

# IVIE FOLK POETRY: A STUDY IN POETIC GRAMMAR

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Ivie (North Ibie by official designation) is one of the dialect clusters of the Northern Edoid languages of the Kwa group of languages. It is a tonal language. In this article, we try to show the phonological, morphological, as well as prosodic determinants of versification in Ivie. The phonic effect of alliterative repetition and clausal arrangement within the verse create some mnemonic effect which is vital for the spoken performance.

L'ivié est une des langues édoïdes du nord et appartient donc au groupe kwa. C'est une langue à ton. Dans cette étude de la grammaire de la poésie ivié, on a tenté de voir les structures de la versification, en démontrant les processus phonologiques, morphologiques, et prosodiques. Les tons y jouent un rôle dominant.

## 0. INTRODUCTION

Ivie (Ibie in official designation) is one of the dialect clusters of the Northern Edoid languages of the Kwa group of languages. The speakers of the language live in the Etsako East Local Government Area of Edo State in what originally was Mid-Western Nigeria. The language is tonal.

As distinguished from normal language use, poetic grammar is the structure of language material used in verse. Poetic grammar explores the phonological, the morphological, as well as the prosodic or verse system of the language. Thus, its interest is both linguistic and literary.

Unlike English which exercises a stress-timed meter system, Ivie utilizes a tonal syllabic system. By this we mean that the rhythm is syllabic, having for source the chest pulse; it thus depends on tonal alternations. These tones are high and low tones which are more or less fixed but go along with other changing tones that are either rising or falling. This article will examine the phonological and syntactic dimensions of language use in the two poetic texts *Gbigbi* and *Tokomito*.

### I. *Gbigbi*

1. **gbigbì**      **ók'h'ázizè**  
noise^noise    story^azize  
Gbigbi, the story of Azize<sup>1</sup>
2. **ázizè**      **ázíz'ókyiò**  
azize    azize^devil  
Azize, Azize, the devil
3. **ókyiò**      **óky'ìválá**  
devil    evil^flaming  
Okyio, the flaming evil genius
4. **ìválá**      **ìvál'ótsé**  
flaming    flaming^shot (of a hunter)  
Ivala, hot shot of a hunter
5. **ótsé**      **óts'ígótsè**  
shot    shot^stalker  
Otse, the brave stalker
6. **ígótsè**      **ígóts'ìdù**  
stalker    stalker^ìvon  
Igotse, with the lion's awesomeness

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<sup>1</sup> Azize is a mysterious folk villain. In Edoid culture he is thought of as a sorcerer or evil one, a native doctor with supernatural powers.

7. **ìdù ìdù'ònjèlè**  
lion lion^deviant/potent  
Idu, possessor of potent powers
8. **ònjèlè ònjèl'ékè**  
deviant deviant^counterfeit  
Onyele, conceited counterfeit like
9. **ékè ék'íyòkhò**  
counterfeit fake^awesome  
Eke, fright infusing (awesome)
10. **íyòkhò íyòkh'égú**  
awesome double-faced  
Iyokho, double-faced
11. **ègú n'ò^ná gbà gbàlà khîevá**  
double-faced who broke road in^two  
Egu, who ran astride the road
12. **n'ò ná vâl'ágèlékpé**  
who ran shelter^with^deceitful^one  
sheltering in the bosom of
13. **ágèlékpé óruò pì**  
deceitful^one he^gripped^him fast  
Agelekpe who gripped him
14. **àb'òshìshì ònw'úgbá**  
like^ant it^grips^locust^bean  
fast as the ant grasps the locust bean
15. **ùgbá lèkè lèkè àbí**  
locust^bean smooth smooth like  
smooth and sleek like
16. **ánítsò òtóbòudù**  
locust it^thumps^chest  
the locust pounds its chest.
17. **édómèè élú'mé nú wá ró**  
darling what you^saw you^did not  
Darling what hindered you from
18. **ny'á kè shíná mhè**  
cook food keep^for me  
cooking and keeping food for me?
19. **nú rh'úgw'òkòkò j'àmhè dá**  
that^you take^bone millipede drink^water  
You who drank with the skeleton of the millipede
20. **n'ú rh'úgw'òhìmi kpél'ifà**  
that^you with^bone^of^dead strike^divination^shells  
and with the bone of the dead struck the ifa beads.
21. **gbókúmè gbókúmè**  
praise^singer praise^singer  
Praise singer, praise singer.
22. **áyá n'ítsò tébélé**  
chest locust short

The chest of the locust so short.

