reader’s attention at the beginning of his poems” (63). One may not be wrong to conclude that the pattern was adapted from the Ifá verse example where the divinatory narrative is usually introduced with terse, recondite opening lines made up of figurative and other stylistic mnemonics meant to help the diviner raconteur. This segment of Ifá is usually linked with the ensuing narrative body of the Ifá discourse with the statement “*Ló dífá fún...*” (“Divined for...”) or its other variants, and it is constantly rendered in the *ifá kíkì* chanting mode. It is usually microcosmic of the entire verse. Though Adébáyò Fálétí’s poetic exordiums are usually terse, they are not necessarily recondite nor are they always

linked with “Ló dífá fún....”, They, however, constitute a concise versification of the thematic focii of the poems. The following are some examples:

Example I

*Eni tí kò ì kú láyé,
Kó dákun, kó má rora rẹ̀ láròpin
Eni tí kò ì tí ì wàjà
Kó dákun, kó má rora rẹ̀ láròpin;
Béniyàn ò kú یشه ò tán,
Níjọ a bá kú lagbaja pin.
Báráyé sì ń ròşẹ̀ rònìyàn,
Njẹ̀ tOlódùmarẹ̀ ń kọ?
Omọ aráyé roşẹ̀ Olúwa pin! (‘È dá Kò Láròpin’, Ìwé Kìnní, 6)*

5

He that is not dead yet,
Let him please not underestimate himself;
He that is not yet deceased
Please, let him not underestimate his future achievements;
When someone is not yet dead, his activities are not yet ended,
It is on the day that one dies that one's strivings come to an end

Example II

*Onírúurú ọ̀rẹ̀ là ń ní:
Ọ̀rẹ̀ ire ọ̀rẹ̀ ikà;
Ọ̀tọ̀ lẹ̀rẹ̀ dábe-n-yànkọ,
Ọ̀tọ̀ lẹ̀rẹ̀ oníbàjẹ̀ èniyàn.
Kí í şẹ̀ pọ̀rẹ̀ tóótọ̀ kò sí láyé
Ìbí tí wọn wà là ò mò.
Şùgbọ̀n wọn wà láàrin kọ̀ọ̀kan
Bí ọ̀lọ̀mọşíkàtà tí wà láàrin àgbàdo (‘Ọjọ̀ Ìlàyẹ̀fun’, Ìwé Kìnní, 29)*

5

There are friends, and there are friends
Good friends, fiendish friends
There's one whose objective is material reciprocity
The other prone to calumny
It isn't that, on earth, there are no true friends
Only that their realm of existence is unknown
But, they exist, yet dispersed among all nations
As scattered corn grains among maize cobs

Example III

*Ibi tórí ẹni yóò gbé sunwòn,
Kẹ̀sẹ̀ ó dákun kó sìn wá débẹ̀.
Ibí tíre ẹni bá dúró sí,
Kórí wa ó gbé wa débẹ̀,
Ló dífá fún Sàṣorẹ́,
Tí n lọ rẹ̀é sọrí Ẹlẹ̀wii
Tí yóò là ('Sàṣorẹ́', Ìwé Kìnní, 32)*

5

The realm where one will become successful
May one's blessed feet lead one there
Where one's blessing is ordained to manifest
May one's destiny direct one.
Divined for Sàṣorẹ́
Who has been commissioned to protect Ẹlẹ̀wii
Who is destined to be wealthy

