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Language and Style in Obasa's Poetry¹

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Denrele Adetimkan Obasa (1878-1948) was a great Yorùbá poet in his own right. It was he who provided 'the link between traditional beliefs and writing in the modern vein.'² The three volumes of Yorùbá poetry produced by him between 1927 and 1945 had a great impact not only on the adults who were impressed by the wealth of traditional sayings in his poems, but also on the school children who were made to learn some of the poems by heart.³ In this paper I intend to answer the question: In what does Obasa's greatness as a poet consist? In the Ìjùbà (prologue) to *Ìwé Kínní Àwọn Akéwì*, he writes:

O di odún mọkànlélógbòn ní sísíyí (AD 1896) ti mo ti bèrè sí ʃaáyan kí kọ-jọ àwọn ọrọ ọgbón àtáyebáyé ti àwọn baba nílà wa, tí i máa hán jade ní nú orin, ègè, rárà, ì jálà, ì pẹsà, àrò fò, orí kì, ì lù, fèrè àti àgbéka ọrọ wọn... (Obasa 1927: i)

(For the past thirtyone years (1896-1927) I have been assembling Yorùbá traditional sayings which embody the wisdom of our fore-fathers. These sayings are found in songs and in various forms of Yorùbá poetry; ègè, rárà, ì jálà, ì pẹsà, àrò fò, orí kì, and in the language of the drum and the flute.)

From the above statement, one may be tempted to decide that Obasa's greatness consists in his ability to assemble traditional sayings (including chants

1 This essay was originally published by Afolabi Olabimtan under the same title in Wande Abimbola (ed.). *Yorùbá Oral Tradition: Selections from the Papers Presented at the Seminar on Yorùbá Oral Tradition: Poetry in Music, Dance and Drama*. Ile-Ife (Nigeria): University of Ife, 1975, pp. 1031-1069.

2 A. Babalola, 'A Brief Survey of Creative Writing in Yorùbá', *Black Africa*. II/2, St. John's University, 1971, p.121.

3 Author's personal interview with Chief Adeyemi Ayorinde of Ibadan.

and songs) which embody the traditional wisdom of Yorùbá society. And certainly, in his time, this could stand as an achievement. As is well known, Lijadu⁴ had collected and published Ifá verses before him, and had helped to publish the poems of such bards as Arí bilóṣó and Ṣóbò Aróbíodu before 1920, and Akinyele had published in 1911 his own valuable book *Ìwé Ìtàn Ìbàdàn, Ìwó, Ìkìrùn àti Òṣogbo* which contained a lot of *orí kì*. Before him, in 1885, Mojolá Agbebi had collected and published traditional Yorùbá riddles in *Ìwé Àlò*, and a number of people had produced anthologies of Yorùbá proverbs. Examples are Burton and Lakèru.⁵ But none of the earlier writers had made use of as many types of Yorùbá oral poetry in their works as Ọbasa.

However, from a careful study of his poetic works, we have perceived clearly that his greatness as a poet does not consist only in his mere assemblage of Yorùbá traditional sayings. Ọbasa himself declares that his role is more than that of a scribe recording traditional sayings. He says in one of his poems:

*Èmi l'Àkòwé Akéwì,
Èmi l'Àkéwì Àkòwé;
Bí mo ti n'ké kí ké,
Bẹ̀ẹ̀ náá ni mo n'kọ́ kí kọ́.
Èmi a sì máa tẹ̀ lóti tẹ̀.* (Ọbasa 1927: 2).

I am the poet's scribe,
I am the literate poet;
On the one hand, I write my own poems,
On the other hand, I help to reduce
others' to writing.
Furthermore, I am a printer.

The above statement shows that Ọbasa was not only a collector of traditional sayings, not only a scribe to Yorùbá oral poets but also a writer of poems in his own right. The search for his greatness must therefore not be limited to his effort as a collector of materials from Yorùbá oral literature. In our opinion, his greatness lies in his use of Yorùbá oral poetic language and

4 E.M. Lijadu, *Ifá*, (1897); *Ọrúnmi là*, (1908); *Ìwé Kéjì Àwọn Àrò fò-Orin ti Ṣóbò Aróbíodu*; ed. Lijadu, (1907); *Àwọn Àrò fò Orin ti Ṣóbò Aróbíodu àti Oyésí lẹ̀ Kẹ́rìbò*, ed. Lijadu, (1917).

5 Burton, R.F. *Proverbs in the Yoruba Language' in Wit and Wisdom from West Africa*. London, 1865 and Lakèru, *Àwọn Òwè Ilẹ̀ Wa*, Abeokuta, 1916.

style to 'produce'⁶ written poetry at a time when many writers of Yorùbá poetry were much influenced by English poetic styles.⁷

His poems fall into three broad categories: those which are strings of traditional sayings with little or no addition by Obasa himself, those which have Obasa's original composition joined to strings of traditional sayings, and those which are Obasa's original composition on select, traditional sayings.

