



## “Fanfare for Oduduwa”: Atukwei Okai’s Re-interpretation of a Yoruba Myth

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**Abstract:** *History has it that an exiled Edo prince from ancient Benin Empire named Ekaladerhan became the first Ooni, that is to say, the first king of Ile Ife. His people deified him after his passing away, and thereupon they invent about him a legend in which he became Oduduwa. However, apart from the Oduduwa of the legend, there was another mythological Oduduwa in Yoruba cosmogony. This latter is a deity; Olodumare, the Yoruba supreme God, ordered him to create the earth at the beginning of times. In fact, the deity Obatala was the first deity asked to do the task of creating a habitat for humanity, but he failed to do so. Therefore, Olodumare called on Oduduwa to do the sacred task of turning water into earth. Atukwei Okai, a Ghanaian poet, wrote a poem he entitled “Fanfare for Oduduwa” to honour this mythological Yoruba divinity. The poet does not concern himself with the legend of the first Ooni of Ile-Ife, the deity’s namesake; instead, he only focuses on the myth. The Ghanaian poet rewrites the Yoruba story of creation and turns it into a sexual encounter between the sea and the spiritual entity, called Oduduwa.*

**Keywords:** *Yoruba myth, re-interpretation, eulogy, a mixture of cultures.*

### INTRODUCTION

“Poetry as an art form predates literacy;” [1] it has existed since the beginning of times. Besides, “Timbuktu manuscripts” [2] display a range of poems some of which were written, albeit with Arabic alphabet, in Songhai, an African language. Thus, be it oral or written, poetry existed in ancient Mali and Songhai kingdoms during medieval times, that is to say, before African colonization. After the conquest of Africa by Europeans, writing with Arabic alphabet became out of fashion in sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin alphabet replaced it through European languages that colonists imposed upon indigenous populations. In this regard, contemporary African native literates adopted the westernized system of writing poetry and adapted it the way they pleased. One poet among others who succeeded in this adaptation issue is Atukwei Okai, a Ghanaian from the modern Ghana Republic. He evoked Yoruba mythological deities as well as Christians’ beliefs in some of his poems. Atukwei Okai proves he is a hybrid man having drunk from African understanding and western (English and Russian) knowledge. I say Russian because he completed part of his literature university studies in Russia. [3] Thus, he artistically put in verses his hybrid personality. I intend to explain Okai’s ode to a Yoruba deity through one of his poems entitled: “Fanfare for Oduduwa.” [4] After some preliminary words about the poem, I will sort out the difference between the authentic Yoruba myth and Atukwei Okai’s cultural mixture creation. The reception theory will be in the background of my various analyses because this will enable me to do a thorough line to line reading of the poem, the way I please.

### 1. PRELIMINARY WORDS

The poem starts and ends with the “Lord’s Prayer” [5] in the Yoruba language. One may rightly wonder why a Ga native expresses himself in Yoruba to recite an introductory prayer before writing a poem. The answer to this questioning is quite simple. Atukwei Okai attended a boarding school where his father was a headmaster, and the latter obliged his pupils to say the Lord’s Prayer before dinner. They recited this prayer alternately in English as well as in one of the various African languages spoken by the pupils among whom there were some Yoruba natives. Atukwei Okai incidentally learnt

the Lord’s Prayer in Yoruba with his Yoruba classmates. He confesses that: “The Lord’s Prayer in the Yoruba language is so beautiful that the sounds stayed with [...] [him] all over the years and [...] [he] would sometimes mutter them.” (Okai, 166).

One can deduce that this Yoruba prayer has become part of himself and of his African heritage. His headmaster, who was also his father, thus achieved his goal since he wanted “to inculcate in [...] [his pupils] pride in [...] [themselves] and [...] [their] African heritage.” (Okai, 165). The headmaster negotiated a way to link Christianity, an alien western legacy, to diverse African languages. Here are the first four verses of the “Lord’s prayer” in Yoruba and its translation in English. (Okai, 63 & 123).

Yoruba’s Version	English’s Version
<i>Baba wa ti mbe ni orum</i>	Our father who is [sic] in heaven
<i>Kia bowo fun oroko re</i>	Hallowed be thy name
<i>Ki joba rede</i>	Thy kingdom come
<i>Ife tire niki a she laiye</i>	Thy will be done on earth

It seems that this prayer stands for a permission Okai is asking the Almighty Christians’ God before praising a lesser African god. Besides, the poem is full of images and metaphors of all kinds. As for Kofi Awoonor, another modern Ghanaian poet, novelist and literary critic, he asserts that in general, poets’ “desire to use images and even existent symbols that are culture derived indicates a fine quality of mind which bases itself in associations, and in sensations of sounds and ideas. It carries poetry beyond mere rhetoric and sententious speech.” [6]

