

Animate-object-characters in the Yorùbá Indigenous Healthcare Delivery System: A Literary Appraisal

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Abstract

This paper attempts to show how symbolism is related to animate-object-characters in the indigenous healthcare practices in the Yorùbá race taking into consideration the metaphorical level and socio-cultural contexts. It has been observed that much interest has not been shown in the Yorùbá verbal arts as used on health-related issues. Thus, the paper contributes to the understanding of the therapeutic aspect of Yorùbá orature by exhibiting the utilitarian nature of the verbal art healing system. The paper concludes by calling for more research on the importance of orature in the healing system.

Keywords: Symbolism, metaphorical, socio-cultural, healthcare, animate-object-character, human-object-character, supernatural-object-character

INTRODUCTION

Various scholars have used Symbolism as a critical concept and tool in their analysis of literary works. The work of Ogden and Richards (1923:9) on symbolism has really been exciting in the manner it defines symbolism as being relevant to literary texts and the outside world:

Symbolism is the study of the part played in human affairs by language and symbols of all kinds and especially of their influence on thought. It singles out for special inquiry the ways in which symbols help us and hinder us in reflecting on things.

According to the scholars cited above, it is revealed that there is hardly any aspect of human endeavour to which symbolism is not relevant. In his view on symbolism, White (1949:35) concludes that “...the key to this

world and the means of participation on it is the symbol.” From White’s perspective, man makes use of symbols in his endeavour simply because the device is regarded as the essential function of human consciousness, and it is undoubtedly basic to the people’s understanding of the operations of the language. This is most especially true in the case of Yorùbá health-related genres, as it will soon be shown. In Preminger (1965:833), Friedman, who discusses the functions of symbol sees it as being able to “...unite an image (the analogy) and an idea or conception (the subject) which that image suggests or evokes” What this scholar drives at is that symbolism comes in when an image, either concrete or abstract, leads to an idea or conception. To establish the fact that symbolism is unavoidable in man’s daily activities among the Africans in general and the Yorùbá in particular, Smith (1966:11) stipulates that “*Symbolism enters into the very texture of African art, religion, social custom, every day speech*”. It can in fact be rightly concluded that the Yorùbá have symbolised all their activities in all human endeavours. This indigenous method of communication is known as **àrokò** which has been explicitly explained in Ògúndèjì (1997) who works on its communicative and semiotic contexts. Potter (1967:148)

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declares the importance of symbolic expression thus:

...The essential act of thought or cognition is symbolization. It is this, above all else, that raises the mental faculties of men above those of animals. It is also this ability to use symbols that has made man the master of the world of nature.

The above quotation expresses symbol, as being the instrument with which man comprehends his natural environment and the thing that makes him feel elevated among other creatures. In Firth's (1973) studies on symbols of various phenomena, it is asserted that, symbolism is an instrument of expression of the communication of knowledge and of control. Firth's (1973: 172) regard to this device shows that it is an inevitable instrument in the life of man. In his earlier discussion, language is regarded as "an important system of symbols through which the individual transforms physical reality into experienced reality. So giving something a name gives it recognition and status in the categories of experienced reality". If language itself is a symbolic system as Firth notes, then it can be regarded as the basic human symbolic system which is employed in the interpretation of other symbols. Ògúndèjì (1997) shows for example that 'the linguistic medium is the final channel of interpretation' in **àrokò** the Yorùbá symbol-communication. This we believe is true of almost if not all other symbolic communications. Even when an image is used to decode another image, one still needs language to explain further. An image which is a sign of a given phenomenon is even an aspect of language. Olátúnjí (1984), in his work, describes symbolism as applied to **ofò** as a symbolic word-play which is used as an instrument to get their targets. This is commonly found in **ofò** (incantation) and its sub-types (**àyájó** (myth-like incantation), **iwúre** (supplicatory blessing), **èbè** (verbal propitiation) and **èpè**

(curse). In our own view, and from the perspective of this study, symbolism in **ofò** and other genres under study refers to concrete images apart from the verbal aspect.

Emenanjo (1977) has worked on the use of symbolism in Igbo folktales and explained that time, place, characters and number are symbolic in the genre. In this study, we borrow the idea of this scholar, but with a little modification in the treatment of symbolism. What he refers to as symbolic time and place are changed to temporal and spatial symbolism respectively. Besides this, a more elaborate analysis is given on the symbolic characters in this study by suggesting various classes of characters with the ideas they symbolise in the health-related verbal arts among the Yorùbá. This symbolic analysis is discussed at meta-symbolic, meto-symbolic and phono-aesthetic levels as suggested in Ògúndèjì (1988)