When one reads a poem like "Pẹ̀lẹ̀pẹ̀lẹ̀" (Obasa 1927: 10) in which it is the first line alone (and this is a repeat of the poem's title) that is not a Yorùbá proverb, one may feel that Obasa is no more than a mere collector of 'traditional Yorùbá sayings of the proverbial type.'⁸ But even then, he must be given the credit for looking for proverbs appropriate to the title of the poem, and for organizing the proverbs in a way to make the language of the poem so created flow. Yet it cannot be said that in all the poems in which he does not pretend to claim originality it is only the language of proverbs that he uses. Let us look at the following poem, for example.

"Ìkà - Èké"
Ọlọrun kò dá kanyinkanyin
Kó ní nla bí ẹsin,
Àtapa ni i bá ta 'ni,
Àtapa ni i bá tà 'ni à;
Èni à ti i bá f-enià sẹ sí n,
Ọlọrun Ọba kì í jẹ kó ní láárí. 5
Èni à ti i bá sẹgbẹ rẹ n'í kà,
Ọlọrun Ọba kì í jẹ k'ó n'í pa.
Ìkà kò pé:
Bí a bá nyo 'lẹ í dà;
Ohun wẹ rẹ -wẹ rẹ 10
Nwọ n a má yó 'ni sẹ!
Ìmàdò i bá sẹ bi ẹlẹ dẹ a bà 'lú jẹ'
Èrú i bá jọba,
Èni à i bá ti kù kanṣoṣo! 15
Èké kò pé 'ra rẹ lórúkọ
Ìkà kò pé 'ra rẹ ní kà

6 We use the word 'produce' to refer to those poems which are mere assemblage of traditional sayings, and those which are Obasa's own compositions in oral poetic language and style.

7 For example, A.K. Ajisafẹ, Afọlabi Johnson, D. Oladele Ajao and E.A. Akinnitan. Exceptions are the Egbá bards whose poems are in their own dialect.

8 A. Babalola, 'A Brief Survey of Creative Writing in Yorùbá', *Black Africa*. II/2, St. John's University, 1971, p. 191.

B'í lẹ̀ nǵb'òsì kà,
Bí kò gbe olóòótọ́;
B'ó bá pẹ́ tí tí, 20
Oore a máa sú ni í ẹ!
Bí abẹ́ rẹ́ bí abẹ́ rẹ́,
Oun l'á á ẹ̀ké
Ijọ́ t'ó bá t'ọ́ kọ́ irọ́
Ni í pa ni! 25
Èké ilé gbònwú r'òde,
Èké ilé, èké òde:
Àwọn l'àgádán'dogo,
Nwọn kò f'ínú han 'ra wọn;
Adáka'-ndeke 30
Àwọn àgàbà'ngẹbẹ́,
Nwọn a gun ebè lát'ábàbà
Emi l'á n̄se n'í kọ́ kọ́
T'ó jú Olọ́run kò tó?
EGBE: Ní gbangba,
Ní kedere; 35
Ọ̀rọ́ ì kọ́ kọ́, ní gbangba
Ni mbọ́.
Emi l'á n̄se l'óko
T'á à n̄ d'òru? 40
A f'èké àgbẹ́
Ti yí ò j'ìsu wà lẹ́ hìn
Awọ́ tẹ̀rẹ́ bọ́nú, kò jẹ́
K'á r'í kùn aṣeni – lóhun.
Máa bá 'nú sọ, má b'èni à sọ, 45
Èni à kò sí mó
Aiye ti d'Èké!
Ẹ̀nit'á a ni k'ó kín ni lẹ́ hìn,
Ó f'ẹ̀gún s'ọ́wọ́;
Ẹ̀nit'á a ní k'ó fẹ́ ni l'ó jú, 50
Ó f'ata s'ẹ̀nu
Ẹ̀ni a ni k'á fẹ́ hìntì
K'á mu dí dùn ọ̀sàn,
Gígan ni í n̄ fún ni mu!
Ẹ̀ni a ni k'á f'ínú hàn 55
L'ó j'alaròkiri.
Bí nwọn bá mba ọ́ rìn girigiri,
Máa mu inú rẹ́ rìn