23. **ágbò      álí      ìlìmì      é      tóbòádókó**  
 the^quick and the^dead they strike^the^big^drums  
 The quick and the dead strike the 'big drum',
24. **àdókó      nì      gèlè      gbódè**  
 big^drums of    parting ways  
 the drum of the parting of the worlds.
25. **ámò^òpfo      áìvó      ótàò**  
 today          it^ends food^of^noon  
 It ends today, the final end.

## II. Tokomito<sup>2</sup>

1. **tòkòmítòé      tòkòmítò**  
 touch^I^ narrate touch^I^ narrate  
 Tokomito, tokomito (xylophone strokes onomatopoeic reference);
2. **ò    r'úgbégbé    w'èrhé    kyá**  
 who with^top    fetch^fire walk  
 who bears along fire with a top;
3. **w'èrhè    kyá ní    gbálúmè**  
 take^fire walk that^is latecomer  
 torch-bearing late invitee to the coven (gathering),
4. **gbálúmè    ní    gbùsómótè**  
 latecomer of    charisma  
 late invitee whose charisma is overwhelming,
5. **àdígyá    dígyá    gb'ógégé**  
 struggle struggle hit^ogege (sweet fruit)  
 struggling like the ogege plant,
6. **ògégé    èká    ògég'úvié**  
 ogege bead^like ogege^(uvie)^beadlike  
 beautiful like the eka beads, expensive as the uvie beads.
7. **àgádám'óbò mí      rá      ky'éfá**  
 thumb/index^finger^space strike the^guitar (musical instrument)  
 With the thumb/index finger gap I strike the guitar.
8. **òròbò    ny'ákè lé    kékéké**  
 self^cook and^eat in    small^bits  
 You stingy one who cooks and eats alone.
9. **ójí      n'ótà      ólìmì      òátò**  
 rat^of^noon corpse^(idiot) he^is stingy  
 It all ends today, a final performance.

The verses are arranged in tonal meters made up of different coda. They are syllabic, relying on chest pulsation with frequent structural repetition.

- I: **gbìgbì, ókh'ázizè**                      (2 + 4)  
**ázizè, áziz'ókyiò**                      (3 + 4)  
**ókyiò, óky'ìvalá**                      (2 + 4)  
**ìvalá, ìval'òtsé**                      (3 + 4)

<sup>2</sup> **tokomito** is a formulaic reference to narrating perhaps akin to **okye** 'tell a story' or **mito** 'let me narrate'. It is onomatopoeic in reference to the striking of the xylophone boards.

II: <b>tòkòmítòé, tòkòmítò</b>	(4 + 4)
<b>ò r'úgbégbé, w'èrhé kyá</b>	(4 + 3)
<b>w'èrhé kyá, ní gbálúmè</b>	(3 + 4)
<b>gbálúmè, nì gbùsómótè</b>	(3 + 5)

It can be seen that the vocalic nucleus or center in the word contributes to the determination of the syllabic measure or rhythmic beat. This measure in *Gbigbi* ranges between 6 and 7 while in *Tokomito* it is between 7 and 8. The variation in syllabic measure is a result of vowel syncopation which is observable between the two words of the second segment of each poetic line, e.g., **okhe azize** → **okh'azize**; **azize okyio** → **aziz'okyio**. Besides, it would seem that there is caesura or pause in each succeeding line. This creates syntactic parallelism and gives room for word repetition which produces a kind of enjambement or straddling of two lines which produces both phonic and structural rhythm. In both poems this makes for topic emphases.

The opening words in line 1 of both poems have even tones consisting of alternating high and low tones. These tones are followed by changing or uneven tones comprising rising and falling tones. Thus, all through the two poems, the first lines that carry over from the preceding lines maintain a regularity of tones.