The Symbolic Object-characters

The issue of the object-character in the health-related verbal arts is not limited to human beings. The non-human beings, animal and inanimate objects also have roles to play in the management of the health of mankind. We use the term 'object-character' since some of the items in the genres feature as objects, and as well appear as characters. In this study, the items we have at hand are numerous. The supernatural characters include *Ikú*, *Òrúnmilà*, *Òsayìn*, *Ògún*, *Ọya*, *Èṣù* to mention but few. Human beings such as *Odùduwà*, *Ọrànyàn*, most common personal names as *Ògúnrinólá*, *Ọmówáare* and *Ojúró-n-gbé*; the royal personalities like *Alára*, *Ọwàràngún-àga* and *Ajerò* are also featured. Others that feature are animals such as *ijápá* (tortoise), *adiyẹ* (chicken), *ìgbín* (snail), *àgbònrín* (antelope), etc. We cannot but mention the inanimate object-characters like *òkúta* (stone), *igi* (tree), *erùpẹ* (sand), *odò* (rivers) and others. We classify

the object-characters into four different groups— human object-characters, supernatural object-characters, animal-object-characters and inanimate-object-characters. This paper is mainly concerned with the first three groups.

Human-object-characters

The human-object-characters as postulated in the health-related verbal arts are numerous. The characteristics of the human characters that feature in the Yorùbá genres under study, in line with the Yorùbá belief, is extra-ordinary, because, most if not all of them, are mythical legendry figures. They have peculiarities which have become cynosure of all eyes. Those kinds of peculiarities have great roles to play in the lives of the average Yorùbá man. Let us examine the role of *Odùduwà*. He has been seen as a formidable progenitor. There is an *àyájó* (myth-like incantation) where *Odùduwà* is depicted as a protector who does not want any of his subjects or descendants to be vanquished and threatened in any form. In the same excerpt, he advises *Ìdàbirí* (his *Ifá* Priest) not to succumb to the victimization of *Ògún*, *Èṣù* and *Òrúnmìlà* since there is a power to neutralize their evil machination. Here we can say that he represents boldness, protection and justice. He may be seen in a modern parlance as a human right advocacy. The chanter of the excerpt wishes to have the afore-mentioned attributes of *Odùduwà*. Also, the chanter is making use of the cultural belief to connect and commune with the divine power of the said character. Emotionally, the chanter is convinced that his/her problem will be solved because of his belief in the already mentioned symbolic representations of the progenitor/character mentioned in the excerpt. Therefore, he/she is given mental relief that plays a vital role in the health of mankind. Another human character who left a good legacy behind for his descendants can be found in *oríkì* (verbal salutes) of *Abímbólá* who was a renowned hunter and *Ifá* priest in *Ọyó* town:

Abímbólá ọmọ Ìrókò
Ìrókò ọmọ Adéyẹmọ
Adéyẹmọ n baba Ìrókò
Ìgba tí baba Ògúnwándé n bẹ láyé
Tí baba rẹ n bẹ ní yìnbọnyìnbọn
Bákátá ń sá lọ bí afẹfẹ
Bótòlò ń kunra rẹ ní kànnàkànnà
Àrídòpó, mo ní baba rẹ ó bá a¹

Abímbólá, the offspring of Ìrókò
Ìrókò is the offspring of Adéyẹmọ

Adéyẹmọ is the father of Ìrókò
When Ògúnwándé's father was alive
When your father was very active in
the hunting expeditions
If a civet-cat was as swift as air
And if a waterbuck was as fast as the
stone released from a Catapult sling
Àrídòpó, I said, your father would
catch up with it.

The excerpt above describes how good *Abímbólá* was in the hunting game. It can give the descendants a clue to life that one needs to know the technical-know-how of one's profession, and it, as well, teaches them that one should excel in any field one has chosen, in order to leave a remarkable legacy behind. The excerpt can be used to encourage the descendants to see their father as a symbol of excellence and fulfillment which can heal anyone who is melancholic or perhaps neurotic among that descendant. In other words, it has an ability to stimulate the healthy emotional development and stability in that descendant and the whole society. The above *oríkì* (verbal salutes) brings joy and hope to the offspring of the main character mentioned. Joy and hope are usually the antidotes of hysteria, anxiety, obsessions, depression and compulsions which are the symptoms of neurosis. This psycho-therapeutic healing can be achieved, because, *oríkì* (verbal salutes) of this nature, works on the psyche of the target. Also in the *oríkì* (verbal salutes) of this same family, a human-ancestor of their character is

depicted. Their progenitor was so generous that he is said to have even fed flies:

*Baba yín àgbà ló rà ràà rà,
Tó relégbò lésè.
Ó ní kéesìn ó lè mọ-ọn róhun jẹ*

*Your forefather procured
uncountable things
That he bought a person with a sore
in the legs
On which the flies fed*

The excerpt inculcates some moral into the members of the family in order to eradicate selfishness/self-centeredness that can destroy the emotion (human feeling) of the society. A human being with sores on his/her legs is the object in the above excerpt, while the main character (progenitor) in the excerpt symbolises generosity. Though, this action is dehumanising, but for comic relief, the chanter is only demonstrating that their progenitor's generosity is indescribable.