Ìwọ̀ nì kan ọ̀-ọ̀-ọ̀

EGBE: *Ẹnu wọn l'òfà* 60
Ẹnu wọn l'òje;
Èké l'ọmọ aráiyé,
Ẹnu wọn l'òje!
Èké kò j'áro ó mú,
Àbí kú s'olóògùn d'èké.
B'á ò bá p'Èké l'Eké 65
B'á ò bá pè 'kà n'í kà!
Nwọn á ní t'àwọn t'oba
L'ó jọ ntún aiyé ẹ.
Ìkà ì bá là, a bà 'lú jẹ'
Ìkà kò fẹ k'á r'ẹrù k'á sọ, 70
Orí ẹni ni í sọ ni.
Ìkà kò jẹ paramọlẹ ó dàgbà.
A n'í kà bi ì baaka.
Ìkà ní í k'oni kà 75
Tani í dárò aṣì kà kú?
Atakóró wọ́nú àdó,
Ọmọ ìrẹ́ nkọ́?
Aya ìrẹ́ nkọ́?
Agbà t'ó gb'èbù ì kà, 80
L'óri ọmọ rẹ ni ó hù lé;
Ìkà at'adiẹ ì rànà,
Nwọn kò mà s'ohun à jẹgbé.
B'ọjọ́ bá pé tí tí,
A bá wọn jẹ díẹ ní bẹ. 85
Ẹni tí n'ṣe rere,
Ẹni tí n'ṣe 'kà,
K'ó maa ẹ 'kà,
Atoore, àt'í kà
Ọkan kì í gbé.

God did not make the *kanyinkanyin* insect⁹
 As big as a horse.
 Had He made it as big, the insect would
 be stinging people to death.

9 The numbering is not necessarily consecutive in the English translation. It is specifically made to show the equivalent with the original lines.

God does not elevate
 People who would ridicule the
 unfortunate.
 God does not give power 5
 To those who would be wicked to their
 fellowmen.
 No one gains anything through being wicked.
 He who practices treachery in secret, 10
 Reaps the fruits of his action in secret.
 If this wart-hogs were to live in town
 as pigs do,
 the wart-hogs would have ruined the town.
 If slaves became kings
 They would not spare the life of any man. 15
 Men who tell lies do not call
 themselves liars,
 The wicked never call themselves wicked.
 When the wicked are prosperous
 And the righteous are not,
 If the situation continues for long 20
 The righteous become frustrated.
 Like a small needle
 That is how one first starts the act
 of falsehood.
 The day it is as big as a hoe,
 It kills. 25
 A liar cards his cotton in his house

 and takes to another liar outside.
 Two liars from different places are
 like two padlocks
 Which do not expose their interior
 parts to each other.
 Deceitful men: 30
 They are the hypocrites.
 They climb by a ladder to reach the
 top of their heaps to plant yams.
 What do we do in secret
 That is hidden to God?
 CHORUS: Publicly, 35
 Very clearly,

The secret talk
 Shall come into the open.
 What work engages one's attention so much
 That one stays on in the farm till dark? 40
 It's only the work of the deceitful farmer
 Who intends to take other farmers'
 yams from their heaps.
 The thin skin that covers the stomach
 Does not allow us to see the interior
 of the treacherous person.
 Keep your secret to yourself;
 never share it with any man. 45
 There's no honest man nowadays.
 All people are now deceitful.
 The person we asked to help us rub
 our back with a sponge,
 Added thorns to the sponge in his hand.
 The person we asked to help us blow
 dust from our eyes, 50
 First put some pepper in his mouth.
 The man on whose generosity we
 rested assured
 To obtain and enjoy sweet oranges,
 Gave us sour oranges to suck,
 The man we wished to confide in, 55
 Turned out to be a garrulous person.
 When people make themselves your
 close associates,
 Be cautious; confide only in yourself.
 Only in yourself.
 CHORUS: They call something six now, 60
 Later they call the same thing
 Seven.
 People are deceitful,
 They call the same thing seven.

Treachery prevents the *aró* dye from
 growing strong.
 The *àbí kú* gives a physician a bad name. 65
 If we fail to tell liars that they
 are liars;

If we fail to tell the wicked that
 they are wicked;
 They'll say they are co-operating with
 the authorities
 To make the community wholesome.
 If the wicked should become rich,
 they would be a danger to all. 70
 The wicked man does not wish one
 to be relieved of one's burden.
 It is one's 'Head' that relieves one.
 The night-adder is prevented from
 growing long by its cruelty.
 It is as cruel as a camel.
 Cruelty begets cruelty. 75
 Whoever mourns the passing of a
 cruel man?
 You who are so powerful as to enter inside
 the small medicine gourd to shelter
 yourself from danger,
 Have you forgotten your children?
 Have you forgotten your wife?
 The evil seeds a man sows
 Shall be reaped by his offspring. 80
 Cruelty, like *adiẹ ìràṇà*, is never
 without repayment.
 However late it is
 The repayment will come when it will. 85
 Those doing good
 (Continue to do good)
 Those doing evil
 Continue to do evil
 Neither good nor evil
 Is done without its due consequences. 90

In the above poem, Q̣basa not only makes use of Yorùbá proverbs and other poetic types, he also uses texts of Yorùbá drum language. There are, for example, seven proverbs between line 1 and line 25 alone, while lines 39-42 sound more like *ì jálá* than *ẹ̀sà*, and lines 35-38, and 60-63 which Q̣basa calls *ẹ̀gbẹ̀* (chorus) are utterances traditionally beaten out on drums.

