

The Yorùbá Royal Bards: Their Work and Relevance in the Society

AKINTUNDE AKINYEMI

Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

The paper describes the social function performed by the Yorùbá royal bards in the society. The data are from the Oyo-Yorùbá communities, but *mutatis mutandis* they can be seen to represent all the Yorùbáland, because cultural variation between different areas is limited. The bards sing and chant in honour of the kings, and they also announce the advent of important guests by drumming or piping the names and attributes of such guests as they enter the royal palace. The social responsibilities of royal bards include entertainment, the description of the qualities of the character and physical appearance of patrons, historical documentation, and image-making for their patrons. Socio-economic changes, however, have caused considerable changes in the roles of these bards. Since the economic status and the social prestige of the traditional rulers has declined, most of the male bards have become freelance minstrels in addition to the traditional trade, and they go about entertaining the public at social gatherings and even on the street. Female bards, on the other hand, have stayed loyal to the palace. (Ed.)

Keywords: Divine kingship, Yoruba, bard

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a descriptive account of the social function performed by the Yorùbá royal bards within the context of their poetic production. Although this work is based on the data collected from the Òyó-Yorùbá communities, the presence of royal bards (palace chanters, singers, poets and drummers) is noticed at the palace of most, if not all, the important kings in Yorùbáland¹. These bards sing or chant in honour of the kings and they also announce and honour important guests to the palace by drumming or piping the names and attributes of such guests as they enter into the palace. Since royal bards are found all over Yorùbáland, the bards make use of any of the Yorùbá dialects to deliver their chant, depending on the locality of the chanter². In other words, the style of delivery of the royal bards might differ from one Yorùbá dialect group to the other; the content remains virtually the same.

¹ Although only the male royal bards are often found at the entrance of the palace, this does not rule out the existence of the female royal bards who often stay within the palace since they are part and parcel of the royal family.

² The most common tunes are: *ràrà* in Òyó, *alámò* and *àsámò* in Èkìtì, *olele*, *òsàré* and *àdámò* in Ifè and Ìjèsà, *ègè* in Ègbá (Abèdókúta), *àdàn* in Ondó, *òséghè* in Òwò, etc.

However, we have restricted this work to data from Òyó communities for several reasons³. First, the Òyó-Yorùbá dialect is the closest to the standard Yorùbá. Yorùbá as a language is spoken by about 25 million people in the south-western part of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and in some parts of the Republics of Benin and Togo⁴. As rightly observed by Oyelaran (1978: 626), there are several dialects of the language but the closest to the standard variety of the language is the Òyó dialect. Speaking much earlier, Bamgbose (1966: 2) also confirmed that “for the purpose of education, writing and contact between persons of different dialects, the type of Yorùbá used is a ‘*koine*’, which may be called standard Yorùbá. This ‘*koine*’ is based on the Òyó dialect”. Secondly, the art of palace chanting is more advanced in the communities embracing the old Òyó empire, from where the art probably spilled over to other Yorùbá communities with the fall of the empire towards the end of the 18th century.⁵ The disintegration of the old Òyó empire paved the way for the autonomy of several communities in Yorùbáland and this encouraged more *Obas* (kings) to keep praise singers at their palaces permanently, whose duty it was to sing their praises all day long.⁶ It appears, then, that the content of the royal chants remained virtually the same across the Yorùbá dialect groups, thus making the bards’ work and relevance in Yorùbá society identical.

1. THE ÒYÓ YORÙBÁ ROYAL BARDS

Virtually all Òyó-Yorùbá royal bards perform in a tune peculiar to the Òyó speaking communities, known as *ràrà*⁷. According to Wolff (1962: 45), “*rara* is a chanted variety of *oríkì*. The term is used to refer to any kind of eulogy chanted or recited in which various types of personal names, including *oríkì*, play a prominent part”. Names cited in such eulogies are referred to as “good” names; the fact that they are “good” increases the sentimental values which the Yoruba listener attaches to these chants. Royal bards could be male or female. The male royal bards, otherwise called *akígbe-oba*, *arókin-oba*, *alusèkèrè-oba* or *oníràrà-oba*, are of two types: those that chant to the accompaniment of “gourd rattle” (*sèkèrè* or *ajé*), called *alajé* or *onísèkèrè/alusèkèrè* and those that chant to the accompaniment of “metal clavicles” (*aro*), who are also called

³ The major Yorùbá communities speaking the Òyó-Yorùbá dialect are: Òyó, ìbàdàn, Ònkò, Òsun, Orígbó, Òyun, and Ìgbómìnà.

⁴ The Yorùbá communities in Benin and Togo speak the Òyó dialect.

⁵ Read more about the fall of the old Òyó Empire and the rise of the new Òyó Empire in Àtandá (1973).

⁶ Before the fall of the old Òyó Empire the only accredited king (*Oba*) who reigns and owns a palace is Aláàfin. Other rulers in the empire are not kings in the real sense of the word because they can neither own palaces nor keep praise singers like Aláàfin.

⁷ Read Akinyemi (1991a) for a detailed discussion on the source of the *ràrà* chant.

