

Nigerian Literature and the Postmodern Turn: Plurimediality and Interarts Aesthetics in Modern Nigerian Poetry in English

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Abstract

This essay explores the plurimedial practice of incorporating visual illustration in contemporary Nigerian poetry in English as a postmodern aesthetic practice. An aspect of intermedial studies, Plurimediality studies the relations between verbal/word-text and visual arts as used within the same presentation. Described in this paper as “Interarts Aesthetics”, the incorporation of visual illustration in modern Nigerian poetry is seen as a postmodern practice and a shift from the aesthetics of orature which trademarks postcolonial writings and discourses in African and Nigerian literature. While both critical and creative activities in this area of research have been on for a long time in other national literatures, a review of postcolonial Nigerian literary works in English reveals that the practice is recent. Before this time, it was associated with Children’s Literature which dates back to the 1950s. Evidence of this creative practice in Nigerian adult literary works in English dates back to the late twentieth century and exists in only a few texts including very few Modern Nigerian poetry collections in English. Similarly, there is hardly any significant critical interest in this aspect of Nigerian literary critical studies. Using theories of “Intermediality”, this study explores the practice of incorporating verbal text and visual arts and the relationship between these as multimodal means of knowledge creation and aesthetics communication in modern Nigerian poetry in English.

Key words: Intermediality, Plurimediality, Verbal text, Visual art, modern Nigerian poetry, Interarts aesthetics, postmodern turn

Introduction

Nigerian literature can be said to have experienced the postmodern turn towards the end of the 20th century but the literature's proper engagement in postmodern practices can be traced to the beginning of the 21st century. This development was noticed by critics and scholars of Nigerian literature and some aspects of this orientation and practices were explored variously. For instance, it was noticed that there have been a number of changes in the character, texture, nuances and thematic preoccupations of Nigerian literature in English since the turn of the 21st century. Hamish Dalley observed that much of the 21st century Nigerian writing, or the contemporary phase of what has been described as the third generation of Nigerian literature, is shaped "around ambivalent spatio-temporal imaginaries that exceed the national-generational framework" (2013, 15). This is a disposition that deviates from what has been known as the traditional postcolonial orientation and thrust of the 20th century Nigerian literature, which Timothy Brennan described as the "obsessive nation-centeredness" of postcolonial writings (1990, 64). This phase of Nigerian literature – the first generation of the literature and the early writings of the second generation – is particularly characterized aesthetically by the creative exploration and deployment of oral resources and preoccupation with nationalist issues (Obichere, 1985; Bamikunle 1992); Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 2003).

Adesanmi and Dunton observed that the new creative and theoretical disposition of the third generation of Nigerian writers implicate the aesthetic quality of their writings. They note that these writers deviate from a paradigm that is defined by "cultural nationalism and its centralizing myths of transcendental nationhood" (2005, 17) which constituted an aesthetic marker of the writing of the first two generations. The first and the second generations of Nigerian literature were preoccupied with the "imperative of historical revisionism", which was aimed at deconstructing the colonial master narratives whose claims have, so far, been debunked. According to Adesanmi and Dunton, this deconstructive engagement resulted in "a traditionalization of creative space and idiom, spelt out in the valorization of rural settings in the fiction of Chinua Achebe and Elechi Amadi or the privileging of rituals in the drama of Soyinka and John Pepper Clark" (2005, 15). This also defines the writings of the second generation of Nigerian writers, although their writings contain some elements of radical Marxist orientations, as can be seen in the works of writers such as Osofisan and Osundare.

As Adesanmi and Dunton further observed, "the departure from this ur-text is, arguably, the most significant distinguishing feature of Nigeria's third generation poetry and fiction" (2005, 16), a quality that Garuba described as the absence of the "ritualist centre" of the earlier two generations and the upholding of, "a much more expansive creative space, fluid plot, faster-paced narrative, language shorn of the domestication-impulse of the first and second generation writers," and a setting which "is almost always urban and ambience" and "equally euro-modernist" (Adesanmi and Dunton 2005, 16). Therefore, beyond this traditional aesthetics of orality/orature and Marxist orientation, there is a new aesthetic feature and practice that has been noticed predominantly in what has been tagged by many critics as the "New Nigerian Writing" – the literature which began to be written since the beginning of the 21st century.

The aesthetic feature described above has been attributed to contemporary interdisciplinary practices and the postmodern turn that is preferably referred to in this paper as the “Inter-arts aesthetics” – the intermedia practice of engaging both the printed verbal text and visual arts in the same literary work. This practice of incorporating the visual arts in the form of painting, graphic arts, drawings, graffiti, photographs and other forms of the visual arts in literary texts is also described as “plurimediality”, to underscore the degree or dimension of the (inter)mediality.