The above-mentioned poems, "Pẹ̀lẹ̀pẹ̀lẹ̀" and "Ìkà-Èké" exemplify those of Obasa's poems which are strings of traditional sayings.¹⁰ There are, however, a number of poems which are Obasa's own composition. These are of two types, viz: those which are entirely of his own composition with hardly any traditional sayings. An example of the first type is the poem "Aláṣeju" (Overdoer) in Obasa (1927: 17) whilst the poem "Oburẹ̀wà" (An Ugly Person) in Obasa (1945: 125) is a clear example of the second type. In everyone of these types the three principal characteristic features of Yorùbá oral poetic language, namely antiphonal rhythm, tonal counterpoint and figurative expressions are in evidence.¹¹ But it is in Obasa's efforts to use the oral poetic language and style in his published works that he shows his creative ability. To achieve his aims, he makes use of the following devices: (a) substitution of his own words for parts of traditional sayings; (b) addition of his own words to traditional sayings; (c) the use of proverbs on those lexical items that are synonymous with the title of the poem or those items that belong to the same semantic range as the item used as title for the poem; and (d) imitation of the spoken form.

Substitution of Words

Obasa sometimes substitutes his own words in place of those commonly known in the traditional sayings that he employs in order to advance the theme of his poem. Here are examples to illustrate the device.

- i. *Ènià gb'ókèrè ní'yì.*
Aṣọ b'ẹ̀ṣe ọ̀kín.

Distance lends enchantment to one's view about a man
 Fine clothes cover the ugly spot of the dandy's body.

The underlined word *ọ̀kín* is Obasa's own substitution for the word *ìdí* (buttocks) which is usually found in the saying. The lines are taken from a poem entitled "Ọ̀kín", and one may find this as an easy explanation for Obasa's word substitution. But the words *ọ̀kín* and *ìdí* do not have the same meanings in their respective sentences. *Ọ̀kín* is usually used to connote a well-dressed, attractive person, pleasant to behold, whilst *ìdí* can be used to

10 "Pẹ̀lẹ̀pẹ̀lẹ̀" is an assemblage of Yorùbá proverbs. "Ìkà-Èké" is an assemblage of proverbs and other traditional sayings on treachery and wickedness.

11 Babalola, 'Yorùbá poetic Language: Transition from oral to Written Forms', *Spectrum*, Atlanta, Georgia, June, 1973, p. 20.

connote pleasant and unpleasant things. Associated with *ìdí* are, for example, *ìlẹ̀kẹ̀* (beads) which beautify the buttocks of its owner, particularly a woman, and make her fashionable, and *ìkù*, *àgbààrín*, *kókó*, *oówo* (ugly swellings) which present the ugly spot on the buttocks of the owner. In the above-mentioned context, the connotation is to the ugly side of *ìdí*. Yet we cannot accuse Obasa of misusing the word *òkín* in place of *ìdí*. His purpose in the poem is to show that underneath a beautiful thing, pleasant to behold, can be found some ugliness.

- ii. *Baálé kì í fejò sórùlé*
Kó sùn ló fọnfọn.

The head of a household, while a snake is on the roof of his house
 Will not go to bed for the night's slumber.

The underlined word *ejò* (snake) is Obasa's own substitution for the word *iná* (fire) which is usually found in the traditional saying. The lines are taken from the poem entitled "Àwọ̀n Ejò" (The Snakes). It is not enough to use this fact as an explanation for the substitution. As in the first example, the substituted word is quite helpful. It helps to advance two ideas (a) the danger associated with the presence of snakes in dwelling houses, and, (b) the reaction of the inmates of such a house to the presence of snakes. The lines preceding the above quotation will make this point clearer:

A-rí-sá iná,
À-kò-ta-gìrì ejò:
Agbà t'ó r'è jò tí kò sá,
Ara ikú ni nt'olúware!
A n' 'Ejò g'òrùlé'
Oorun dá l'ó jù baálé ilé! (Obasa 1945: 144).

The fire outbreak is a dreadful thing repelling us.
 A snake is a dreadful creature, filling us with alarm.
 He who sees a snake and does not run away,
 Is courting death.
 Learnt that a snake was on the roof of his house,
 He became wide awake immediately.

- (iii) *Eni f'eeru mọlé,*
Ìrì ni í wo o.

Walls built with ashes
Are broken down by dew.

The substituted word is underlined>. The usual word in its place is *itó* (spittle). As in the first two examples, the substituted word echoes the title of the poem. It helps to carry forward the theme, but it seems the figurative force of the new sentence is reduced by direct use of the title-word in place of the commonly known one in the traditional saying.¹²

Addition of Words

Sometimes Obasa adds his own words to those in the traditional sayings to reinforce his idea. Here are some examples:

- i. *Ìkà àti adìẹ ìràṅà*
Nwọn kò mà á ṣ'ohun àjẹgbé. (Obasa 1927: 7).