Example IV

*Ẹ fẹ̀yìn tì, kẹ̀ ẹ̀ gbọ̀dìí òwẹ
Kí ẹ̀ gbọ̀hun tí í mú wọ̀n wí pé,
Ẹ̀là lẹ̀rẹ̀.
Mo ní eléte lète í yé
Ohun tí a bá ẹ̀ ní í yéni.
N óò wí, n kò ní í sàìsọ
Bí ọ̀kà tí ẹ̀ tó dénú ọ̀kà
Bí kò̀n kò tí ẹ̀ to fí rìn dénú ẹ̀kọ̀ yangan,
Bẹ̀sin tí ẹ̀ tó fí wa orín fún olówó
Enìyàn tó já lórí igi ata, tó ẹ̀ bẹ̀ tó kú.
Ohun tí ojú àṣá rí tó
Kó tó fò fẹ̀rẹ̀, kó tó wá gún alápatà lẹ̀bẹ̀
Lójú gbogbo wa –
Gbogbo rẹ̀ ní mo fẹ̀ sọ.
Ẹ̀ sáà jẹ̀ ká yanjú rẹ̀ lẹ̀kò̀kan 15
Ọ̀kò̀kan nìyàwó àgbẹ̀ í yosẹ̀ lẹ̀kù.
Bígi bá wó lẹ̀rí araa wọ̀n
Tòkè là á kọ̀ í gbé gbogbo janmàà wa ('Ẹ̀là Lẹ̀rẹ̀', Ìwé Kìn-ínní, 23)*

5

10

On a reclining chair, sit!
Thus, listen to the quintessence of proverbs
So as to be conversant about the causative factor

Of which prompts them to say that
 "Expatiation is the essence of a word"
 I say hypocrisy is only understood by the hypocrite
 An act is only understood by the enactor
 I will say it, surely, I will narrate
 How sorghum settled in the cobra's stomach
 How the toad mysteriously gets into the solidified corn pap
 How the steed brought his master chewing sticks (from the farm)
 What prompts the hawk to fly swiftly and stabs the butcher
 – in the very eyes of us all
 I will narrate the entire story Let's resolve it one after the other
 For as such the farmer's wife executes her steps in the palm oil press
 One wisely lifts up the uppermost one
 When a tree topples on trees

The arresting function of the exordium of 'È dá Kò Láròpin,' does not end at the sixth line as quoted by Qlátúnjì (1984a: 63-64). Rather it extends to the ninth line as shown above. The first six lines capture the major moral theme of the lengthy poem that one should always be hopeful in as much as one is still living. The remaining three lines hint at a closely related minor moral theme that the Divine factor should always be remembered, even when others deride one's poor condition. The intention of the poet in this exordium, as Olatunji (1982a) noted, is to sensitize his readers into wanting to know the reason for the poetic wisdom expressed in the concatenation of the two parallel statements of the first four lines, climaxed with the proverbial declaratives of the fifth and sixth lines, and finally capped with the rhetorical question and exclamatory sentence of the final two statements in the remaining three lines.

There are eight lines in Example II. The first declares that there are different types of friends. The second lists the two types as "*ire*" or *rere* (good) and "*ikà*" (fiendish/ wicked). The third and fourth lines further offer two examples of wicked friendship; the one based on material reciprocity ("*òré dábẹ̀-nyànkọ̀*") and the one full of calumny ("*...òré onibàjẹ̀ èniyàn*"). The final three lines lament the fact that though good friends (called true friends here) exist, they are difficult to come by. The imagery of the maize cob with scattered but big grains among other maize cobs *ọlọmọ̀şíkàtà láàrin àgbàdọ̀* is used to buttress the rarity of good friendship in the last line. This we think is Adébáyò Fálétí's own poetic reworking of a Yorùbá proverb that says *Ọ̀rẹ́ tòótọ́ kò sí mọ́, ká rẹ̀ni bá rìn ló kù* (Bossom friends exist no more, all there is left are acquaintances). The focus of the exordium in Example II is not moralistic; rather, it is a concise exposition of the poetic narration.