Postmodernism as a concept is multi-faceted and, as such, it is often defined in relation to the activity with which it is associated at a point in time. But generally speaking, postmodernism, among other things, engages activities and strategies that are aimed at radicalizing social consciousness, reasoning and values in such a way that the multiplicity and plurality of social awareness and knowledge are underscored. As Hicks notes, postmodernism is “activist strategy against the coalition of reason and power” (2014, 3) which qualifies modern consciousness and orientation. Therefore, the “post” in postmodernism suggests a deconstruction of modernist ethos and perspective by stressing individualism and diversity rather than a collectivism. Lyotard underscored all of these, in *The Postmodern Condition*, when he argues that postmodernism suggests, “the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age” (1979, 3); that the idea of totality is brought into question and grand narratives interrogated.

When it is discussed in relations to literary discourse and criticism, postmodernism concerns the rejection of the idea of objectivity of meaning and interpretations, authoritarianism and imperialist views. Instead, it privileges the relativity of meaning, truth and understanding that are suggestive of a transgressive viewing of creative and cultural activities and literary practices. This is most evident in the idea of genre blurring, blurring of disciplinary boundaries, hybridity and the interdisciplinary nature of knowledge production. The blurring of lines between science, literature, and ideology, between literature and literary criticism, between philosophy and cultural criticism, and between high cultural criticism and popular criticism, is characteristic of the postmodern turn. Talking about implications of postmodernism and the postmodern turn for literature and liberal arts, Best and Kellner observed that the postmodern turn essentially ruptured the link with the “bourgeois elitism, high modernism, and the avant-garde”, while maintaining some links to previous aesthetic traditions. In other words, it rejects the autonomy of art and celebrates mass culture which implies that it, in essence, “combined ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultural form in an aesthetic pluralism and populism.” (1997,5)

In Nigerian literary history, the postmodern turn became evident in the new creative orientation of the third generation of Nigerian literature through a cosmopolitan, globalized, transnational and transcultural view of culture and a somewhat individualistic disposition to life. This turn in cultural and creative sensibility distinguishes the creative practices of the first and the second generations of Nigerian writers and those of the third generation. Essentially, transnational idiom, the tropes of nomadism, exile, displacement, hybridity, and deracination have become the emblematic features of postmodernity and postcoloniality, and these characterize the writings of much of Nigeria's third generation writers. It is in this vein that the blurring of the disciplinary

boundaries between literature and the visual arts in Nigerian literature constitutes a postmodernist engagement. This practice and the discourses surrounding it, among academic researchers in the humanities, takes place within the domain of media studies and have been variously described as “Interarts Studies”, “Media Studies”, and “Intermedial Studies” or “Studies in Intermediality” (Claus Cluver, 2007) to underscore increase in interdisciplinary discourses. When it concerns the relationship between visual arts and literature (verbal art), which is the interest of this paper, it is described as Plurimediality.

Intermediality is an interdisciplinary study in the humanities which explores the interrelations of the arts; it explores the mixing of genres and of media. Also described as Interarts Studies, intermediality, as a research focus, is centuries-old, and dates back particularly to the Poetics of the Romantics as ideas of media connections. However, there has been a renewed research interest in this area of study in the past two or three decades. Although the concept of intermediality has been defined in various and different ways, it has come to be understood generally as the relationships that exist between and/or among different media in the process of representation of culture and knowledge and in the production of meaning.

Intermediality, as a concept, describes the interconnectedness that exists among various modern media for disseminating information (Chapple & Kattenbelt, 2007). Lehtonen (2001) describes intermediality as a form of intertextuality which exists across media borders. This transgressive interconnectedness occurs in many cases as a result of the incorporation of digital technology into artistic practices such as obtains in theatre practices, in which case various media such as film, television and the digital media, are present in theatre productions, especially as it is realized in contemporary theatre production.

According to Werner (2011, 2), intermediality concerns any “transgression of boundaries between conventionally distinct media” and comprises both “intra -” and “extra – compositional” relations between different media. Similarly, Rajewsky (2005, 44) described intermediality as the exploration of the practice of media border-crossing and hybridization, which, according to Jannids, especially when it relates to text-image relationship, interrogates the manner in which “different media of one culture interact with one another and their place in communication process of postmodern societies which helps to give traditional literary studies a new bend toward cultural studies and interdisciplinary discourse” (1998, 42). As such, as Kattenbelt (2008) observed, this rapport of media in the process of meaning generation underscores the need to study the arts and media from the broader perspective of their level of differences and co-relations, instead of examining them separately from point of view of their individual historical developments, rules and specifications.

Intermediality, as a catchword, became popular in the 1990s and has since become one of the most productive terms in the domain of the humanities; it has become one of the most important areas of research in contemporary studies in literature and culture. As earlier noted, the concept of intermediality is define from an inter-disciplinary perspective which accounts for the use of “Intermediality” as an umbrella term that accommodates several other concepts such as multimediality, plurimediality, crossmediality, infra-mediality, media-convergence, media-integration,

media-fusion, hybridization, and so on and so forth. For example, Warner (2011, 5) developed a typology of Intermediality to include the following:

1. Literature as a medium that shares transmedial features with other media in a comparative perspective (*Transmediality*)
2. Literature as a medium that can yield material for transposition into other media or ...borrow material from other media (*Intermedial Transposition*)
3. Literature as medium that can enter into plurimedial combination with other media in one and the same work or artefact (*Plurimediality*);
4. literature as a medium that can refer to other media in various ways (*Intermedial Reference*) ; and
5. Literature as an element in a historical process of remediation (*media merge or are differentiated – emergence of new media*)

It is in this vein that media study researchers have decided to conceptualize intermediality, using such terms as transformational, discursive, synthetic, formal, transmedial, ontological, or genealogical intermediality, primary and secondary intermediality, or intermedial figuration to describe the heterogeneous nature of intermedial studies (Werner 2011, 5). The focus of this paper, however, is the exploration of the plurimedial relationships that exist between verbal text and illustrative visual arts in modern Nigerian Poetry in English as a postmodern aesthetic form within the context of postcolonial discourse.