*alaro*⁸. The style of delivery of both sets of royal bards is identical; their difference is in the instruments that accompany their chant. For instance, they both acclaim their patrons in a long solo eulogy as in the following poetic lines chanted in honour of *Aséyìn* of *Ìséyìn*:

<i>Adéyerí, omo Alájogun.</i>	
<i>Adéyerí, omo Wúràólá.</i>	
<i>Adéyerí, omo Wúràólá, Ìyàndá.</i>	
<i>Ìyàndá, A-báni-sòrò-má-tanni-je.</i>	
<i>Adéyerí omo Alájogun.</i>	5
<i>A à féná, a ní ò jò</i>	
<i>Aféná tán, oníkálukú n gbénu sá kiri.</i>	
<i>Aaka baba Ìrókò</i>	
<i>N ó k'Aséyìn, oba àrànse</i>	
<i>Òyìnbó, omo Èjìdé Àgbé</i>	10
<i>Oyinlolá, Oláwóore</i>	
<i>Asoba-jagun</i>	
<i>Peran-borí, Peran-bofá.</i>	
<i>Oláwóore, abèyìn-àrò-gelemò-gelemò</i>	
<i>Ó dèèkínní, onísé Ìbàdàn dé,</i>	15
<i>Wón logun jà ni Mókin-ilé</i>	
<i>Arówólóyè, oba Oláwóore</i>	
<i>Wón ní mo kí Séríkí, mo kí Balógun;</i>	
<i>Mo kótùún, mo kòsì.</i>	
<i>Ó dèèkejì èwè,</i>	20
<i>Onísé ará Ìbàdàn dé.</i>	
<i>Wón lógun jà ní Mòkín-ilé.</i>	
<i>Arówólóyè,</i>	
<i>Wón ní won ó kí Séríkí dáadáa;</i>	
<i>Won ó kótùún, won ó kòsì Ìbàdàn.</i>	25
<i>Igbà tó dèèketa èwèwè⁹</i>	

Translation:

Adéyerí,¹⁰ the offspring or the warriors.

Adéyerí, the child of *Wúràólá*¹¹

Adéyerí, the child of *Wúràólá*, *Ìyàndá*¹²

⁸ Each of the descriptive nouns is formed by adding a derivational morpheme or prefix (*a/oní*) to a verb phrase (verb + noun). Thus, *akígbe-oba* means the-one-that-acclaims-the-king; *arókin-oba* means the-chronicler-of-the-king; *onísèkèrè/alusèkèrè-oba* means the-one-that-plays-on-the-gourd-rattle-for-the-king; *oníràrà-oba* means the-kings'-praise-singer and *alaro-oba* means the-one-that-plays-on-the-metal-clavicles-for-the-king.

⁹ Data collected at the palace of *Aséyìn* of *Ìséyìn* on 25th February 1993. *Ìséyìn* is about 25 miles to the north-west of *Ọyó* town.

¹⁰ *Adéyerí* - the crown fits the head - is the family name of that particular *Aséyìn*.

¹¹ *Wúràólá* - the gold of honour - is the name of the king's mother.

¹² *Ìyàndá* is the king's personal *oríkì* usually given along with other names at birth. It means someone who has been specially created.

Ìyàndá, the-one-that-is-not-deceitful.	
Adéyerí, the-offspring-of-the-warriors	5
We didn't blow air into the fire and we claim the fire isn't burning.	
After blowing the fire to burn, they all ran away.	
Aaka ¹³ the lord of Ìrókò ¹⁴	
I will praise Aséyìn ¹⁵ the merciful king.	
The light-complexioned child of Èjìdé ¹⁶ of Àgbé ¹⁷ lineage	10
Oyinlolá, Oláwóore ¹⁸	
A warrior king	
The one that slaughters animal to his destiny and Ifá ¹⁹	
Oláwóore, whose kitchen is full of roasted meat	
The first time a message came from Ìbàdàn ²⁰	15
That war is ravaging Mòkín, ²¹ the source,	
Arówólóyè ²² king Oláwóore,	
It was said that I sent greetings to Séríkí ²³ and Balógun; ²⁴	
I greeted the high chiefs on the left and the right sides.	
The second time,	20
The message came from Ìbàdàn,	
That war is ravaging Mòkín, the source.	
Arówólóyè,	
Good will was sent to Séríkí,	
They should also extend greetings to the high chiefs on	
the right and the left sides in Ìbàdàn.	25
Then came the message the third time	

The royal female bards perform a special and restricted form of *ràrà* known as *yùngbà* in all Òyó-Yorùbá communities. This is a kind of court music performed

¹³ *Aaka* (*Lecaniodiscus Cupaniodes*)- 'Sapindaceae' is a type of tough but small tree found on rocky hills used for making rafters, hafts and pestles.

¹⁴ *Ìrókò* - African Teak (*Chlorophora Excelsa*) - *Moraceae*. The wood, which is hard, durable and ant-proof, is used for furniture.

¹⁵ *Aséyìn* is the title of the traditional ruler of Ìséyìn.

¹⁶ *Èjìdé* is used to address twins without mentioning their real names.