Cruelty and *adìẹ ìràṅà*¹³
Are never without their repayment.

The word *ìkà* (cruelty) is Obasa's own addition. If we break down the grammatical structure of the sentence the inappropriateness of the word *ìkà* (cruelty) in the utterance will be clear.

Ìkà kò màá ṣ'ohun àjẹgbé
Adìẹ ìràṅà kò màá ṣ'ohun àjẹgbé

Cruelty is not eaten without repayment.
Adìẹ ìràṅà is not eaten without repayment.

12 There are, however, places where words so substituted do not, in any way, help his poem. An example is

<i>Àkúnlẹyàn</i>	(Our pre-natal choice
<i>Òun l'ádáiyéí</i>	will be our life's experience)
Where the word 'rí' is used in place of word 'bá'.	

13 *Adìẹ ìràṅà* is the hen taken before a corpse that is carried home from the farm. It is killed and eaten after the burial of the deceased. The import of the saying is that he who eats *adìẹ ìràṅà* must always remember that some people will eat the hen that will be killed at his own death.

Nobody eats 'cruelty', and an acceptable sentence in place of the first would have been:

Ìkà kò màá ʃòhun àṣegbé.
Cruelty is not practiced with impunity,

which, in fact, is what Qbasa intends to convey with the addition of *ìkà*.

- i. *Eni bá n'w'óri ahun,*
Tí bá n'w'ó w'ó ahun,
Tí n'w'ésè ahun,
Odidi ahun ni í rán wọn.

He who is looking for a tortoise's head,
And is also looking for a tortoise's hands,
And is also looking for a tortoise's legs,
Must buy a whole tortoise.

In the above example the second line is Qbasa's own addition. Whilst the addition does not destroy the meaning of the traditional saying it reduces the effect of the figurative language whereby 'head' and 'legs' are used together to suggest 'a whole'.

- ii. *Ṣàṣà ènì à ni í fẹ́ ni lẹ́hì n,*
B'á ò bá sí ní nú ilé,
T'ẹ́rú t'òmọ, t'ájá t'ẹ́ran
Ní í fẹ́ ni l'ó jú ẹni. (Obasa 1934: 9).

Only few people act in our interest in our absence
When we are not around
But in our presence, every Dick
And Harry, slaves and freeborn,
Display their love for us.)

The phrase, *t'ẹ́rú t'òmọ* (slaves and freeborn), in the third line above is Qbasa's own addition. As in the first two examples the traditional saying as it is, without the addition is better. The phrase, *t'ájá t'ẹ́ran* which literally means 'both dogs and goats' embraces all and sundry, and Qbasa's additional phrase only repeats the idea of totality.

Imitation of the Spoken Form

In his attempt to use the oral poetic language and style in his written poetry, Obasa sometimes imitates the spoken form of the language. Here are examples to illustrate:

- i. *Ìbà ti mo ju 'un*
T'Ògá à mi ni.
Ògbéni G.A. Williams oninuure
Editor àgbà n'ílé Èkó
Òun l'ògá à mi. (Obasa 1927: 3).

That homage which I have just paid
 Is to my master
 Mr. G.A Williams, the kind-hearted.
 A leading editor in Lagos
 He is my master.

The underlined syllables in lines 1,2,3, and 5 indicate Obasa's attempts to write exactly all that is heard when the sentences are uttered.

- ii. *Àgbàbòò sòkòtò òun èwu*
Kò yè 'mò ènià;
Bí kò fùn ọ l'ésè,
A sò ọ l'ápá,
Dónré gí l'ohun ẹni,
í í bá ni í mu. (Obasa 1927: 19).

Borrowed trousers and garment
 Never fit a man well;
 They are usually neither too tight, or too loose.
 Proper fitting is achieved
 When one wears one's own dress.

The extra syllable 'ò' after *àgbàbò* in line 1, the omission of the syllable 'ọ' in the word *ọmọ* resulting in 'mò in line 2, and the underlined syllable 'í' in line 6 all indicate Obasa's attempt to write exactly what is heard when the sentences are uttered.

Arrangement of Different Traditional Sayings

Obasa sometimes looks for words which have identical meanings, chooses one of such words as a title for his poem, collects a number of traditional sayings pertinent to each of the words, and arranges them all under a poem. For example, under the poem entitled 'Pẹ̀lẹ̀pẹ̀lẹ̀', there are such sayings as –

Pẹ̀lẹ̀ níl'arẹ̀wa í rì n
Jẹ́ jẹ́ lómọ ọlọ́lá í yan.

A beauty walks gently
 An honorable citizen walks leisurely.

Ohun tí a f'ẹ̀sọ́ mú,
Kí í bà jẹ́;
Ohun tí a f'agbara mú,
Koko ní í lẹ́.