Plurimediality is an inter-media situation in which literature as a medium is combined with other media in one and the same work or artifact (Werner, 2011, 5). In this case signifiers that belong to more than one semiotic system are combined either integrally or complementarily to produce or reinforce meaning, such that the text produces the effect of media hybridity whose constituents can be traced back originally to heterogeneous media. Plurimediality, according to Jandl (2017), describes a situation in which a range of media co-exist in a work in order to generate and amplify meaning. Usually, this situation is realized when verbal text incorporates other modes such as pictures, and other visual arts forms in almost an equal measure. As an intra-compositional occurrence which is realizable in artistic practices such as opera, visual poetry, radio programmes, songs and film among others, plurimediality occurs when there is the overt presence of two or more media in a given semiotic entity, mostly in such a way that they are more or less dependent on each other to make meaning or to add to the meaning in any particular work. The result of this co-existence, most often, is the emergence of a new syncretic media. Thus, as a postmodern practice, the plurimedial interaction of multiple genres and media in a piece of work shatters the notion or the possibility of an essentialist stance in the production of knowledge and generation of social meaning.

There are various types of visual art and verbal art relationships in literary texts, especially in texts that are not hypertextually encoded. The most important and commonest relationship (as observed in Western literature) is the interplay between texts and images. The relationship between text and images or visual arts has been widely and variously examined over the years and from various perspectives. This discussion has addressed issues of the commonalities and the differences that exist between the two and has been done from various perspectives including that of the author, the artist, the reader and the viewer. For instance, many critical works have been done on the

artistic perspective of the discourse which closely examined the boundary between the image and the text for highly different purposes (Parmiggiani, 2002). In recent time, there have been works (Lussu, 1999; Perondi 2012) which addressed the semiotic dimension of the study, especially from the point of view of academics and designers who are of the opinion that there should be an inclusive dimension to the understanding of the relationship in which case attention is paid to not only the “the form of the sign but also the relationships between the different signs in the space” (Dolor 2017, 1).

Visual Arts Incorporation and Interarts Aesthetics in Modern Nigerian Poetry in English

The visual art has featured in Nigerian creative arts or artistic expressions from the pre-colonial time and have always been part of the folk tradition. They constitute part of the non-verbal aspects of the folk tradition and have taken the form of textile weaving, cloth dyeing, wood carving, brass casting, pottery, and blacksmithing. Falola describes these as “a component of the autochthonous folklore of many cultural and ethnic population in Africa” and that “they are as old and enduring as many oral literary forms” (2019, 702). Among the Yoruba, for example, these visual artistic works are seen as ornamental works and described as the *aso-oke* (textile weaving), *adire didi* (cloth dyeing), *igi gbigbe* (wood carving), *ikoko mimo* (pottery craft), *ise agbede* (blacksmithing), and *ide susu* (brass casting) (Falola, 2019, 703). The usefulness of these works include the promotion of interarts aesthetics and the communication of social and moral messages. As an integral part of the Nigerian social and moral value system, artistic expressions are exhibited or displayed through various media, such as plastic texts, as impressions on objects or materials like cloth (textile materials) and walls. These served some kind of multimedia means of achieving the aforementioned functions.

These dimensions of artistic activities were, however, revolutionized by the experience of colonization, the consequent Western influences on African culture and artistic practices and expressions, particularly contemporary methods of visual arts creations occasioned by the new information technology. These modern and postmodern practices have transformed the media, genres and functions of Nigeria visual art. The gradual advance in Nigerian visual art forms can be seen in their use for political purposes which, according to Falola, can be traced to the 1960s and the early 1970s after many African countries gained independence. As Falola observed:

The use of art forms in this manner has also enhanced the incorporation of orthographic narratives into visual creativity, bringing about a sort of pastiche. Cartoons, caricature-esque images, and other graphic works that treat political subjects contemptuously are usually accompanied by captions and callouts that make them appear story-like and dramatic (Falola 2019, 704)

The incorporation of the visual art into the written text in modern Nigerian literature constitutes an aesthetic shift from Nigerian postcolonial creative practices which was hitherto marked by the deployment of oral resources to underscore the hybridity of the literature. It is in this