¹⁷ *Àgbé* is one of the Yorùbá lineages on which the *oríkì orílè* (lineage praise/descriptive poetry) is based.

¹⁸ *Oyinlolá* - honour is (like) honey - and *Oláwóore* - honour is looking for goodness - are personal names of that particular *Aséyìn*.

¹⁹ *Ifá* also known as *Òrúnmilà* is Yorùbá god of wisdom and divination. Read Abimbólá (1976) for details.

²⁰ *Ìbàdàn* is the melting pot for the Òyó warlords during the days of the Yorùbá intra-tribal wars of the 19th century. It is today the largest town south of the Sahara.

²¹ *Mòkín* is one of the old Yorùbá towns destroyed during the intra-tribal wars of the 19th century.

²² *Arówólóyè* - the one that became rich on the throne - one of the appellations of *Aséyìn*.

²³ *Séríkí* is an Islamic religious chieftancy title.

²⁴ *Balógun* - father on the battle field - is the title of the most senior Yorùbá traditional war leader.

solely by the royal wives (*ayaba* or *ayomo*).²⁵ Its performance is reserved for the noble and royal people alone. Unlike the production of the male royal bards, the delivery of *yùngbà*, performed to the accompaniment of calabash beating (*igbá títtí*), involves at least, two performers or group of performers whose performance have an “overlapping structure” (Olúkòjù 1978: 134) such as the following:

Adétóún: Àtándá Babaa Kúdí.
Mopélólá: Oba lomo Láwoyin
Adétóún: Òrò tí e so léyìn,
Mopélólá: Té ò gbodò so lójúu baba.
Adétóún: Bó o rójú olórò, 5
Mopélólá: O ò bá ti senu wí?
Adétóún: Ìrìn esin ò jòrìn èyàn
Mopélólá: Láyíwolá le ó máa dóbálè fún,
Adétóún: Pátápátá, yánányán, Láyíoyè,
Mopélólá: Oba lomo Adéyemí.²⁶ 10

Translation:

Adétóún: Àtándá,²⁷ father of Kúdí²⁸
Mopélólá: The child of Láwoyin²⁹ is the king.
Adétóún: The matter that you discussed in father’s absence,
Mopélólá: That you cannot in his presence.
Adétóún: When you see the person concerned, 5
Mopélólá: What will you say?
Adétóún: Human walk is unlike that of the horse
Mopélólá: You will continue to prostrate to Láyíoyè³⁰
Adétóún: Everybody, all of you together, Láyíoyè.
Mopélólá: The child of Adéyemí³¹ is the king. 10

2. THE ÒYÓ-YORÙBÁ ROYAL BARDS AT WORK

There are different dimensions to discussing the relevance of the royal bards in Yorùbá society, but we will commence our discussion in this paper with the entertainment role of the bards. Yorùbá royal bards are palace entertainers,

²⁵ *Yùngbà* has been fully discussed somewhere else by the present writer. See Akinyemi (1991b).

²⁶ Data collected from the male royal chanters in the palace of *Aláàfin* sometime in 1989.

²⁷ *Àtándá* is one of the personal *oríkí* of this particular *Aláàfin*, Oba Làmídì Adéyemí the third.

²⁸ *Kúdí*, a shortened form of *Kudrat*, is an Arabic name borrowed into Yorùbá through Islam.

²⁹ *Láwoyin* - honour deeps in honey - is the personal name of the grandfather of oba Adéyemí the 3rd.

³⁰ *Láyíoyè* - the one that rolls on the throne - is one of the personal names of the king.

³¹ *Adéyemí* - crown fits me - is the family name of the king.

entertaining the king, his chiefs and visitors to the palace. Their chants are rendered mainly for entertainment but occasionally also for the purpose of obtaining remuneration either in cash or in kind. Every morning the bards are expected to salute the king at dawn with their chants and musical accompaniments. Afterwards, the bards will acclaim the king at intervals of between ten and fifteen minutes by citing the king's names, *oríkì*, attributes and appellations verbally or on the musical instruments and this continues until very late at night. For a clearer understanding of this point we have to go back to the mode of delivery of the bards. Take *yùngbà*, for instance; the essence and function of the chant is a thing of beauty and joy to the audience present. As far as its words, the first aesthetic significance of the chant is in its mode of delivery because of its auditory pleasantness. The human mind is receptive to *yùngbà* chant and the participants (chanters and audience) are never bored during its delivery. The beauty of the chant is in its overlapping structure where the delivery of one group of chanters overlaps that of the other group, as in this excerpt:

Mopélólá: Kábíyèsí,

Adétóún: Aláse, èkejì òrìsà.

Mopélólá: Òósà, baba Àkèé,

Adétóún: Òósà, oko Móyíólá.

Mopélólá: Láyemí n lowó bí ení lomí.

5

Adétóún: A-náwó- bí- elédà.

Mopélólá: Okoò mi ò dèdà rí,

Adétóún: Owó è ló yà³².

Translation:

Mopélólá: Your royal Majesty!

Adétóún: Your Lordship, second in command to the deities.

Mopélólá: The deity, father of Àkèé³³

Adétóún: The deity, husband of Móyíólá³⁴.