It is significant at this point to note the use of caesura for marking a syntactic and content/thematic distinction. While **gbigbi** and **tokomito** serve as formulaic openings as well as topic reminders, the words introducing the caesura serve equally as repetitive reminders of topic and as emphasizees. They also contribute strongly to the rhythmic pattern of the lines. Thus, in *Gbigbi*, **azize** reminds the reader of topic mentioned while **aziz'okyio** further describes or specifies the referent.

In *Tokomito*, the same pattern of treatment is adopted even though there is inversion in **w'èrhé kya ní gbalumè** specifying an action characteristic of **gbalumè** 'Gbalume who takes fire along with him'. Note that normal syntactic structure would be **gbalume n'o w'èrhe a kya** 'Gbalume who takes along fire in his walk' but this has been inverted to **w'èrhé kya ní gbalumè**. The syntactic inversion is motivated by the prosodic need of rhythmic conformity through enjambing or spanning structures. Such prosody-motivated syntactic changes can be noted in *Gbigbi*, where the associative marker **ní** is elided: **aziz'okyio** and not **azize n'okyio**. The same structural elision is found in **ivale otse** → **ots'igotse**, **igots'idu** → **idu'onjele**, **onjel'eke** → **ek'iyokho**.

The next major characteristic of the folk poetry under consideration is the subject/rhythm of theme or themateme/rhythm correlation. In *Tokomito*, the rhythmic measure is of the pattern 8-7-7-8 when the subject or Gbalume description is given, but from line five to the end, when the deeds of Gbalume are narrated, the rhythmic measure is one of 8-9-9-9.

In *Gbigbi* there is a similar correspondence: an even alternation of 6-7-6-7-6-7-7-6-7 measure up to the tenth line where a measure of 10 indicates a change from sheer description to narrative action. This is followed by a regularity of 7-7-7-8-8 measure, the change of rhythmic pattern being motivated by a change in information. The measure of 10 recurs in line 17 to indicate narrative comment. On the whole, there is variety in syllabic measure/rhythm. Thus, *Gbigbi* brings about rhythmic parallelism while in *Tokomito* there is some measure of alternation. It is pertinent to observe that much of the variation is a result of vowel syncope resulting from progressive and (sometimes) regressive assimilation.

While the verse is highly alliterative in the display of assonance and consonance, it could be said that there is no deliberate effort to produce rhymed verse by a display of alliteration: in *Gbigbi*, **z-z z-z** (of *Azize*), **ky-ky-ky** (of *Okyio*), **-v- v-v- -v-** (of *Ivala*) **-ts- -ts- -ts-** (of *Igotse*); in *Tokomito*: **wh-rh...ky, wh-rh...ky, gb- gb- gb-**. By and large, what seems to be most determinative in the rhyme and rhythmic pattern is the triple repeat scheme of certain words (**azize, okyio, ivala, otse igotse**, and so on). This is done for referential highlighting and emphasis. The ensuing continuity of referent helps to

establish interlinear relationship. In *Tokomito*, this comprises the colon;<sup>3</sup> **kya, w'erhe kya, ni gbaluma**. In *Gbigbi*, there is **azize, okyio, ivala, otse, igose idu**, and so on. This, along with the use of caesura shows progression in thought group in the content structuring of the poem. Textually, the two folk poems show a characteristic genre pattern. There is a formulaic opening which announces not just the topic but also the genre, e.g., **ghigbi (okh'azize)**. This first colon is a characteristic jingle-like opening whereas **okha azize** (the story of Azize) tells the thematic concern of what follows. In the same way, **tokomito** is jingle-like and formulaic. The word **mito** 'let me narrate' points to the genre. In ordinary practice *Tokomito* is recited with the performer alternately touching the outstretched leg as of a xylophone.

The formulaic opening is followed by the subject comprising the noun and its epithet.

In *Gbigbi*, the noun **azize** is followed by its epithet **okyio**. Thus, there is **azize okyio, okyio ivala, ivala otse, otse igotse, igotse idu**. These are nominal constructions with a continuity of the same referent who, by a pile up of epithets, produces a mystifying personality. In another sense it is the same referent; one has, therefore, to do with a string of appositives. Thus, in *Gbigbi*, there is **azize** and its subsequent chain of epithets **okyio, ivala, otse**, and so on. What is to be noted here is the nominal as well as the epithet roles of the same words in constituting a chain type of narrative.