Example III agrees with I and II as far as drawing attention to thematic focus from the onset and aesthetically pithy structurization are concerned. It is however, pertinent to draw attention to the fact that the story and the structure of this exordium are adopted from Odù Ọ̀bàràkànràn, a minor chapter of Ifá corpus. The fifth line that expresses the divinatory activity confirms this claim. The two parallel statements of the first four lines are a supplication to one's inner head (*orí inú*) to make one successful in life. It is no doubt semantically incongruous to say "statements cast divination/ divined for..." as presented in the lines. This incongruity is indexical of a figurative usage. However, in Ifá corpus such statements are usually taken as metonymic of an original mythological diviner, who originally made them. S/he is the one the third person, singular number, pronoun subject "ó" in "*Ló dífá fún Sàṣọré*" ("Divined for Sàṣọré") denotes. Connotatively, and, especially in the context of the poem, however, this third person pronoun should be seen as referring to the already explained meaning of the preceding statement. The connotative meaning signified then is that it is on the truism of the statement that the story of Sàṣọré is premised. This is plausible because Sàṣọré's story as presented in the body of the poem is an amplification of the truth expressed in the said four lines.

The exordium of 'Ẹ̀là lẹ̀rọ̀' reproduced in Example IV focuses more on presenting the list of the five seemingly contradicting witty statements (lines 7-13) explicated in the body of the poem than any ethical lesson. The first six lines concentrate on arresting the audience's attention. Only three lines (3 – 5) out of the eighteen lines of the exordium hint on an ethical lesson drawn from the title of the poem that advocates digging deeply into the premise of a statement/ matter to be able to understand it. If the underlying structure of the idiomatic phrase, *Ẹ̀là lẹ̀rọ̀* in the third line, is *Ẹ̀là /lílà /sísàlàyé / ni ó ni àṣọyẹ/ àgbọ́yẹ ọ̀rọ̀*, (The beauty and meaning of a word/ statement/ discourse lies in clearly dividing/ splitting/ explicating / expatiating /presenting it), then the analogical image created is that of a (ground)nut whose shell has to be split opened to reveal the edible content. The splitting is captured by the predictor "*là*" in *ẹ̀là* or its implied gerundive alternative *lílà*. Analogically therefore just as the shell of the nut has to be split opened before the edible fruit can be accessed, so the witty statements have to be explicated or amplified to appreciate their aesthetics – semantics. It can be contended therefore that, it is the process of what the poet is setting out to do in the body of the poem that he is still talking about even in these three lines rather than drawing attention to any ethical intention. He just wanted to tell interesting stories to explain the aetiology of the identified proverbial constructs.

The exordium of 'Ìgbéyàwó Kan Ní Ìlètò Wa' begins with a wedding folk song as noted by Ọ̀latunji (1982a):

*Ìyàwó dùn lẹ̀sìngín, ọkọ tún mi gbé
Ọkọ tún mi gbé, mo fẹ ẹsoge*

Being freshly wedded is pleasant; husband, wed me again,
Husband, wed me again, I want to look splendid.

The arresting purpose of the exordium in this poem, however, extends beyond the first two lines to the third and fourth lines. It is in the third and fourth lines that attention is drawn to the moral of the poem; that since time expended cannot be redeemed; we should spend our life time meaningfully.

*Ìgbà tó lọ kì í bọ mọ'
Ẹ jẹ ká lo ayée wa ní rere.*

Time once expended, can never be retrieved
Let's make good use of life's opportunities

The morality in the exordium of 'Alágbára Ilé àti Alágbára Oko', adapted from Otúúrúpọ̀n Méjì (also, Ọlọgbọ̀n Méjì) major chapter of Ifá corpus is indirectly presented through an extended proverb cast in a conditional syntactic structure.