Mopélólá: Láyemí³⁵ is spending money as if it's water.

5

Adétóún: The-one-that-spends-money-like-a-magician.

Mopélólá: My husband has never been involved in magic money,

Adétóún: It's because he is not tight-fisted.

The overlapping structure of *yùngbà* chant is well demonstrated in the above excerpt where the production of the two chanters overlaps. The first chanter makes an incomplete sentence and the second chanter takes over from her. She builds on the incomplete sentence, makes it complete and meaningful. The first

³² Data collected sometime in 1989 from the female royal chanters at the palace of *Alààfin*.

³³ *Àkèé*, royal name used for the king's male children in *Òyó*.

³⁴ *Móyíólá* - the child rolls in honour - is a name of one of the king's daughters.

³⁵ *Láyemí*- honour fits me- is the name of another of the king's daughters.

chanter takes over again, and so on. The beauty of this unique structure of *yùngbà*, according to Olukoju (1978), is best described by the verb denoting the act of its performance. The verb is *kùn*, and it literally means “to buzz” or “to hum”, while the act of performing the chant itself is denoted by *yùngbà kíkùn* meaning “intoning *yùngbà*”. The term *yùngbà* itself is descriptive of the performance contour, in which the chanting moves on in a leisurely pleasing manner like buzzing or humming. Little wonder, then, that the *yùngbà* chanters are referred to as *akùnyùngbà* literally meaning “one who hums melodiously”.

Still on the relevance of the royal bards as palace entertainers in Yorùbá society; the bulk of the chant of royal bards is made up of names, appellations, attributes and *oríkì*. It must be on account of the prominent role played by names and *oríkì* in the production of *ràrà* that Wolff (1962: 50) referred to the chant as “an artistic form of name calling” while Babalola (1966: 59) chooses to call it “an artistic form of name praising”. It is our observation that the purpose of making use of acclamations, multiple references of praise names and good qualities of a subject in the chants of the royal bards is to entertain. For, according to Babalola (1966: 24), “the reciting or chanting of the appropriate *oríkì* in honour of the ancestors of a particular family causes members of that family who hear the performance to feel proud of their pedigree, and if they are then away from home, they also feel exceedingly homesick”.

Royal bards refer to the qualities of the character or physical appearance of their patrons when chanting to entertain them. Such qualities and descriptions are highly specific as in this chant, rendered to entertain the first *Òkèrè* of Saki³⁶:

E è pé ta lo sebè sílè,
Tí gbogbo wa fi n run?
Òkèrè òkíkí Bóyèdé
Ló sebè sílè tó ní kí gbogbo wa ó run
A-bógun-lóko-má-rò-fénìkan. 5
Èjìbùkólá, ogun jà l'Ógìdìgbó
Baba ló lé ogun tí tí tó fi dápá ibe.
Èbè ló pò lápòjù, Baba ibá lógun d'Ájàsé
Arógunjò, paragada bí iná jóko.
Eléyìn-èjí, Ókèrè, baba Mojíradé. 10
Òun ló so ahéré dilé.
Aréwàkálé, ogun léyìn Osòrun
Òun ló so àtàn doja.
Ó so òpópóo Fílàní dìgbéjò.
Òun ló dá Òkè sílè 15
Tí wón fi n joba ní Sakí.
*Aféfé tí terí oko ba*³⁷

³⁶ Saki is about 85 miles north-west of Òyó.

³⁷ Data collected on 3rd May 1995 at the palace of the traditional ruler of the town, the *Òkèrè* of Saki.

Translation:

You might want to know who prepared the soup
 That we all take.
 It is *Òkèrè*, *Òkìkí Bóyèdè*³⁸,
 That cooked the soup and ask everybody to partake.
 He-that-goes-into-war-alone. 5
*Èjìbùkólá*³⁹, there is a serious war in *Ògìdìgbó*⁴⁰
 It is father that pursued the war there.
 But for several appeals, he would have pursued the war to *Àjàsé*⁴¹.
Arógunjò,⁴² the destroyer.
 The-one-with-space-on-the-incisor-teeth,
 the *Òkèrè*, *Mojíradé*'s father. 10
 It is him that turned a hut into home.
Aréwàkálé,⁴³ the support of *Osòrun*.⁴⁴
 It is him that turned the rubbish heap into a market place.
 He turned the *Fílàní* nomadic path into his court.
 It is him that established *Òkè*,⁴⁵ 15
 For them to have kingship institution in *Sakí*.
 The wild wind that controls the grass.

In the above excerpt we have reference made to qualities of the character of *Bóyèdè*, the first *Òkèrè* of *Sakí*. His generosity is recognised in lines 1-4 of the above quotation. There, he was acclaimed “the one that provides for other people free of charge”. He was a famous warrior (lines 5-9) and war leader hence, acclaimed as “the-one-that-is-happy-when-at-war”, “he-that-goes-into-war-alone” and “the-support-of-*Osòrun*”. The culmination of his expeditions is the founding of what is known as *Sakí* town today (lines 11-15). Reference is also made to the physical appearance of *Òkèrè Bóyèdè*, who was very handsome in his days. Possibly, the summary of this is compressed in the appellations ‘*Aréwàkálé*’ (line 12) meaning the one whose fact of being handsome is recognised and appreciated in every home and ‘*Eléyín-èjì*’ (line 10), meaning

³⁸ *Òkìkí* (*Òkìkíolá*) - a prominent person - and *Bóyèdè* - the one that was given birth to on the throne -are personal names of the first *oba* of *Sakí*.