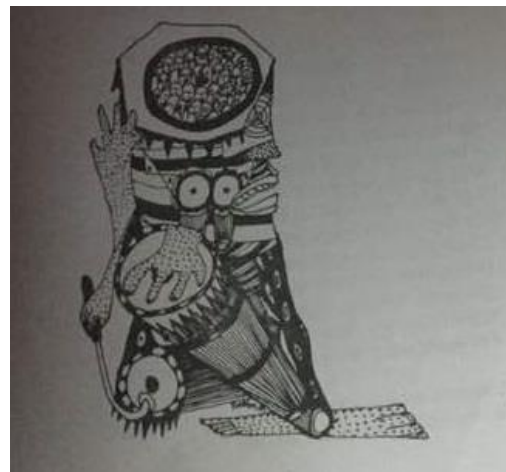
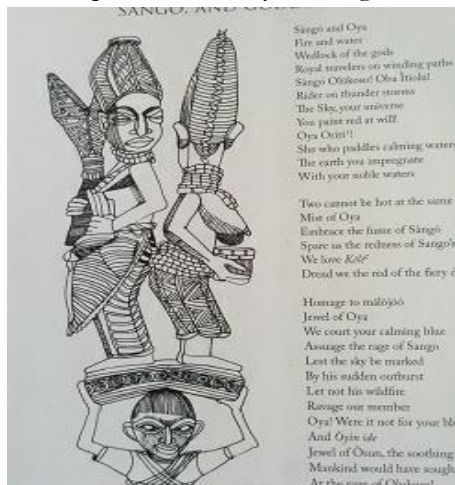
vein that the incorporation of the visual art in postcolonial Nigerian literature is seen as a postmodernist and an inter-disciplinary practice that brings multiple dimensions to the understanding of cultural and social realities. In this context visual art fills the gaps in written documentation, whereby, “Transmitted words and images have provided some limited understanding of cultural experiences where there is no history in written form. Images capture those memories, sometimes drawing on epics, legends, and even esoteric knowledge such as divination and rites of passage” (Falola 2019, 732).¹ Thus, this practice is described as “Interarts Aesthetics”, which developed from the intermedial art of incorporating visual art into the verbal text either for the purpose of increasing understanding of the text or for the purpose of aesthetics. In this case the exploration and construction of meaning occur at the intersection of language and image.

In postcolonial Nigerian literature, this postmodern practice marks a significant shift in the use of image and illustration in literary texts and dates back to between the middle and the later part of the 20th century. Until this development, the practice was associated with school textbooks, particularly science books and Children’s literature. Despite the increase in the creative practice of incorporating visual arts in script-texts of Nigerian adult literature in the past two decades, not much has been done to theorise this literary engagement in postcolonial Nigerian literary studies, which defines the interest of this paper. Apart from a self-analysing article by Toyin Falola on his co-authored collection of poems, *Etches on Fresh Waters*, which was published in his book, *In Praise of Greatness* (2019), Ayodeji Shittu’s exploration of plurimedial practice in Niyi Osundare’s *Village Voices* (2017), and his article, “Intermediality and Visual Orature in Modern Nigerian Poetry in English” (2020), no other critical work has been found that explored this practice in Nigerian literary and critical discourse. This paper attempts a survey of the practice of Plurimediality and Interarts relations between verbal/word-text and visual arts in modern Nigerian adult poetry in English.

The practice of incorporating visual arts into a verbal text is novel in Nigerian literature in English, and was typically associated with the Children’s literature; its occurrence in adult literature is very recent. Apart from the work of one or two writers published in the 20th century, the practice is essentially a 21st century one in Nigerian literature. Most of the available texts in this category in Nigerian literature were published from the turn of the 21st century and these include works like Niyi Osundare’s *Village Voices* (1984), Tony Marinho’s *Engraved* (2001); Remi Raji’s *Shurtlesongs America* (2003), Ademola Dasylyva’s *Songs of Odamolugbe* (2006), Toyin Falola and Vivek Bahl’s *Scoundrels of Deferral* (2006), Toyin Falola and Aderonke Adesanya’s *Etches on Fresh Waters* (2008), and Ben Okri and Rosemary Clunie’s *The Magic Lamp* (2019). While most of these works were done by merely including visual arts presumably suitable for associated verbal texts, one or two of them are products of extraordinary collaborations between visual artists and writers, particularly Ben Okri and Rosemary Clunie’s *The Magic Lamp* and to some extent, Toyin Falola and Aderonke Adesanya’s *Etches on Fresh Waters*.