Supernatural-object-characters

The healing system does not exclude the supernatural powers among the Yorubá. As earlier illustrated in this study, the origin of the indigenous healthcare delivery system is always traced to the supernatural beings. The origin of various diseases and cure cannot be explained without mentioning the roles played by these supernatural beings. The most prominent among the supernatural beings in healthcare delivery system are *Òrúnmìlà* and *Ọsanyìn*. Other supernatural beings take after them. *Òrúnmìlà* is regarded as *ẹléríí-ìpín*, the witness of man's destiny. In other words, he knows man's problems and the solution to the problems. As regards the healthcare delivery system, the Yorubá believe that *Òrúnmìlà* is versed in solving health-related problems through *ẹbọ* (sacrifice) and *àyájọ* (myth-like incantations). The following *àyájọ* narrates the story of how *Òrúnmìlà* knew the secret of how cough can be cured:

*A-ró-gégé-má-gbófá orúkọ tí à ñ pe
ikó
Ò-rìn-gbèrè-gbèrè-fídí-solè-gbì
lorúkọ tí à ñ pe iwọ kẹlẹbè.
ÀtArógégé, àtArìn-gbèrè-gbèrè-fídí-
solè-gbì,
Èyin méjèjè, mo mọ orúkọ yín...*

*The one-that-stands-boastfully-not-
knowing the secret of Ifá,
the name which cough is called
One-who-walks-majestically-but-
falls-suddenly on his bottom is the
name you phlegm is called Both
One-that-stands-boastfully and
One-that-walks-majestically-but-
falls-suddenly on his bottom,
The two of you, I know your secret
names...*

In the above health-related text, *Òrúnmìlà* is a symbolic representation of protection, healing, wisdom, intelligence and knowledge in accordance with the Yorubá belief. He is given a great accord in the healthcare delivery system. In this mythical excerpt *Òrúnmìlà* in applying wisdom, intelligence and knowledge was able to obtain an oath (ritual contract) from the personified disease and its symptom, that they will always depart from any of his children that knows their names (i.e. the secret names). *Òrúnmìlà* through this single action procured a solution for his children (those who consult Ifá divination). Such people (children of *Òrúnmìlà*) can also be said to have a latent protection from the disease. The efficacy of the mythical incantation is premised primarily on the strong Yorubá belief that the knowledge about the primordial origin and secret names of an object, phenomenon or person will make the thing, phenomenon or person be obedient to one. The Contracts taken on oath must as a matter of rule be respected among members of Yorubá cults. Hence the belief that primordial contract taken at the cross road of oath-taking is irrevocable and must be respected by the parties. All these

strong beliefs among other things are what ensure efficacy in such context. It will not be out of place while treating what *Òrúnmilà* stands for in the health-related verbal arts to add that *Òrúnmilà* is believed to be the controller of death, because he raises people from death. Hence the Yorubá saying in *Odù Òbàrà-òfún*:

*...Ewé òjújí dé
Mọ́ lópèré mi
Ifá wolé o jí mọ-ón mi
Èlà⁴, iwọ lo s'òkú alé àná dààyè...*

*...The waking leaf has arrived
The offspring of the city of Òpèré
Ifá, come in, and raise up the dead
It was you Èlà, that raised the dead
of yester night...*

Òsanyìn is another supernatural agent that is worth mentioning in the study. The name *Òsanyìn* symbolises herbal medicine, healing and cure. All the traditional healers see the divinity as the originator of healing through the use of herbs and *ofò* (incantations). The indigenous healers do pay homage to *Òsanyìn* in the course of the preparation of concoctions and other types of medicine. To them, the mere invocation of the divinity ensures efficacy in their indigenous healthcare practices. Other Yorubá supernatural beings that play vital roles in the healing system and to which references are made in health-related verbal arts include *Òsun*, *Obà*, *Obátalá*, *Kóri*, *Òsàrà* and host of others.

Animal-object-characters

In the Yorubá health-related genres, there are various animals that feature either as characters or objects used for healing purposes. What we have in mind in this section is that all the non-human creatures including birds and insects are categorised as animals¹². Various scholars such as Basom (1969), Abimbólá (1976), Àjàyí (2002), Èlébu-ibon (2004) and Ifálérè (2014) have

discussed the utilitarian nature of some animals as regards the indigenous healing system among the Yorubá. Some of the animals usually mentioned in health-related verbal arts are *òkété* (giant rat), *àkùkọ* (cock), *ìjápá* (tortoise), *eyelé* (pigeon), *ẹja* (fish), *ewúrẹ* (she-goat), *òbúkọ* (he-goat), *àgbò* (ram), *àgùntàn* (sheep) and *ìgbín* (snail) to mention but few. Of all these, *àkùkọ*, *ìgbín* and *òkété* are chosen for detailed discussion as examples of the symbolic significances of the animal-object-characters. We shall only mention what each of the rest symbolises.