³⁹ *Èjìbùkólá* - the gap on the incisor teeth adds to honour - is an appellation for the first king of *Sakí*.

⁴⁰ *Ògìdìgbó* is the name of one of the old towns destroyed during the Yorùbá civil wars of the 19th century.

⁴¹ *Àjàsé* - this town is located near *Sakí* at the border between Nigeria and Benin Republic.

⁴² *Arógunjò* - the one that dances when at war - is an appellation for the king.

⁴³ *Aréwàkálé* - the one whose fact of being handsome is recognised in every home - is an appellation for the king.

⁴⁴ *Osòrun* is the title of the war chief/leader in *Òyó*.

⁴⁵ *Òkè* is the shortened form of *Òkèrè*, the traditional ruler of *Sakí*.

the one with a gap in-between the upper incisor teeth⁴⁶. The Yorùbá people talk more about the beauty of their women generally but very little attention is paid to the physical appearance of their men. When reference is made to a handsome man, as like in the case of *Òkèrè*, such a person must be exceptionally handsome. It is in recognition of these qualities that *Òkèrè* became a respectable king in his domain. The fact that he commands the respect of his subjects is reflected in the last line of the above quotation, where the acceptance of his authority by his people is compared to how the wild wind controls the grass.

The chant of the Yorùbá royal bards is dominated by *oríkì*, made up of separate units accumulated over time and referring to qualities or events associated with the subject but usually otherwise unrelated. It can be seen from the above that some of these units refer to qualities of character which are highly specific, referring to incidents in the subjects' life, often apparently trivial and even scandalous occasionally, as in these examples:

Eléripa, e n lé nibèun.

Oba tí n be lóyè n lèmi n ké sí.

Oba tótó!, mo lémi ò perí oba

Apórógunjó, omo a kúnlè bódògùn sòrò.

*Omo a síjú apó pìrí dagba ofà sófun*⁴⁷.

5

Translation:

*(Eléripa,*⁴⁸ *greetings to you!*

I salute the king on the throne.

Your Royal Highness, I cannot call you in vain.

Apórógunjó, the-offspring-of-the-one-that-kneel-down-to-talk-to-the-medicine.

The-offspring-of-the-one.that-opens-the-quiver-suddenly-to-swallow-two-hundred-arrows.)

5

And,

Méèle nìkàn sùn, méèle nìkàn dájí,

Nílè l'Àlàbí ti m'Àlàké ròde.

Agbe torí omo rẹ dáró,

Àlùkò dúdú tori omo rẹ kosùn;

Lékelèké torí omo rẹ déwù funfun.

5

Torí Àlàké lo fì kóògùn aremo.

Eléyelé iyàwó, oko Jólásún

Olókan-ò-jòkan aya, Àlàbí, oko Látúndùn.

*Oyèèwùmí Àlàbí ló fì Látúndùn rópò ara rẹ, kó tóó tẹrí gbaso.*⁴⁹

⁴⁶ The Yorùbá people see a gap on the incisor teeth as one of the criteria for determining a person's level of beauty. This probably accounts for the desire of some individuals without a natural gap between their incisor teeth to create an artificial one (*pèjí* - creating a gap on the incisor teeth).

⁴⁷ Data collected from royal chanters at the palace of *Eléripa* of Eripa on 4th May 1995.

⁴⁸ The title of the traditional ruler of Eripa, a town of about 48 miles from Òsogbo.

⁴⁹ Data collected from royal chanters at the palace of Sòún of Ògbómòsò on 2nd October 1995.

Translation:

I can neither sleep nor wake up alone,
 It is from home that Àlàbí took Àlàké out
 Agbe⁵⁰ prepares the indigo because of its child
 The black Àlùkò⁵¹ painted itself black because of its child.
 Lékelèké⁵² got a white dress because of its child. 5
 It's because of Àlàké that you became a paediatrician.
 The one with a beautiful wife, Jólásún's husband.
 The-one-with-so-many-wives, Àlàbí, Látúndùn's husband.
 It is Oyèwùmí Àlàbí that replaced himself with Látúndùn before his demise.

In the first example, the poet recognises the *Eléripa*'s knowledge in Yorùbá magical power and medicines he is therefore acclaimed the offspring of the one that kneels down to “talk to medicine” and “the one that opens the quiver suddenly to swallow two hundred arrows”. In the second example the poet acclaimed the *Sòún* of Ògbómòsò⁵³ for his (the king's) lust for women. That particular *Sòún* had so many wives and he goes about with them all the time. In fact, as shown in the last line of the above quotation, one of the wives had so much influence and control over the king that it was rumoured that the king had transferred his kingship authority to the women. References to incidents like these are not meant to discredit the Yorùbá kings; rather, they are made to confirm the power and authority of the kings, to entertain them and to boost the image of the kings, thereby enhancing their position in their respective domain. The saying in Yorùbá that “*iyi loba n fori bibé se, oba kan ki i mujè*” corroborates this fact: no king drinks blood, he only beheads (offenders) to enhance his position and to command respect.