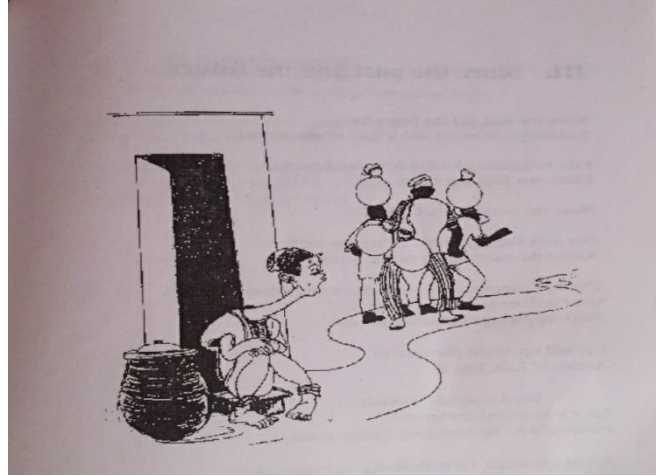
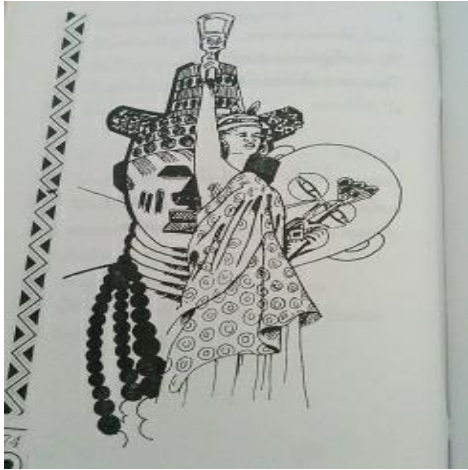
Plurimedial practice in modern Nigerian adult poetry in English manifests in the use of various visual art forms as illustrations. Analyses of relevant modern Nigerian poetry texts reveal three categories of visual illustrations. The first category is represented in the use of indigenous

visual art form which retains the original oral art forms of pre-colonial era. These form of visual art are found in Niyi Osundare's *Village Voices*, Remi Raji-Oyelade's *Shuttlesongs: America*, and Toyin Falola and Aderonke Adesanya's *Etches on Fresh Waters* as represented below. They show that the artists who produced these visual arts were influenced in their craft by the indigenous traditions of visual art practice. As Falola (2019, 758) observed, post-colonial Nigerian art, "from early pioneers to twenty-first century creators, ... has continuously looked both forward and back" drawing inspiration from "indigenous customs and ancient stories, combined with ever-changing styles and techniques, to convey messages for the present day."



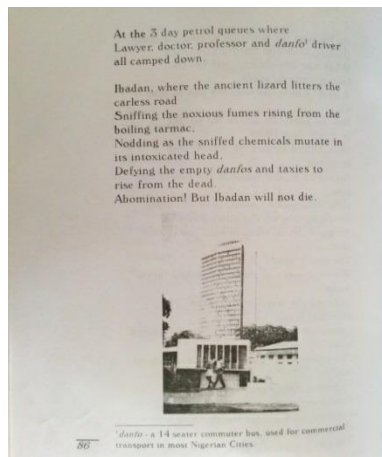
Figs. 1 & 2: Images of the Yoruba deities of Sango and Oya and Yoruba drum ensemble from *Etches on Fresh Waters* and *Village Voices*, respectively

The second form of visual art illustration identifiable in modern Nigerian literature in English is the category that employs contemporary representations of realities and experiences using pencil drawing, charcoal drawing, pen on paper and abstract drawing/arts of modern dimension. This category of visual art forms is found in Ademola Dasylyva's *Songs of Odamolugbe*, Falola and Adesanya's *Etches on Fresh Waters*, Remi Raji's *Shuttlesongs: America* and Tony Marinho's *Engraved*. This form of visual art illustration possesses artistic patterns which adopt local ideas and local art patterns and designs, but employ modern art and design techniques; they thus project the philosophical content of Nigerian social, political and economic thoughts.



Figs. 3 & 4: Images of the Yoruba deities of Sango and Oya from *Shuttlesongs: America & Songs of Odamolugbe*

The third category of visual art illustrations are photographs of real-life scenes which are inserted alongside poems. Examples of this are found in Falola & Bahl's *Scoundrels of Defferal* and Marinho's *Engraved*. One quality that differentiates this form of illustration is their easy interpretation. Although meanings derivable from these illustrative photographs are multilayered, as is this case with the more complex graphic arts, and other forms of artistic expression, it is easier for readers to associate themselves with plain photographs as representations of real and lived life, notwithstanding the fact the poet may have a different connotation in mind.



Figs. 5 & 6: Photographs of the Cocoa House in Ibadan and that of a homeless man: from *Engraved* and *Scoundrels of Defferal* respectively

Another dimension of the visual art illustrations and interarts aesthetics in modern Nigerian poetry in English is in the level of relations between the visual art illustration and the verbal or word-text. Plurimedial relations occur on several levels. McCloud (1994, 2) described seven (7) levels of relations that can exist between a visual image and illustration and word-text. These include word specific, picture specific, duo specific, additive, parallel, montage and interdependent relations.

A plurimedial or multimodal text is said to be word specific “where pictures illustrate but do not significantly add to a largely complete text”. It is said to be picture specific “where the picture dominates and words do not add significantly to the meaning of the image”. In a situation where words and illustrations in a multimodal text “send essentially the same message” it is described as duo specific. The relations is said to be additive when “words amplify or elaborate on an image or vice versa”. Image/illustrations is described as parallel where “words/image follow different courses without intersecting” and montage when “words are treated as integral parts of the picture”. That is, when illustrations in a text are significant or vital to the generation of meanings in the text. Finally, the image-text relations in a text is said to be “interdependent” when, “image/words together convey an idea that neither could convey alone”. In this case, the multimodal text presents a sort of visual-verbal balance of meaning (McCloud 1994, 2).