Atukwei Okai abides by Awoonor’s point of view when he appeals to his native Ga culture through a ritual sacrificial meal called “kpokpoi” he evokes. (Okai, 65). Usually, just before harvest season, Ga priests sprinkle “kpokpoi” by the roadside to ask for ancestors’ clemency and to thank them at the same time for allowing them to have a good harvest. According to Kirsten Jacobson, “Kpokpoi is also sprinkled across the ground in processions to the gods and ancestors for spiritual protection.” [7] In Atukwei Okai’s case, one can affirm that he seeks spiritual guidance before starting to re-examine a sacred Yoruba narrative set up a long time ago. Etymologically, “poem” and “poetry” both derive from the Greek word “poieo” which means “I make, do, create.” [8] Atukwei Okai is right to reimagine, to create, to re-invent in the form of a poem, a story that pleases him, the way he fancies, regardless that the mentioned story is sacred or profane. However, to stay within the sacred area, Okai alludes to religious practices in a Ga ritual. Moreover, while talking about Oduduwa a Yoruba deity, Atukwei Okai makes other Africa born spiritual entities interfere.

Besides, the poem abounds in Yoruba words and Okai also makes use of an Igbo word “ndewo”, meaning “thank you” (Okai, 123) more than once, together with the Yoruba expressions “Oshe o” that means the same thing as “ndewo” and “Kpelle o” meaning “excuse me.” These three expressions create an atmosphere of begging and gratitude. It seems the poet is thanking the Supreme God for having ordained a lesser deity to create the earth.

Okai is an African, and he proceeds to prove it by using African languages in an English poem. The use of Yoruba language is superior to that of Ga and Igbo languages; one need not point out that it is because of Oduduwa, the main protagonist, who is a Yoruba deity, the one who created Mother Earth on the Yoruba Almighty God, Olodumare’s instigation. As I have said further above, Atukwei is not a Yoruba native, he once visited Ile-Ife, and a tourist guide told him Oduduwa’s story, and that was how he came across this Yoruba ancient story. (Okai, 161). But, what exactly did the guide report to Atukwei Okai about the myth of creation? The answer to this rhetorical question will precisely shed light on the errand Olodumare asked Oduduwa to carry out.

## 2. ODUDUWA’S TASK

Here is the myth as Atukwei Okai heard it in his voice:

*[...] I was told the story about Oduduwa. I listened carefully and asked questions. I heard that Oduduwa was the son of Olodumare, the equivalent of God. He had been sent from heaven to create the earth. Oduduwa’s wife was Olokoun, the goddess of the ocean. Oduduwa placed a cock on the sand so as to scatter it over the ocean. As this happened, and Oduduwa started to walk over the water, the water thus dried up, leaving in its place the dry earth. Thus therefore was the earth created out of water at Ile-Ife. (Okai, 161).*

There is an omission in what the tourist guide of Ile-Ife explains. The mythological account of the Yoruba held it that Oduduwa brought some sand and a chicken with him down right from heaven to earth. [9] Okai’s account of the myth, as he caught it, does not mention this trivial detail. Instead, he talks about another deity, “Olokoun, the goddess of the ocean” as being “Oduduwa’s wife.” The poet seizes the mythic and legal matrimonial link between the two deities to rearrange the Yoruba story and to turn it into a husband and wife sexual interaction.

Thus, the poet implies that the creation of the earth is a legitimate birth that results from Oduduwa and his spouse Olokoun’s nightly conjugal duty. To cut the story short, Oduduwa slept with Olokoun, and they gave birth to Mother Earth just after their sexual merriment. At this point of my analysis, I can quote the following Shakespearean verses: “Unnatural deeds / Do breed unnatural troubles.” [10] Hence, there is no need for the Ocean, a material element, to carry a pregnancy for a time before giving birth to an offspring. In the case under consideration, the expected offspring is the earth that is also a material element. Atukwei Okai makes sure he avoids science fiction, in this regard, a material thing (water) brings about another material item (earth). Despite this fact, an enchanted tone still surrounds the poem because one wonders how a deity can make love to an ocean.

In his re-writing of the myth in the poem “Fanfare for Oduduwa,” the time is mid-night; the night is parted into two equals; so are the stream, the song, and the journey. (Okai, 63). It takes two thumbs to spilt apart the colanut, and two hands to spilt apart the calabash. Okai implies that “thumbs” and “hands” refer to the attempt of a man, I mean a human being. Besides, colanut and calabash are ingredients needed in the shrines of African deities among which are Oduduwa and Olokoun.