*Bọmọ́dé kò bá dóko ẹlòmú rí,
A máa lẹ́rí, a máa fọ́nnu
Pé kò sẹ́nì tó lẹ̀ sàgbẹ
Tí yóò dáko ju baba ọ̀un lọ*

A child who has not discovered the expanse of other's people farmland
Will be boasting; bragging
That there is no farming elsewhere
That is comparable to her/ his father's

The proverbial statement, in these four lines presents an analogical scenario of a child who, when s/he has not visited any other farmland apart from her/his father's was boasting that no other person's farm is as large as her/his father's. The poet in the next three lines of the exordium goes on to disprove the notion and declares that there are many other big-time farmers. The indirect moral in this exordial poetic context is partly occasioned by the agrarian imagery in which it is cast; a poetic device that belongs to the proverbial source. The whole poem is not about farming. It is rather the pride brought about by the child's ignorance that is relevant in the context of the whole poem and

not the proverb's agrarian metaphoric signifier. Similarly, the moral commitment in 'Adébímpé Ọ̀jẹ̀dòkun' is also indirect and subtle. The poet opens in the first two lines of the exordium with a declarative statement about his decision never to make charms anymore since the day Ọ̀jẹ̀dòkun, the brave hunter, gets killed by a leopard.

*N kò tún fowó sòògùn mọ́
Níjọ́ tẹranko ti pỌ̀jẹ̀dòkun erelú ọmọ jẹ.
Adébímpé Ọ̀jẹ̀dòkun, erelú ọmọ
Èdìdàrẹ́ inú ìgbẹ́, ọmọ ìyálágbòn.*

I will no more indulge in charm-making
Since the day a beast preyed on Ọ̀jẹ̀dòkun
Adébímpé, Ọ̀jẹ̀dòkun, the favourite nimrod
He who mocks his peers in the wild, protégé of the ìyálágbòn.

The poet does not start by moralising about making charms. Rather, he simply offers his readers his own decision never to make charms again. This serves an initial suspense that would only be satisfied by reading the whole poem. The four arresting opening lines of 'Ìjàmbá Odò Ọ̀bà', a non-narrative poem betrays no moral commitment. It is rather made up of an initial declarative, in the first two lines, about the poet's fear of Ọ̀gún, the fearful divinity, and his supplication for mercy in the next two lines. According to Ọ̀látúnjí (1984a), it constitutes the lyrics of an *ìyálá* (Ọ̀gún/ hunter's chant) song. Similarly, the arresting opening lines of 'Oníbodè Lálúpọ̀n', warns against 'spending money for drummers' (*nínáwó fún onílù*) or giving money in appreciation of a drummer. This too cannot but be surprising to an average Yorùbá who would be interested in finding out the reason for such an anti-culture conclusion and thus have to read the whole poem.

III

In conclusion, it is important to draw attention to the fact that not all of Adébáyọ́ Fálétí's poems open with an arresting exordium that is microscopic of the whole poem. His short non-narrative poems like 'Dídákẹ́ Akéwí', 'Alákàòdì', 'Ìṣẹ́ Ènì', 'Ìṣẹ́ Àgbẹ́', 'Fágúnwà Kú' and 'Adélabú Kú' do not have this exordial pattern, apparently due to the brevity of their form. The exordial pattern is also not noticeable in his overtly lyrical poems composed for musical performance such as 'Ìrínisí', 'Bírí Layé N' Yí', 'Erin Orí Àtẹ́' and 'Wẹ̀rù Mi O'. Apart from all these, 'Agbódó Rogun' a narrative poem adapted from Ifá's Odù Ọ̀ṣẹ́-kànràn (otherwise known as Ọ̀ṣẹ́ Sẹ̀rànsẹ̀rà̀n) and 'Ìtàn Ìbàdàn' do

not exhibit the identified exordial style. However, since the two are the only aberrant of the eleven narrative poems, it can be concluded that the exordial style is more applicable to narrative poems than the non-narrative ones. As demonstrated above, the style is meant to stimulate readers' interest from the on-set. It does not always present a moral theme but attempts to pithily summarise the story. It is always cast in apt stylistic and figurative language that makes for mnemonic relevance. Finally, as demonstrated above, it is apparent that the exordial style is not rigid. Rather, the subject matter, length, and aesthetic vision of the poem in general determine its form and style.

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