In the modern Nigerian poetry texts identified in this paper, three broad levels of visual art illustrations and verbal/word-text are recognizable, namely montage, also known as integral relations, word-specific relations, in which case the visual art illustration is merely complementary to the word-text and additive. The montage and integral level of relation between the visual art illustration and the word-text is found across the texts. This is particularly demonstrated and amplified in a new dimension in four of the six texts in such situation in which the visual illustration also functions as a form of narration or visual orature. Visual orature is a form of visual representation of verbal art forms and oral traditions such as myths, legends, oral narratives, and oral history. Such visual art serves as visual textualisation of oral collective consciousness, values, aesthetics and imagination. Examples of this form of interarts aesthetics are found in Osundare’s *Villages Voices*, Raji-Oyelade’s *Shuttlesongs: America*, Falola and Adesanya’s *Etches on Fresh Waters* and Dasyuva’s *Songs of Odamolugbe*.

In Niyi Osundare’s *Village Voices*, for example, the visual illustration that accompanies the poem “A Dialogue of the Drums” (1985, 5) serves as a visual orature. The visual art is an image of an ensemble of Yoruba drums with different drums identified, including the Talking drum (*gangan* or *dundun*), *omele* and a *bata* drum. These drums belong to an ensemble which is traditionally associated with or used for the purpose of disseminating information and for royal purposes; they are also used for entertainment. The talking drum provides coded messages which the initiates are trained to decode or understand. Drumming in Yoruba oral literature has been described as “drum poetry” and is a critical aspect of Yoruba oral performance. According to Sotunsa (2009, 6), “The esoteric nature of drum poetry deepens its aesthetic value such that only those acquainted with it understand its language and are able to derive special pleasure from the art of decoding its messages”.

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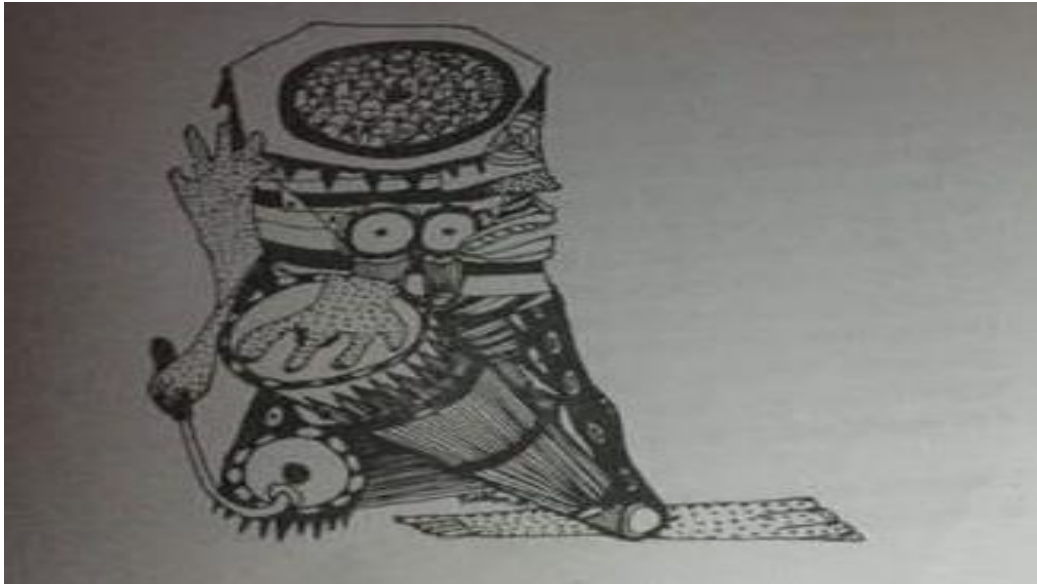


Fig 7: Image of Yoruba drum ensemble including the *Gangan/Dundun, Omele,* and *Bata* from *Village Voices*

Sotunsa further explained that the Yoruba drum poetry texts are derived from other forms of Yoruba verbal art forms, especially the traditional lore such as proverbs, praise chants, witty sayings, and maxims (2009, 10). Therefore, a visual presentation of drums in modern Nigerian poetry is suggestive of a range of oral traditional practices and drums thus become a repository of deep cultural and indigenous meanings. The discourse surrounding the drum and drumming in Yoruba oral tradition is described as the drum lore and its significance in postcolonial Nigerian literature can be seen in its deployment in modern Nigerian literature, especially in the dramatic and poetic genres. Its use in the literature is a reference to the oral traditional aspects of the culture. Some of the traditional functions of drum and drumming among the Yoruba are described by Osundare in stanza 7 of the above-named poem:

I will not only give legs to my coiling words
I will also give them the fang of facts
When last did your hands touch *reso*,
Which celebrates the coming of a newborn,
Ogbele which warms the grave of the dead one
Where were you when *adan* filled the night
With the shame of *Apeloko*
Who proved too sharp with the neighbour's yams?