Whatever is carefully done,
 Is always easily done well.
 It's what is done impatiently
 That gives one great difficulty.

Ìgbí n kò l'ọ́wọ́,
Ìgbí n kò l'ẹ̀sẹ́,
Èsọ́ ẹ̀sọ́ n'ìgbí n gbà gun 'gi.

The snail has no hands,
 The snail has no feet,
 Gently the snail climbs the tree.

The underlined words, *jẹ́ jẹ́* and *ẹ̀sọ́* mean the same as *pẹ̀lẹ́* or *pẹ̀lẹ́pẹ̀lẹ́* (carefully, gently). Also under the poem entitled "Ètẹ" there are traditional sayings on such words as *àbá* and *èrò* which belong to the same semantic range as *ète* (plan, proposal, project).

In some cases, Obasa writes different poems using each of the synonymous words as title, but under each of such poems he repeats himself. Examples of such repetitions are in the poems entitled "Àìgbón" and "Òmùgò" in Obasa (1934: 39; 54); "Ìtànjẹ" (Obasa 1927: 27) and "Irọ" in Obasa (1934: 18).

Figurative Language

Of all the figures of speech employed by Obasa, metaphor is the most developed. In some of his poems the use of metaphor even begins with the title of the poem and runs through the whole poem. Examples are the poem "Baba", the figurative meanings of which are 'Senior, Superior', and the poem "Àdá" whose figurative meaning in the poem is 'Miser'. But where Obasa's creative ability comes out prominently is his metaphorical use of words of deep cultural association. The following extract from the poem "Ọtí" is used as an illustration.

Ọtí, atí'mọ l'asọ.
 Şàngó inú àgbá.
 Qya inú ságo.
 Ọmọ sí mí ni fílà,
 Kí mí tí ọ şubú.
 Ọmọ tè mí yèkè
 Kí mí yí ọ gbirigbiri. (Obasa 1945: 158).

O Liquor, you who make it impossible
 for a person to have adequate clothing.
 Şàngó, dwelling inside the cask;
 Qya dwelling inside the demijohn
 'You take off my cap,
 I will push you down',
 'Bend me double,
 I will make you roll on the ground.'

The first line in which *ọtí* (Liquor) is personified immediately reminds us of the traditional saying *ẹni ọtí i í tí* (a man who takes alcoholic drinks is never put to shame). But the force of the lines above lies in the deviation from this view. The deviation shows the attitude of the poet to alcohol drinking. His emphasis is on the capability of alcohol to put a man to shame rather than the opposite. He plays on 'tí' and *ọtí* becomes that which makes a man such a pauper that he cannot provide himself with adequate clothing. The personification continues in the second and third lines where *ọtí* is more dignified. It is raised first to the status of a deified ancestor and then to the status of a deified ancestress. Şàngó was a fierce king in his life time, and after deification he was responsible for causing violent deaths on persons who committed heinous crimes. The use of Qya, the mythological wife of Şàngó, in the third line does not constitute an opposition to the preceding line. It only suggests

that whether *otí* (liquor) is strong (that is, like a husband when compared to a wife) or soft (that is, like a wife when compared to her husband) the intrinsic nature of alcohol in it is unchanged. As the fierceness of *Ẓàngó* is evidenced in thunder and lightning, the god of which he is, so is the fierceness of *Ọya*, his wife, evidenced in strong winds and gale of which she is the goddess.

The fourth line is a warning against any uncouth person who does not have enough traditional training to know that one does not insult one's superior in age or authority by taking the cap of that superior off his head. Here the poet refers to the bottled *otí* (alcoholic drink) and the lid of the bottle is likened to the cap a person wears on his head. The result of the insult is expressed in line 5. *Otí* will pull the uncouth person down. But removing a cap from one's superiors head is not the only way of giving him an insult. If you pull him by the arm or head to make him bend, you also insult him. This is a reference to what happens when one bends the cask or demijohn containing *otí* to take some. The insult will not go unpunished. *Otí* will make that man roll on the ground.

The metaphorical use of *Ẓàngó*, the divinity in charge of thunder and lightning, and *Ọya*, the divinity in charge of gale for *otí* well depicts the latter as a force capable of making a man fierce and violent.

Here is another example to illustrate *Ọbasa*'s use of words which are of deep cultural association.

O rí kéké olówu,
O ò pé nwọn ó ǵá ọ.
S'òbòrò-b'óní là-jé,
A-ǵú-máa-dán,
A-pón-b'épo-ré,
Kí'lo wá dé 'bi ẹsẹ' adìẹ'? (*Ọbasa* 1934: 30).

You know of the tribal marks *kéké Olówu*,
 You did not ask for them to be cut on your face.
 He who has a face without a mark disgraces those with facial marks;
 You, whose skin is black and glossy;
 You, whose skin is light red like palm oil;
 What attracts you to 'a hen's legs'?