Yorùbá royal bards are also regarded as the repository of tradition and as chroniclers of the kings' genealogy, reminding them of histories and great deeds of their (the kings') predecessors, so that they (the kings) may uphold tradition. In the following royal poetic lines, the poet gave a list of all the past and present *Sòún* in chronological order, starting with *Sòún Ògúnmólá*, the founder of Ògbómòsò, who happens to be the first *Sòún*:

Ògbomosó, òle ò gbé, eni ó lágbára ní gbébe.
 Ògúnmólá lorúko Sòún àkókóó jé
 Òun loba tó kókó tèlú Ògbómòsó dó.
 Lòòótó ni bée náà ni,
 Kí gbogbo oba ó tóó máa je 5
 Ìgbà tí ò sí eléyìí n nì mó,
 Ló wá kan Ajàyí-ògídí-olú, Oníkànga-àjípon.

⁵⁰ Agbe – the bird blue *Touraco Musophagidae* i.e. Cuckoo family.

⁵¹ Àlùkó – a type of bird - the rose - red bird.

⁵² Lékelèké - the buffbacked Heron - cattle Egret (*Bubulcus Ibis*). The bird follows cattle-herds and seeks insects disturbed by the cows.

⁵³ *Sòún* is the title of the traditional ruler of Ògbómòsò, a town of about 35 miles north of Òyó town.

Ariwoolá, agidingbi lójú ogun.
Àtilé, àtònà ni baba mi Àrèmú fi ko nnkan ijà sí
Ìgbà tí ò sí eléyìí n nì mó, 10
N ló wá kan oba Ajagunbadé
Àrará rírí, Bángbóyè, ìrèlè oba
Ìgbà tí ò sí eléyìí n nì mó,
N ló wá kan Àlàbí Oyèéwùmí.
Oyèéwùmí, Ládíméjì, Ládèjo. 15
Afolábí, omo Tinúuwin
Ìgbà tí ò sí eléyìí n nì mó,
Ló kan Oyèéwùmí Àlàbí.
Oba Ògbómòsó tí n be lórí oyè nísínín.
Oládùúnní, oba tó rojó ilè tó jàre 20
Òyèéwùmí Àlàbí, Oládùúnní Ajagunbadé keta.⁵⁴

Translation:

Ògbómòsó, the lazy one cannot live there but the powerful
The name of the first Sòún is Ògúnmolá.
He is the first king to found Ògbómòsó
That is the truth,
Before all other kings are installed. 5
When he was no more,
Then came the Àjàyí-ògídí-olú,⁵⁵ the-one-whose-well-is-visited-very-early-in-
the-morning.
Ariwoolá, the stubborn one in the war front
My father Àrèmú, filled every where with war implements. 10
When he was no more,
Then came the turn of king Ajagunbadé.
The dreadful one, Bángbóyè, the gentle king.
When he was no more,
Then came the turn of Àlàbí Oyèéwùmí. 15
Oyèéwùmí, Ládíméjì, Ládèjo.
Afolábí, the child of Tinúuwin
When he was no more,
Then came the turn of Oyèéwùmí Àlàbí
The king of Ògbómòsó currently on the throne 20
Oládùúnní, the king that pursued the land case and won.
Oyèéwùmí, Àlàbí, Oládùúnní Ajagunbadé the third.

Further more, in the following excerpt:

Láyíwolá, Láyíoyè, oba lomo Adéyemí.
Rógun-má-tèé, omo Àtìbà,

⁵⁴ Data collected from royal bards at the palace of Sòún of Ògbómòsó on 2nd October 1995.

⁵⁵ Ògídí-olú is an appellation for anybody bearing the name Àjàyí.

Rogun-má-sojo, omo Sàngó.
Àtándá, omo Alówólódù tí n j' Ádéyemí.⁵⁶

Translation:

Láyíwolá, Láyíoyè, king is the child of *Adéyemí*.
He-that-does-not-fail-in-war, the child of *Àtìbà*,
He-that-does-not-shiver-in-war, the child of *Sàngó*.
Àtándá, offspring of *Alówólódù* that bears *Adéyemí*.

Reference is made to the present *Aláàfin* of Òyó as the offspring/child of some past *Aláàfin*, to remind him of the great deeds of his predecessors, and to challenge him to uphold tradition by emulating such great leaders. It is for this reason that the current *Aláàfin* has been linked to *Àtìbà*, a great warrior and the first *Aláàfin* that reigned at new Òyó (1837-1859), after the fall of the old Òyó empire. He was also linked with *Aláàfin Alówólódù*, his grandfather and *Sàngó*, Yorùbá deity of lightning and thunder, and the most important royal deity in Òyó town (Johnson 1921: 44-45).