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

Another example of this category of visual art use is found in Raji-Oyelade's *Shuttlesongs America* and Toyin Falola & Aderonke Adesanya *Etches on Fresh Waters*. Visual images of two Yoruba divinities, Sango and Oya, are deployed in both collections of poems as representations of Yoruba oral traditions and epistemology. Interestingly, the separate deployments of the images of these deities by the authors occur within the transnational context.

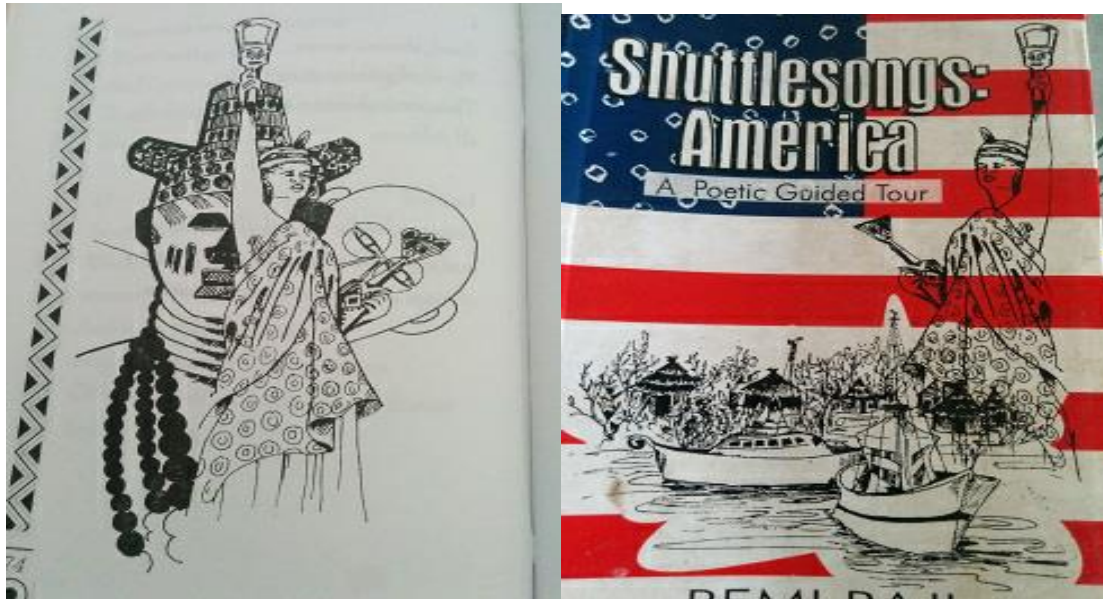
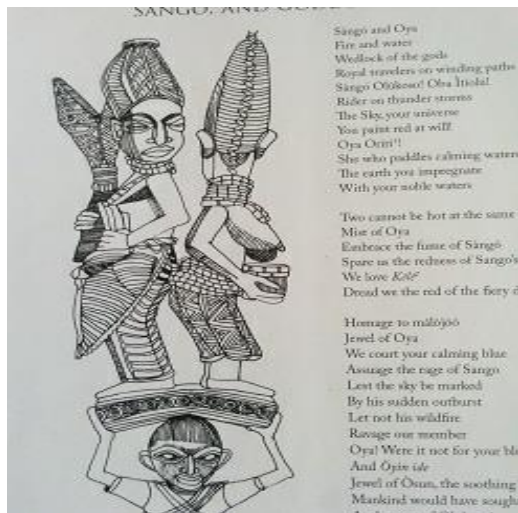


Fig. 8: Images of the Yoruba deities of Sango and Oya from *Shuttlesongs: America*

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

The poet substitutes the features of the America's tower of liberty with those of Sango, the Yoruba god of thunder and those of his faithful wife, Oya. Instead of the stola, the Yoruba woman, Oya, wears an obviously African-designed fabric; instead of the crown with the seven spikes, she wears what appears to be Oya's traditional head gear. Again, instead of a torch, the African woman carries the *Ose* of Sango (sacred Axe of Sango) and instead of the tabula ansata, she carries in her left arm what appears to be Oya's insignia. Both the torch and the sacred Axe of Sango symbolize light or enlightenment. The orature status and oral traditional source the image is evident in an oriki of Sango provided in Falola and Adesanya's *Etches on Fresh Waters*.

In Falola & Adesanya's *Etches on Fresh Waters*, the oriki of Sango and Oya appears on the dedication page. It is instructive to note that Falola and Adesanya dedicate their collection of poems to these same Yoruba divinities. In the dedication both Sango and Oya are praised:



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

(Stanza 1)

Fig. 9: Images of the Yoruba deities of Sango and Oya in *Etches on Fresh Waters*

In Yoruba tradition, Oya was the most faithful of the three wives of Sango and was said to have remained with him till the end. Therefore, the deployment of the visual images of Sango and that of his wife, Oya, as the cover design, and as illustration on page 74 of Raji-Oyelade's *Shuttlesongs: America* and the subject on the dedication page of Falola and Adesanya's *Etches on Fresh Waters* both invoke a body of very important Yoruba myths. Both Raji-Oyelade and Falola wrote their collections in the United States of America. As Africans in America, they experienced an inevitable culture contact and interrogation as postcolonial subjects either consciously or sub-consciously. As Shittu (2020b, 16) observes, "This juxtaposition of these icons and myths represents in a way the scars of colonial conquest and the post-colony's mask of resistance. But at the same time, it illustrates the consequences of the globalization of cultures and how it engenders a transformation

of the semantics of culture and contexts of experience”. Oha described these myths and divinities in themselves and as used, as “texts of collective consciousness, which are now used in framing the post-colonial presence of the past”; and function as a ‘semiotic system’ that is useful for the purpose of re-apprehension and re- articulation of social experience (2009, 187).