The force of the words *ẹsẹ' adìẹ'* is not appreciated until one realizes that the question in which they appear is directed to beautiful girls; that *ẹsẹ' adìẹ'* as part of cooked chicken are customarily given to juniors at a party, and that the words are used to refer to a type of tribal mark belonging to a non-Yorùbá group. The tribal mark is called *ilà Ẓàgbà*. The poet, like the traditional poets in their verbal salute to the *olúfẹ* lineage who call anyone with such mark

Gàmbàrí oní làyààgbà, has nothing against those who have no facial marks at all. His quarrel is with those who carry non-Yorùbá tribal marks on their faces. To him the action of such a Yorùbá man is tantamount to falling from grace to grass.

Another striking aspect of Obasa's poetry is his vivid description. He uses words which are directed to the senses of sight and sound at the same time. The following examples illustrate this point.

- i. *Aṣà ñkẹrẹgbẹ, kẹrẹgbẹ,
Bí àgbébò adìẹ l'átìtàn
Ní torí òsíò-òmọ-adìẹ.
Ó-di fì-i-rì-rì gbàjà.
Ó di fì-i-rì-rì sàkà.
Ó di síò! síò! síò!*

The kite swaggers, and swaggers
As a mother-hen does on the rubbish-heap
In order that it (the kite) might catch a chick.
Now it's *fì-i-rì-rì gbàjà*.
Now it's *fì-i-rì-rì sàkà*.
Then it's *síò! síò! síò!*

The above lines describe how *àṣà* (kite) pretending to be a mother-hen, moves near to the chicks, seizes one of them, and flies off. The word *kẹrẹgbẹ* describes the movement of the kite and a repeat of the word emphasizes the point that the deceitful, swaggering movement continues for some time. The climax is, however, reached in the use of words to represent phonaesthetically the kite's dash for the chick and the consequent catch of it. The word *fì-i-rì-rì gbàjà* and *fì-i-rì-rì sàkà* are directed to the senses of sight and sound at the same time. The former describes the dash and the latter describes the catch. The last line is a description of the doleful cry of the chick after it has been caught. Its reaction is a mere cry from a helpless creature.

- ii. *Eni t'ó ságbe kò lówó ní nú,
Ó di fì-i-rì-rì gbàgà l'ágodi.
Igbà òì bó s'ofin ì jà,
'A f'eni bá fẹ lo 'ra rẹ f'òba. (Obasa 1945: 174).*

He who inflicts a wound on another person now is given no option of fine.

It's *fi-ri-ri gbàgà* at Agodi prison yard.
 The Whiteman's government has made fighting illegal.
 One must not fight unless, however,
 one wants to work in the prison yard.

As in the first example, the word *fi-ri-ri-* describes speed. In the above context, it is the speed with which the accused is pushed into the cell. The word *gbàgà* describes the sound that is heard when the door to the cell is jammed and locked.

- iii. *Ó jẹ̀ 'gbàdo òjò bi ẹni ti nlù 'lù òkú*
Ẹnu gbogbo n'dún
Ṣàkùlùmò, ṣàkùlùmò, wì-i!
Ṣàkùlùmò, ṣàkùlùmò, wì-i! (Obasa 1945: 161).

He eats early maize, in the process of which his mouth produces
 such a sound as that heard from drums beaten on funeral occasions.
 The mouth is full, and it emits the sound
Ṣàkùlùmò ṣàkùlùmò, wì-i!
Ṣàkùlùmò, ṣàkùlùmò, wì-i!

To those who are knowledgeable about Yorùbá traditional music on occasions for the burial of the dead, the simile *bi ẹni tí nlù' lù òkú* (like someone beating the drum on an occasion for the burial of the dead) would give a feeling of the sound that the mouth of the glutton produces when he eats. But those who are not knowledgeable are helped by the words *ṣàkùlùmò wì-i* not only to imagine the shape of the mouth as the glutton eats but also to have a feeling of the sound produced by the mouth.

Obasa's Word-Borrowings

Another striking fact about Obasa is his unrestricted borrowings of words, phrases and sentences from different languages to create humor. This is evident even from the first page of his first book where he writes:

Oì bó ní 'Who is that?'
 ...
Ẹgùn ní, 'Mènú wè?'
*Hausa ní, 'Wò ní nì?'*¹⁴ (Obasa 1927: 1).

¹⁴ The underlined are borrowed respectively from English, Ègùn and Hausa languages.

In an attempt to say *ìwọ ta ha nu un?* (who is that?) in many Yorùbá dialects and non-Yorùbá languages. In our opinion Obasa could do without most of the borrowings and still convey the same idea in his poems. There are, however, some places where his use of borrowed words is defensible. For example, his use of *Sen-Teli* for St. Helena is acceptable especially as it is Yorubanized in its written form, but his addition of the English version of it in front of *Sen-Teli* in some places is indefensible. He should have left off the English version of it as he does with such words as *Inglandi* for England, *Wulemu* for William, and *Kişina* for Kitchener. His use of the word 'Editor' is also indefensible.