Apart from reminding the kings of histories and great deeds of their predecessors, the Yorùbá royal bards also document major events associated with the tenure of each of the kings in their chants. For instance, in the following chant, the royal poet gives information on the accession of *Oba Aásírù Olátúnbòsún Tádése* to the throne of *Olúwòó* of Ìwó:

Olátúnbòsún Àlàgbé, Oba Alèwílèse.
Awa Látúnbòsún la jo de'Lésà, la jo d'Òsogbo.
Látúnbòsún, Oba onínúure.
Ìgbín tenu mógi, ó gùn ún
Olátúnbòsún tenu móyè, ó sì mú-un je. 5
Atilé-yanrí wa, o sayéere.
Alòlò-má-gbàgbé-ilé.
At'Ìbàdàn wa gboyè lówó eni tí n be nílé,
Olátúnbòsún Àlàgbé, léni tí n be nílé ò róyè je.
Àlàgbé ti n sèlú bo lójó tó ti pé. 10
*Àlàgbé je kánsílò, o tún j'alága.*⁵⁷

Translation:

Olátúnbòsún, Àlàgbé, your royal majesty.⁵⁸
We were in *Ilésà* and *Òsogbo* together with *Látúnbòsún*.
Látúnbòsún, the generous king.
The snail insists on climbing the tree and it does.
Olátúnbòsún insists on being the king and he got it. 5
The-one-that-has-chosen-good-destiny-from-home-and-behaves-well.

⁵⁶ Data collected sometime in 1989 at the palace of *Aláàfin* in Òyó.

⁵⁷ Data collected from the palace of *Olúwòó* in Ìwó on 12th August 1995. Ìwó is about 25 miles east of Òyó.

⁵⁸ *Olátúnbòsún* - honour moves again - is the personal name of the current *Olúwòó*. *Àlàgbé* is his personal *oríkì*.

He-that-does-not-forget-home-even-when-far-away-from-home.
The-one-that-comes-from-Ìbàdàn-to-snatch-the-kingship-title-from-the-
person-at-home.

Olátúbòsún Àlàgbé says the one at home cannot be made king.

Àlàgbé has been ruling the town for a very long time. 10

Àlàgbé was a councillor and he was also a chairman.⁵⁹

Oba Tádése lived in Ìbàdàn prior to his installation as the *Olúwòó* of Ìwó. He is acclaimed “the one that comes from Ìbàdàn to snatch the chieftancy title from the person at home” because he contested the stool with another prominent citizen of the town, who resides permanently in Ìwó, but *Tádése* was eventually appointed and installed after almost twenty years of chieftancy tussle. During the period, the matter became a legal tussle in law courts in Ilésà and Òsogbo hence the poet’s assertion that “we were in Ilésà and Òsogbo with *Látúbòsún*”. The king-makers opted for *Tádése* in view of the developments which the town witnessed when he was at various times involved in the administration of his local government area. He was first elected a councillor in his ward and later he became the chairman of his local government area with headquarters in Ìwó, as documented by the poet in the last two lines of the quotation.

In assessing the value of poetry as a historical source, it must be remembered that its psychological function and its aesthetic qualities occasionally distort the facts described. In the words of Vansina (1965: 150), “the kind of historical information transmitted by poetry is usually of a rather vague, generalised nature and it is often impossible to attribute it to any definite period of the past”. But such loopholes and gaps could be filled up by information collected from oral tradition and texts as we have in the following information provided by Barber (1991: 239) in respect of the *Olókukù*. *Oba Moses Oyinlolá* had spent many years in Ghana before his installation as the *Olókukù* of Òkukù in 1934. While in Ghana he built a mansion in Òkukù for himself with a separate space for his car. During his tenure, he had the backing of the colonial authorities against insubordinate individuals and towns in his domain. The royal chanters therefore acclaim him the “European of Òkè-òtìn”. *Oba Oyinlolá* uses the colonial apparatus of justice for his own ends and hence he is acclaimed “the one who locks people up until the white man comes”. He is compared to *ààbà*, a staple used symbolically in magical charms, to support the fact that *Oba Oyinlolá* occasionally uses force to control his own people. The more high-handed he was, the more the royal bards exalted him:

Awón-bí-agbón,

Òróòro-ò-se-é-je-méran.

Àjàlá òkín tó kólée mótò lótò.

⁵⁹ Accession to those offices is through a democratic process which involves the casting of votes by the electorate. The fact that he was elected to those offices confirms his popularity in his domain since election to such offices involves campaigning by the candidate and his acceptability to the electorate.

Àábà-demo-dèyá	
Èìbó Òkè-òtìn	5
Àjàlá tí dámo lékun-à-n-se-kóntá-díngbón.	
Amúniílè-kóyìnbó-tó-dé.	
Ò fídí alásejù bomíí gbóná.	
Àjàlá gbònà Ìbàdàn lówó aláwûgbó	
Oyinlolá, a-gba-teni-tó-ranpá-kankan. ⁶⁰	10

Translation:

Rare-as-a-wasp	
The-gall-bladder-cannot-be-eaten-with-the-meat	
Àjàlá òkín built a separate house for his car.	
The-staple-that-pins-down-both-mother-and-child.	
The European of Òkè-òtìn,	5
Àjàlá has stopped people being insolent.	
The-one-that-locks-people-up-until-the-white-man-comes.	
He-who-dips-the-over-reacher-into-hot-water.	
Àjàlá blocked the road to Ìbàdàn from the disobedient people.	
Oyinlolá, the-one-who-seizes-the-goods-of-the-man-who-defies-him.	10

Scholars wishing to use Yorùbá royal poetry as their source of information should always remember that the poets' ultimate concern is to chant to the satisfaction of their patrons. Hence, scholars must watch for exaggerations and distortions embedded in the poetry before they can reach the little gem beneath the heap of rubbish.