The word-specific level of relation between visual art illustrations and the verbal or word-text, in which case the visual illustration is merely complementary, is realized in a situation in which the visual art illustrations serve mere aesthetic or ornamental function. That is, they do not play an inevitable role in the interpretation of the poetry’s verbal texts. In this case, the visual art illustrations and the verbal text can be separated without having adverse effects on the meaning of the text. This dimension of the interarts aesthetics is observable in all the collections of poems identified in this paper. An example is the visual illustration of the poem “Compatriots arise” from Ademola Dasyuva’s *Songs of Odamolugbe* on page 54.



Fig. 10: an image of a soldier wearing a combination of military & civilian dresses from *Songs of Odamolugbe*

The visual art illustration depicts a man in a mixture of both military and civilian dresses. He wears a traditional cap over a military cap, an *agbada* on top of a khaki shirt, trousers and a pair of boots. The man, looking sideways, adjusts his *agbada* with one hand while holding his firearm with the other. A simple reading of the visual illustration portrays an abnormal combination of military and civilian systems of governance by a military ruler. It depicts apparent contradictions and bipolarity inherent in the personality of the country’s ruling class. This is reminiscent of the style of the military rulers in Nigerian history, especially of retired military Generals who ended up occupying top positions in the country’s civilian government.

When read alongside the poem, we see an agitation against the amphibious and hypocritical nature of the Nigerian military leadership. This is indicated in the first line each of the first four stanzas which call on “compatriots” to “arise” and “arrest”, a call that is grounded within the matrix of the Nigerian National anthem, “Arise O compatriots”. Thus, the poem is a call on Nigerians to rise up in resistance against the political, economic and psychological oppression imposed on the people by their rulers. This is voiced in stanza 1:

Compatriots arise, arrest
Obai’s enthralled dignity,
As we watch her squandered prosperity,
Leaders in vain glory transgress,
And leaches the gamblers’ congress

In instances of this form of visual art-verbal text relation, visual art illustrations, in addition to making aesthetic statements, is used to enrich the poetic text in order to make it more appealing to the reader. Because of the brevity of poems which reduces its narrative depth such as in the description of physical appearance of characters, visual art illustrations provide additional picture for the reader as supplementary to verbal figures of speech. In the poem above, the visual art illustration of a man that wears traditional attire over his military uniform suggests a range of meaning including a desire to deceive the people and confuse them about his true identity.

However, while the visual illustration supplements the meaning of the poem, it does not supply any new information which is not already in the poem. It merely reemphasizes a part of the poem stated in stanza 4, especially in line 3 of the stanza, “Compatriots arise, arrest/This siren of frightening convoys in daylight/As bandits parade as democrats.” In other words, the visual art illustration is complementary rather than integral. This is what McCloud (1994, 2) describes as word-specific; that is, a situation “where pictures illustrate but do not significantly add to a largely complete text”. The function of the visual art illustration in this poem can also be said to demonstrate an element of additive relation between the visual art illustration and the verbal or word-text since the visual art illustration actually amplify or elaborate on the verbal text.

On a general note, the use of visual arts to illustrate word-texts in modern Nigerian poetry in English, apart from serving to mediate or interphase the printed text and meaning by giving meaning to imagination, is also a form of performance. It can be said that visual arts or other forms of illustration perform the same functions in printed poetry, when garnished with art, that performance does in oral poetry to readers or audience’s imagination. They create image in the mind and engender access to meaning.

Conclusion

Plurimedial practice of incorporating visual art illustrations in modern Nigerian adult literature opens a vista of interpretative dimensions of Nigerian literature. It is an inter-disciplinary

practice in the humanities which explores the relationship among creative and critical practices in the humanities. As an aesthetic strategy, it is an inevitable shift beyond the initial traditional aesthetic marker of the early postcolonial discourses in modern Nigerian and African literature. Described as interarts aesthetic, this creative practice is a postmodern strategy of expressing the various dimensions of the postcolonial experience. It demonstrates the integrative and interrogative natures of the postcolonial consciousness, especially in an increasing globalized and inter-disciplinary terrain of knowledge production. Interarts aesthetic in Nigerian literature demonstrates the convergence of the traditional, the modern and the postmodern in the continuous negotiation of the postcolonial identity; it reveals the evolving nature of the postcolonial consciousness and the cultural texture of post-colony as an identity schema.

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