Àkùkọ (cock)

In the Yorubá indigenous healing system, *àkùkọ* (the cock) depicts various things that are essential to human health. To start with, *àkùkọ* (the cock) symbolises unforgetfulness, memory or un-obliviousness. The Yorubá believe that when it is included in a medicinal preparation used to heal amnesia, it makes the drug potent, thereby making the user to be mindful, conscious, attentive, thoughtful and sensible. Let us examine the following excerpts used in getting rid of amnesia:

*i. A-múyè-wú
A-múyè-sọ kùkùkù,
Òrò tí ààtàn bá bọ̀ mọ̀lẹ̀,
Adìyẹ́ ló ń hú u.
Kí iyè mi là.*

*The thought-booster
The one-that-aids-consciousness-
rapidly
Whatever the dung-hill covers up,
The fowl digs it out.
May I be thoughtful.*

*ii. Bádiyẹ́ bá lupá kùkù,
A rántí òrò àná.
A ní kẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀nke.
Kí n máa rántí òràn gbogbo.*

*Whenever a fowl swings its arms
It remembers the past events
And crows.
May I have retentive memory.*

The belief of the Yorùbá is that *àkùkọ* (the cock) has the property that works against amnesia and boosts one's consciousness on any issue at hand. Taking our cue from the fact that the seemingly more physical, literary or linguistic association in Yorùbá incantation can be taken as the source of very serious symbolic meaning (see Qlátúnjí 1984 on symbolic word play in Yorùbá incantation), one can say that the physical action of the cock referred to in the assertive part of the first incantation; the digging out of what is covered up, is responsible for the relevant mystically potent symbolism in *àkùkọ*. This ability is meta-symbolically imputed on the object-character *àkùkọ* in the first example of the above mythical incantatory excerpt. In the second example, the physical actions of shaking and flapping of its arms and crowing are associated with memory (i.e. remembering a thing). The Yorùbá have observed that the sequence of the two actions when they occur together is constant. They therefore infer that the shaking of the arms is what reminds the cock to always crow. The important thing is that the cock never forgets to crow every morning. This is why the crowing of the cock early in the morning and other time of the day is used among the Yorùbá and in fact among many other people of the world to traditionally mark time. The quality of not forgetting to crow every morning is what qualifies the object-character as a meta-symbol of memory according to the second excerpt above. In relation to people's cultural credence, part of the property can in turn be metaphysically transferred into the body system of the chanter or the user of the medicinal preparation which includes certain parts of *àkùkọ*, as one of its ingredients.

Apart from being a symbol of memory, *àkùkọ* as well symbolises protection and victory over evil. It is believed to possess anti-devilish potency; hence the following saying which is not restricted to only the cock but also includes the hen:

*Fínní ladìyẹ́ n̄ tókò èmọ́ bọ́
A fowl goes to the bush without
having the burrs of *desmodium*⁶ on it*

This is another incantatory assertion that is drawn from the physical nature of the fowl (including both hen and the cock). Whereas if other domestic animals like dog, goat or cat go into the bush, the burrs of some of the shrub and weeds and other pests can stick to their bodies, such burrs cannot stick on the feathers of the fowl if it goes to the bush. From the protective or preventive perspective, the user of any medicinal preparation which includes the fowl and which the line of assertive incantatory statement of verbal accompaniment, the pest and burrs meta-symbolise the evils while the fowl meta-symbolises the user of the medicinal preparation. It is believed that just as the burrs and pests cannot stick on the fowl so the evil machination cannot harm the user. This explains the Yorùbá belief that the potency of any medicinal preparation, charm or potion made with the fowl or part of it can make one free of the wrath of the evil-doers. One of the principal *Odù* (*Òkànràn Mèjì*) explains how formidable *àkùkọ* is:

*È pèkú sìn sìn, ẹ̀ ẹ̀ bun'Fá jẹ
È pẹ́já sìn sìn, ẹ̀ ẹ̀ bun'Fá jẹ
Èé sẹ́ yín tẹ́ ẹ́ fí n̄ jẹ̀kàrà dun'mọ́ àjẹ?
A díá f'ákùkọ́ itàn gálàjà níjọ́ tí n̄
lọgbà awo.
Şàkótó, obìnrin àkùkọ́ nì.*

*Mọ̀jàlàwà, obìnrin àkùkọ́ nì.
Ó nì bẹ́ ẹ́ dẹ́lé,
È kí Şàkótó foun,
È sì kí Mọ̀jàlàwà
Òjó p'Àkùkọ́*

*Ìré dòdì,
Àsúbi awo dàsúre
Ire lésè Òòsà.*

*You killed a good rat, but didn't share
it with Ifá.*

*You killed a good fish, but didn't share
it with Ifá.*

*Why do you eat the bean cake without
sharing it*

with the offspring of the witches?