In pre colonial times, most especially, during the Yorùbá civil and intra-tribal wars of the 19th century, royal bards used to chant for the men going into battle⁶¹. It was their duty as bards to instil courage in the warriors so that they might put in greater effort in battle. They do this either by making reference to previous battles which they (the warriors) have won or by acclaiming the warriors through personal *oríkì*. According to the bards themselves, the purpose of *oríkì* in their poetry is to preserve a record of the past and to spur their listeners by such recitals on to greater achievements in emulation of their ancestors. For instance, the military expeditions of *Balógun Ìbíkúnlé* of Ìbàdàn against the Ègbá and the Ìjèbú in the 1850s are referred to in this chant delivered in honour of Balógun Ìbíkúnlé, an Ìbàdàn war leader:

Ó jagun Aláké, o pomo Aláké.
 Ó jagun Ìgbèìn, Ìbíkúnlé dorò nígbèkùn.
 Ó na Sómúyì, ó n'Àpátí
 Ó yogi gbóngbó, n l'Álólá kiri

⁶⁰ This data, collected on 14th June 1995, corresponds to that collected by Barber (1991:239) much earlier.

⁶¹ See Awe (1975) for a detailed discussion of *oríkì* in Yorùbá warfare.

Ó pa Ìjèbú, ó ri Ìjèbú
Ó ri Ìjèbú bí ení rìpó
Ó ri Ìjèbú tán, ó kojú è sóde.
Níbi wón gbé n ta yangan (Olatunji 1984: 97)

Translation:

He fought against the *Aláké*'s army, he killed the son of *Aláké*
He fought against *Ìgbèìn* army, *Ìbíkúnlé* became a terror in captivity.
He beat *Sómúyì*, he beat *Àpátí*
He took a short cudgel and drove *Alólá* about.
He killed the *Ìjèbú*, he planted the *Ìjèbú*
He planted the *Ìjèbú* as he would plant a post.
He planted *Ìjèbú* and made him face outwards where people were selling corn.

In the above excerpt, *Ìbíkúnlé*'s conquering exploits and cruel deeds were brought into focus. This is done to instil courage in *Ìbíkúnlé* and challenge him to perform better in subsequent wars. Apart from the military might and prowess of the Yorùbá war leaders, their *oríkì* in very many cases inform us on the number of wars they fought and how widespread their fame became in consequence, as in this example:

Ó gbá Kóro lójú,
Ó ta Ajerò láyà,
Ó fi ikúùkù ta Yàgbà lénu (Awe 1975: 287).

Translation:

He slapped the king of *Kóro*
He boxed the *Ajerò* on his chest,
He used a clenched fist to punch the *Yàgbà* king in the mouth.

Just as lines such as these indicate the places where a warrior fought, other verses can show how far a warrior's fame had spread, as in the case of *Oyèéwò* of *Ìbàdàn*, who was reputed to have been known for his exploits in far away places:

Nílè Sokoto, Oyèéwò, ìwo ni wón n dárúko,
Wón n kominú re nílè Sàfàrà.
Ní Sábèé Òpàrá,
*Omo Aríorí kúkú ni wón n dárúko.*⁶²

Translation:

In *Sokoto*, *Oyèéwò*, it is you that they name,
In *Sàfàrà*, you are admired.
In *Sábèé Òpàrá*,
It is you, the son of *Aríorí*, who is on everybody's lips.

⁶² Data collected from royal chanters at the palace of *Olúbàdàn* of *Ìbàdàn* on 22nd –March 1996.

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper has dealt with the function and relevance of Òyó-Yorùbá royal bards, and it is hoped that such an examination will serve as a useful pointer to the responsibilities of royal bards in Yorùbáland in general. The paper identifies some of these traditional social responsibilities to be entertainment, the description of qualities of the character and physical appearance of patrons, historical documentation and image-making for their patrons. Today, however, these responsibilities are changing as a result of the socio-economic changes taking place across Yorùbáland. For instance, most of the male royal bards have become freelance minstrels in addition to their principal trades which they now practise. This is the result of economic change with its attendant social values, which has forced the attachment of bards to royal patronage to decline. Nowadays, some bards go about entertaining the general public at social gatherings, motor parks and even on the street and they get remunerated accordingly. The male royal bards have therefore developed from their original palace confinement to praising and entertaining the general public. However, the female royal chanters are still very much confined to the palace. For instance, *yùngbà* chant is still as restricted as before. In fact, the art is completely in the hands of very old chanters who, unfortunately, are not getting younger. One may only hope that this type of royal chant would not go into extinction.

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