The case of borrowings from other Nigerian language is different. Many of such borrowings are well known to the common man, and some borrowed words, especially from the Hausa language have even been accepted into colloquial Yorùbá. Here are some examples to illustrate Obasa's borrowings from other Nigerian languages:

- i. *Ganni, ganni a gan,*
Arabà dé dé.¹⁵
Dó gba dó gba, l'ógbọ gba
Gánní, gánní à gan
Àràbà dé dé. (Obasa 1927: 37).

Equally, equally,
 Without one share exceeding another.
 Equally, equally,
 Without one share exceeding another.

- ii. *Ìpẹ̀rẹ̀ kú, o kò sọkun.*
Ìlákòşẹ̀ kú, o kò gbààwẹ̀;
Odò nǵbé ʃáwùrú lẹ̀ –
*O ní 'Dèè dèè Mò rá'*¹⁶. (Obasa 1927: 47).

The *ìpẹ̀rẹ̀* snail died you didn't sob;
 The *ìlákòşẹ̀* snail died you didn't mourn;
 The ʃáwùrú snail is being carried
 away by a flowing stream;
 You cry, 'Dèè dèè Mò rá'.

15 The underlined words are from Hausa language.

16 The Underlined words are from Ègùn language.

- iii. *Gàm̀bàrí, ọ̀mọ̀ kò yó kò ẹ̀re*
*Gàm̀bàrí, ọ̀mọ̀ ‘Kàwó Àbíńsí.’*¹⁷ (Obasa 1927: 56).

Hausaman, well-known for taking his meals seriously
 Hausaman, fond of saying ‘where is my food?’

In each of the above examples the utterances adjacent to the borrowings clearly tell the meanings of the borrowings. By the addition of such utterances, Obasa leaves the readers in no doubt as to the real meanings of the lines.

The following illustrates such borrowings that are outside the pale of those that have been accepted into colloquial Yorùbá.

*Turu-ba huku*³⁹
Dà waiyà mbako
Ori ta mẹt a ni í dà mú àlejo. (Obasa 1945: 138).

Turu-ba huku
Dá waiyà mbako
 The cross-roads that disturbs a stranger.

In our opinion, nothing would have been lost in the poem “Èta-Nta-Gbá” from which the example is taken if the borrowings were removed. We cannot say the same thing, however, about Obasa’s use of Arabic words in the poems “Irẹjẹ tabí Ọgbufẹ Kéwú Ìbàdàn” where he writes,

‘Àlámú tàrà ké fá
Fàà là rà búkà?
Ó ní
Ọlórún yíò mú’kà ẹ̀gbẹ̀n
Kò ní ẹ̀jọ́ tá lákà.
Aléfi Ba sin, Lamu;
Núgùnda, Mimu, Ra, Ja’
Ó ní:
Ẹni t’a a bá jùlọ l’áí rẹjẹ,
Mo jù ọ lọ, mo rẹ ọ jẹ.
‘Àlámú tàrà ké fá
Fàà là rà búkà’ (Obasa 1945: 152).

17 The borrowing is from Hausa language

This means:

God will punish the wicked but

This He'll do, not in the presence of the poor.

Àléfì Ba sin, Lamu

Nùgùn`da, Mimu, Ra, Ja'

This means:

It is only one's inferiors that one cheats

Because I'm your superior, I have cheated you.

The borrowings are made for the specific purpose of achieving the goal of the poet, viz. to show by the use of words, the deceitful behavior of an Arabic interpreter based in Ibadan. Whereas the true meanings of the borrowed words are given by the poet in the previous examples, Obasa plays on the Arabic words in the above example to give meanings which are different from what the Arabic words actually connote.

Conclusion

The three volumes of Obasa's poetry contain poems which can be divided into three main groups:

- i. Poems which represent an assemblage of Yorùbá traditional sayings with little or no addition by Obasa
- ii. Poems which are partly an assemblage of traditional sayings and partly Obasa's own composition
- iii. Poems which are Obasa's original composition on select, traditional sayings.

In respect of the first group it is our opinion that Obasa should be given credit for his painstaking efforts to assemble Yorùbá traditional sayings and for his ability to organize the sayings under appropriate titles as poems. In respect of the second and third groups we think he should be credited for his ability to manipulate Yorùbá oral poetic language and style to produce Yorùbá written poetry that could lay claim to some originality. Certainly, today many writers have done what Obasa did, but it is our opinion that as Daniel Olórúnfẹ́mi Fágúnwà is an early pioneer of the Yorùbá Novel, Denrele Adetimkan Obasa is an early pioneer in the area of Yorùbá written poetry.

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