*Ifá divination was cast for a mythical
cock on his way to the sacred grove.*

Şákótó, was cock's wife

Mòjàlàwà, was cock's wife

He said, when you get home,

Greetings to Şákótó,

Greetings to Mòjàlàwà also.

A Cock was drenched in the rain,

The curse was neutralised

*The evil machination of the cultist
became goodness*

Goodness in the abode of divinities.

In the excerpt above, *Àkùkọ* is a character, which we are made to believe, goes to a deadly grove of the cultists, but with the potency of rain, the evil intention of those cultists does not materialise. Therefore, it leaves the grove unharmed. The importance of the rain here is that it serves as a sort of *deu ex machina* in the mythical story, it seems. Another *Odù* in *Ifá* literary corpus known as *Ìwòrìwòsá* also presents *àkùkọ* as the epitome of neutrality, thus:

Ò-fò-ní-kòtò

Ní teruku sále sále

A díá fún Ládugbà

Tíi şomọkùnrin Òra

Tí wọn ní ó mò òkùn lóko

Ó òkùn lóko tán

Okùn rẹ lọ lèé mú Enilèéré

Eni tó ti sùn kó dide

Ìgbà àkùkọ pEnilèéré

Eni tó ti sùn kó dide

One-that-jumps-in-the-pit

Usually raises dust greatly

*Ifá divination was performed for
Ládugbà*

The man from Òra

Who was warned not to make a trap.

He made the trap

His trap caught Enilèéré

*Those who are asleep should wake
up*

When the cock called Enilèéré

*Those who are asleep should wake
up*

The *Odù* above narrates the myth of how *Ládugbà's* trap catches *Enilèéré* (another name for death) in the bush. On getting to the trap, *Enilèéré* cast a spell on *Ládugbà* and he becomes unconscious. A diviner advises the relations of *Ládugbà* to hang some cocks on the shoulder of someone who would go where *Ládugbà* and *Enilèéré* are. On getting to the spot, the cocks crow thrice. The crowing of the cocks neutralises the potency of the spell, and makes *Ládugbà* regain his consciousness. At an interpretative level, *Ládugbà's* unconsciousness meta-symbolises man when he goes to sleep every night, while the restoration of *Ládugbà* meta-symbolises man's waking-up in the morning. The crowing of the cock every morning stands for the crowing of the primordial cocks. The primordial mythical ability of the cock to restore back to life, used in explaining sleeping and waking, is believed to be a potent metaphysical power inherent in the cock. It should be noted that for healing to take place and be perfected even after the use of any medicinal preparation, the sick person needs a good rest, i.e. sleeping and waking. *Àkùkọ* as presented in the myth is a meta-symbol of a potent power that neutralises the effect of spell cast by sickness and disease or any attack and which is capable of restoring bad situation to normalcy. The fact that *àkùkọ* has the power to neutralise an evil machination is also

buttressed in Orímóògùnjé (1989:34-38) in his discussion of the origin of àwúre (the luck-bringing charm). Àwúre, who was then a human being, used seven cocks to nullify the effect of the spell cast on his father, Òsanyìn. Àkùkọ as a meto-symbolisation of time consciousness, because it does not fail to crow when it is due, is depicted in one of the natal songs thus:

*Àkùkọ n kọ,
Ojú mọ lóde.
Kèkèrènke,
Mà gbómọ mi jó.*

*Cocks are crowing
It is now dawn outside
Cock-a-doodle-doo! I'll pick my
child and dance*

The song is actually one of those used at the post-natal sessions where nurses and health officers try to teach the young and new mothers how to take care of the child early in the morning at cockcrow and carry out routine exercises. The relevance of cockcrow here is essentially that of reminding the mother of the time. It should be remembered that this type of post-natal song is meant as part of the psychological means of teaching and imparting healthcare knowledge to the new mothers, even including those who are not new in child-bearing. The health educators do not usually want to leave a chance for mothers who are not new to child-bearing who might have forgotten to carry out some of the necessary health routines. We should however remember that the meticulousness of the health educators is based on the fact that most, if not all the health routines are not traditional to the Yorubá and African culture. In connection with the time consciousness symbolism of the cock, a propitiative verbal art (ẹ̀bẹ̀) recounts that it is the crow of a primordial cock that wakes the witches up in Òtù-Ifẹ̀. Since then, if the intestine of a cock is included in any medicinal preparation, the witches always transfer the adornment they have for the

primordial àkùkọ (cock) to whoever takes it as it is stipulated in the illustration below:

*Amórò
Olójú-mepo
A-fàgbòn-mẹjẹ
A-fi-èkíkísẹ̀ bẹ́ésà lójúde Olú-àfín
Ni orúkọ àwọn Ìyàmi*

*Àjẹ kì í jẹ̀ ìgbí
Àjẹ kì í jẹ̀ ifun àkùkọ
Awọn àjẹ kì í jẹ̀ àdín
Àjẹ kì í jẹ̀ igi ẹ̀ẹ̀rù⁷
Kí ni kì í jẹ̀ kí Àjẹ jẹ̀ ìgbín?*

*Bòlòbòlò ẹ̀nu ìgbín ni kì í jẹ̀ kí Àjẹ jẹ̀ ìgbín
Kí ni kì í jẹ̀ kí Àjẹ jẹ̀ ifun àkùkọ?
Àkùkọ ló jí wọn lójó tí wọn n lọ sílé
Alára...*

*Orò-keeper
One-who-drinks-palm-oil-through-
the-eyes
One-who-sucks-blood-through-the-
chin
One-who-buys-tobacco-bare-footed
in-the-courtyard-of-Olú-àfín
Are the name of the witches
The witches don't eat snails
The witches don't eat cock's
intestines
The witches don't lick palm-kernel oil
The witches don't eat Ethiopian
pepper
Why don't the witches eat the snails?*

*The slippery nature of the mouth of
the snails prevents the witches from
eating snail
Why don't the witches eat the
intestine of a cock
It was the cock that woke them up in
the day they were supposed to go the
household of Alára...*

The witches are grateful till today for the crow of the cock that woke them in the primordial time. So, they don't eat the intestine of cock. Therefore, the chanter

(who takes the concoction) becomes a meto-symbol of the cock which the witches will not touch. The sealed bond between the cock and the witches will be transferred to the chanter, who will henceforth be free from the evil machination of the witches. The Yorubá belief in the **àyájọ́** (myth-like incantation) cited above makes them use a concoction that includes cock's intestine to heal people that are assumed to be tormented by the witches.

Ìgbín (snail)

Ìgbín (snail) plays a prominent role in Yorubá indigenous healthcare practices. It symbolises peace, wisdom and general healthy environment. In *ìwúre* (supplicatory blessings), it is usually mentioned while praying for peaceful co-existence in the community:

*Èrò pèsèpèsè niti ìgbín
Ilé ìgbín kì í gbóná.
Kí ilé àti ọ̀nà wa rójú.*

*It is the portion of the snail to be peaceful.
Snail's house is never hot.
May our homes and ways be peaceful.*

The constant coolness in the house (shell) of the snail conditioned by the watery substance is responsible for the imagery of peace attached to the snail and which the chanter in the above excerpt is identifying with. The gentility of the snail is another quality which the chanter desires for himself/herself and his/her immediate environment. There is no doubt that he/she does not want to experience war, turbulent life and rancour. The basis of the meta-symbolisation in the above excerpt is drawn from the physical condition of the snail's immediate environment. In *àwúre* (luck-bringing charm) incantation, *ìgbín* is regarded as a health advocate and facilitator of good luck:

*Ìgbín ọ̀mọ́ afàlòlò délé Ifẹ̀
Má fà lólò délé Ifẹ̀ mọ́
Wáá máa fa ire, owó ñlá ñlá, àlàáfíà,
òun
àìkú bá mi...*

*The snail, the offspring-of-one-who
crawls-sluggishly-to-Ifẹ̀-city
Do not crawl sluggishly to Ifẹ̀ city
anymore
Drag good luck, huge amount of
money, peace and immortality to me...*

The snail meta-symbolisation in the second excerpt here is premised upon physical and phono-aesthetic condition; the slow movement of the snail and the verb 'fà' ('crawl') used to describe it in Yorubá. The sluggish and crawling nature of the snail's movement is undesirable hence the chanter rejects it. He does not want his/her blessings to come slowly as it is purportedly done in the mythical *Ilé-Ifẹ̀* in the second line of excerpt. The chanter however sees another positive relevance in the verb 'fà' meaning to drag or pull. The motivation for this secondary association tends to be purely phono-aesthetic. The two verbs having the same structure but different meanings are therefore homonymic such symbolisation is, however, not common in Yorubá incantatory poetry. This feature is what Olátúnjí (1984) describes as symbolic wordplay. The chanter desires longevity and money to take good care of his/her health; and peace that will make him/her emotionally stable. *Ìgbín* (snail), in Yorubá belief, is also a symbol of wisdom. Hence the saying '*òmòràn tí moyún ìgbín nínú ìkàrahun*' meaning 'it is the wise one who can decipher the pregnancy of the snail'. This implies that *ìgbín* is pregnant with wisdom and only the equally wise one can appreciate this. In a Yorubá folktale that is commonly referred to as '*ìgbín pabuké Ọ̀ṣìn*', *ìgbín* flatly outwits *ìjápá* (tortoise), the Yorubá animal symbolism of trickery and cunning⁸. Hence, the belief that a medicinal preparation which has the snail as part of its ingredients among other things is capable of imparting wisdom

to the user. An *Ifá* mythical story referred to in a verse of *Odù Ìròsùn Méjì* lends credence to this symbolism. It reads:

Ìkò òwú abídí bàbààbà
A díá f'Ológbun-à-yí-kú
Tí ó d'Ológbun-à-yí-là
Ìpín Awó gòkè
Awo ò kú mó
Gerere.
Ìpín Awó gòkè.

The huge batch of cotton wool
Ifá divination was performed for
Ológbun-à-yí-kú
Who became Ológbun-à-yí-là.
The Initiate is on ascending prosperity.
The Initiate will no longer die.
Easily.
The Initiate is on ascending prosperity.

The excerpt above refers to the myth of how *Ológbun-à-yí-kú* (literally, the-owner-of-the-pit-of-death) is saved when he beholds the snail (*ìgbín*) an item he has earlier offered as sacrifice. His adversaries conspire against him and throw him into a deep ditch, thinking that he would die there. Fortunately, he looks up from the bottom of the pit and sees a snail. The snail (*ìgbín*) spiritually endows him with wisdom with which he climbs out of the ditch. Likewise, the user of the excerpt sees this symbol as relevant to his/her situation if he/she is also in one unhealthy state or the other. This unhealthy state is what the ditch symbolises and the snail as one of the ingredients to be used in a sacrificial offering or medicinal preparation that will give him/her relief

Òkété (giant rat)

According to Yorubá mythology, *òkété* was a great diviner, but he breached the sacred agreement made with *Ifá* by eating palm-kernel during the primordial descendancy of all creatures from the celestial realm. Hence it is a taboo for diviners to eat *òkété* among the Yorubá. It is

a special reserve of the 'elder' and therefore usually used for *èbè-àgbàlagbà* (propitiation of the witches). Hence *òkété* is referred to as *èran-àgbà* (meat for the witches). *Òkété* in this respect may be considered the meta-symbol of an advocate that pleads for man before the supernatural beings. In a verse of *Odù Ogbètòmopòn*, a minor *Odù* in *Ifá* literary corpus, *òkété* is used to appease the three malevolent spirits- *ikú* (death), *àrùn* (disease) and *àjé* (witches):

Ogbe súnmo sí
Ogbè tòmọ pòn,
Ogbè súnmo sibèrè bẹrẹ idí
Ìta mi jèlẹ
Ìsò mi jèlẹ
Oyin ló torí omọ rẹ,
Oyin re kókó igi
Àfòmọ tori omọ rẹ,
Ó ràjàalẹ.
A díá fún Kùkùjẹjẹ obìnrin Ikú
A díá fún Kùkùjẹjẹ obìnrin Àrùn
A díá fún A-bojú-pòpòrò tíi so bìnrin
Àjé.
A díá fún A-tà-má-jùbààrà aya Ode.
A díá fún Èlẹwà tíi sàya Òrúnmilà.
Èlẹwà o gbé lónií, o gbojà rà lówọ
obìnrin Ikú
Èlẹwà o gbé lónií, o gbojà rà lówọ
obìnrin Àrùn
Èlẹwà o gbé lónií, o gbojà rà lówọ
obìnrin Ìyàmi Àjé

Ogbè carry your child properly
Ogbè back your child properly
Ogbè, let your child rest on your hip
The frontage of my house is peaceful
My stall is peaceful

The bee on account of its child
The bee moves to the hard part of the tree
The African mistletoe because of its child
It goes the underground chamber
Ifá divination was performed for
Kùkùjẹjẹ, the wife of Death
Ifá divination was performed for
Kùkùjẹjẹ, the wife of Disease

*Ifá divination was performed for A-bojú-pòpòrò, the wife of the Witch
Ifá divination was performed for A-tà-má-juúbààrà, the wife of the
Hunter*

*Ifá divination was performed for
Eléwà, the wife of Òrúnmilà.*

*Eléwà, you are in trouble now, you
bought the goods supposed to be
bought by the Death's wife*

*Eléwà, you are in trouble now, you
bought the goods supposed to be
bought by the Disease's wife*

*Eléwà, you are in trouble now, you
bought the goods supposed to be
bought by the Witch's wife.*