In *Tokomito*, the same pattern of noun and qualifier is repeated, but here we have clausal qualifiers: **tokomito** (noun), **o r'ugb'oghe w'erhe** (qualifier). In the succeeding line, there is inversion marked by parallelism, e.g., **w'erhe kya ni gbalume: w'erhe kya** a gerundive, **ni** an associative marker, **gbalume** a nominal head word. As explained earlier, the normal order would be **gbalume n'o w'erhe a kya**. The succeeding line **gbalume ni gbusumote** uses emphatic repetition of **gbalume** and a contracted inverted clausal form in **ni gbusomote**. What follows after is what Jason (1976) would refer to as "routine clauses", i.e., the actual narrative telling the story or the action and situation (cf. *Gbigbi* 11–14). In the end, there is a characteristic conclusion which sums up the circumstance of the termination of the story. In *Gbigbi* it is **amo' pfo, alivo' tao**, literally, 'it is ended or consummated, the final end'.

In *Tokomito* there is a similar conclusion. These conclusions are universal comments. In *Tokomito* there is circumstantial emphasis by cumulative attribution of qualities that are negative. These give circumstantial value in being figurative.

From a functional perspective, the verses seem to suit the younger generation which does not require much abstraction. Hence, syntactically as well as prosodically, the rhythmic pattern is such as provides a mnemonic structure that helps memorization and recall.

**Diction.** The diction of the two poems is complex and figurative. In *Gbigbi*, in describing Azize, the attributes of being 'an evil genius', 'a hot shot', and 'awesome' (**igotse idu**) are used rather allusively for fear of the subject or referent. Besides, Azize, otherwise referred to elsewhere as Otse, is shown to be secretive in the display of potency of power. Elsewhere in the chain of likening of the attributes of Azize, he is likened to Egu in his fleeing action that plunges him into deeper trouble like falling into the trap of Aagalekpe. In the end, there is admixture of paradox of the living and the dead sounding the biggest of the play drums with clanging tunes. All 'ends in the day', in other words there is not another day.

As earlier hinted, there is use of metaphoric language as well as other forms of comparison. There is the linguistic blend of repetition for purposes of specification, i.e., an image is referred to and it is reinforced by linking with a nominal object that displays the attribute. Thus, for example, the **ivala** attribute of evil genius as found in Otse or the

<sup>3</sup> Colon (plural: cola) is a contiguous phrase, e.g., in *Gbigbi* **azize, aziz'okyio**, which in the poem constitutes a nominal with its specifier.

**onyeḷe** attribute as displayed in Eke. There is use of simile as in **ugba ḷeḷe ḷeḷe abi anitso ọtobọ'du** 'smooth and sleek like the locust pounds its chest'.

In *Tokomito*, there is a peculiar use of words in unusual contexts to produce paradoxes as when Gbalume is said to take fire with a spinning top. His strangeness is further revealed in absurd action rendered in language that culminates in showing his selfishness in cooking and eating stealthily, in subtle exaggeration of his stinginess even though like the stingy man he is, he likes nibbling at others' food. Semantically, *Gbigbi* uses a lot of hunters' imagery whereas *Tokomito* uses imagery of the weird and witchcraft.

What should be observed of the two folk poems is that, in a way, they are satirical pieces with complex and figurative use of language to capture complex imagery. In comparison to the performance of the poems, the meaning is secondary to the sheer rhythmic recitation among the younger generation for whom sound for mnemonic purposes supersedes meaning.

## CONCLUSION

We can make the following generalizations about these two Ivie poems. First, they function as rhymes not expressive lyrics, hence the mnemonic consideration which is a form of memory aid to the performer and even the audience. Such an aid provides an instant clue to recall what follows each line.

Structurally, both poems follow the same pattern of thematic treatment: the formulaic opening, the description of subject, the narrative action, and then the conclusion. Their form, rhythm, and rhyming structure is such that from generation to generation, they can continue to exist without change. This perhaps, is responsible for the downplaying of the semantic/thematic relevance and the concentration of emphasis on the sound/performance relevance.

## REFERENCE

Jason, Heda. 1976. *Ethnopoetry*. Bonn: *Linguistica Biblica*.