The *Ifá* verse refers the story of how Òrúnmilà had a nightmare, struggling with the three afore-mentioned malevolent spirits. He sent his wife to the market to buy òkété (giant rat) to appease them. On getting to the market, *Eléwà* met the wives of those malevolent spirits bargaining for the only òkété in the market. *Eléwà* appeared to be the highest bidder and bought the òkété. Those malevolent spirits vowed to torment her and Òrúnmilà, but Òrúnmilà quickly made a sacrifice, cutting the òkété into three. Each of the three pieces turned to a whole òkété which they picked one after the other. They granted the appeasement of Òrúnmilà and stopped tormenting his household. In Abimbólá (1975), òkété meta-symbolises safety, because he digs a tunnel for Òrúnmilà to escape the wrath of death. The Yorubá also regard òkété as a great meta-symbol of divine authority. This is borne out in the axiomatic saying: *Òrò tí òkété bá ti bale sọ nilẹ̀ ń gbọ. The earth obeys the giant rat's commands.*

This assertive statement commonly used in incantations is probably derived from the ability of the giant rat to dig the earth with ease. This action of digging is metaphorically regarded as communication between the rat, who digs, and the earth that is dug. The fact that the giant rat never fails

to achieve this purpose provides for a good assertive statement upon which he premises his request; hence the following application of the incantative assertion is possible:

Òrò tí òkété bá ti bale sọ nilẹ̀ ń gbọ.

Ìwọ lágbájá, ohun tí mob á ti wí ni kóo máa se.

*The earth obeys the giant rat's
commands.*

You so-and-so must obey my command.

The whole of the giant rat or part of it may therefore be used in preparing a charm or medicinal preparation for use. Let us quickly note that the dummy noun *Lágbájá* can be substituted for any person or spirit being that the chanter desires should obey him.

CONCLUSION

The study contributes to the understanding of the therapeutic aspect of Yorubá orature, that is, how the verbal arts are used for healing. It has been observed that much interest has not been shown in the Yorubá verbal arts as used on health-related issues. Therefore, there is need for more awareness of the importance of orature in the healing system. Besides all the afore-mentioned contributions of the study, the data collected and the analysis in the paper should be of immense assistance to various scholars in other related fields such as general medicine, nursing, psychiatry, pharmacology, linguistics, religion and cultural studies. The experts in these fields can use their own tools in analysing the data. The presence of all these animate-object characters as part of the ingredients of a medicinal preparation, sacrifice or as psychological effects on the targets, tends to give the user an assurance of getting a quality healthy environment. It is important to point out that this assurance is based primarily on the network of belief of the users.

ENDNOTES

1. *Àrídòpó* is another name for *Òpómúléro* lineage among the Yorùbá. The character in the excerpt hailed from the lineage, therefore, he was referred to as *Àrídòpó*.
2. The excerpt was collected from *Àkànmú baba Bèlávù*, an *Ìjálá* Aritste in 1983/84 session at *Obáfèmi Awólówò University, Ilé-Ifè*, Department of African Languages and Literatures.
3. *Òpèré* is an ancient city which is no longer in existence
4. *Èlà* is another name for *Òrúnmilà*
5. This is extracted from *Odù Òbàrà-òfún*, a minor *Odù* that relates a story where *Òrúnmilà* raised the son of *Olówu-Òdùùrú* from death.
6. There are five different types of *desmodium* (*èèmó*)– *desmodum linearifolium* (*papilonaceae*), *cenchrus Biflorus*, *desmodium lasiocarpum*, *desmodium delicatulum* and *pupalia tappalea* (*Anaranthaceae*). The Yorùbá have four different types of *èèmó*– *èèmó-eyẹ*, *èèmó-àgbò*, *èèmó-abéròdéfè* and *èèmó-ìgò*.
7. The botanical name of *ẹẹrù* (Ethiopian pepper) is *Xylopiá Aethiopica* (*Anonaceae*)
8. *Ìgbín* (Snail) is believed to be the wisest animal, as it is stated in the Yorùbá folklore. Despite the tricky attitude of *ìjàpá* (tortoise), *ìgbín* still outwits it in some Yorùbá folktales.
9. *Ológbun-à-yí-ká* means the owner of a dungeon where people die.
10. *Ológbun-à-yí-là* means the owner of a dungeon where people are safe.

11. The detail of the story is given in Adéoyè (1967). Here goes the song that presents *òkété* (giant rant) as a betrayer:

Òkété,
Báyì nìwà rẹ,
O bá'Fá mulẹ,
O dá'Fá,
O bá'Fá mulẹ
O da'Fá o.

The giant rat,
So this is how you are,
You made a bond with Ifá,
You betrayed Ifá.
You made a bond with Ifá,
You betrayed Ifá.

12. *Ogbè* means half of *Èjì-ogbè* in *Ifá* literary corpus:

<i>Ogbè</i>	<i>Èjì-ogbè</i>
1	1 1
1	1 1
1	1 1
1	1 1

13. The botanical name for *àfòmó* (African Mistletoe) is *Loranthaceae*.

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