Only one papal bull is necessary to spilt apart the world and one voice is sufficient enough to part the red sea. Let me point out that the concept of a papal Bull and that of the parting of the red sea both belong to the Christians’ lexicon. Here, Okai is referring to the bull entitled in Latin “*Inter caetera*” meaning “among others” signed on May 4<sup>th</sup>, 1492 by Pope Alexander VI. The content of the bull goes as follows: “The *Inter caetera*, the papal bull issued by Pope Alexander VI in 1493 [...] split the world between the Spanish and the Portuguese.” [11]

Moreover, it is worth noticing that the mentioned bull is about the colonization of the new lands, America, discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1492. As for the red sea, it stands for the Jews’ flight from Egypt to Israel in the biblical book of the *Exodus*. On God’s injunction, Moses stretched one of his hands, and the red sea split into two and created a dry way for the Jews to go to the other side of the red sea. One notices that Okai is well versed in culture and poetry is for him a means of displaying his large knowledge.

But I wonder why only “one” item is necessary for Christians while one needs two things to undertake human tasks. It seems that Atukwei Okai is implying the supremacy of the Christian God over African deities. Then, the poet evokes without warning two hands spreading a woman’s thighs as if to prepare the reader for what he is aiming at.

Moreover, the poem is full of repetitions, and this generates a spiritual atmosphere because as Marjorie Boulton rightly puts it:

*Magic makes great use of repetitions; we are all familiar with stories in which something has to be done or said three or seven times; religious rituals, which are more or less akin to primitive magic, depending on the degree of intellectual development, make great use of repetition [...]. [12]*

Atukwei Okai brings an impressive atmosphere around the timing. It is midnight; there is no moonlight since it is not only “Charcoal night” it is also “soot of the night.” The poet repeats the time at length. He changes the attribute of water using synonyms: sea becomes river then it is the ocean. And the attributes of the night also change from charcoal, the black colour, to soot, that is to say, thin particles of a sort of black ashes. There is no way one can see anything through that black snow. Secrecy and discretion are required for the woman is already a midwoman just after the offering of a midcola. Let me quote this part at length to emphasize upon Okai’s mind gradual evolution in this section of his poem:

*Midsea! Midnight! Charcoal night...  
Midriver! Midnight! Charcoal night...  
Midocean! Midnight! Charcoal night...*

[...]  
*Midcola! Midnight! soot of night...*  
*Midwoman! Midnight! soot of night... (Okai, 63-64).*

After giving clues about the time, the poet now indicates the location of the midwoman: it is at Ile-Ife, the cradle of the Yoruba people, and then it is one minute past midnight. The poet repeats the time thrice in the Yoruba language. And then he makes lots of invocations and mentions: Tutankhamen the Egyptian Pharaoh, the donkeys of Dudgebe; the caves, the groves, which represent the places of prayers and devotion at Oke-ado, at Ijebu-ode. Then, Oduduwa enters the scene holding not a chicken but a “talisman-toe.” (Okai, 64).

Before coming near the sea, Oduduwa says prayers in the Yoruba language: “Lailai! Lailai!” meaning “forever and ever forever and ever”, “Oshe o,” thank you and “Kpelle o,” sorry. In the Igbo language, the poet writes “Ndewo” thank you; in the Ga language, he recalls the sprinklings of “Kpokpoi.” Finally, in English, he says the end of the Lord Prayer “forever and ever forever and ever.” (Okai, 65). He achieves a simile of the cultural unity of Africa here, and one never knows, maybe if Okai had been familiar with any other large-scale language like, let me say Swahili, he would have used it.

### **3. THE PERFORMANCE OF THE DUTY**

To come back to the nightly spousal union between the two deities, Oduduwa woos the sea in languages before coming near her in spite of the fact that they were husband and wife. Then, suddenly the god reaches a point where he can no longer hold his urges back and be a perfect gentleman. As Okai artistically arranges the situation, one only notices that:

*Oduduwa’s dream circumcises the universe*  
*And blood rises and rushes to*  
*Saturation point within the Adam’s apple*  
*Of dawn. (Okai, 65)*

Oduduwa is ready, and he has to hurry up and finish before “dawn” that is to say before daybreak and daylight. The expression “Adam’s apple” is about the physical organ men have on their necks. The poet infers that Oduduwa is in a hurry and this makes him restless. And his breath is quick, and it is so fast that one notices it on the movement of his Adam’s apple on his neck. He does not want the light to appear before he sexually honours his wife. Okai’s poem is full of suggestive notions and concepts such as:

*Oduduwa’s desire*  
*Detonates*  
*The ocean*  
*And the water-world is a woman.*  
[...]  
*Oduduwa’s manhood is marooned in her warm inside - (Okai, 65-66).*

An eruption favours the meeting of the two lovers; the deity penetrates the sea, his wife, by exploding deep inside her. The two deities cannot carry out this encounter without some magic or enchantment because it is something grandiloquent that is at stake: they are creating the earth. And I guess that deities create the earth once and forever in a lifetime. The godly lover goes near his legal spouse, the ocean and the latter does not reject him as she always does for intruders. Olokoun, the goddess of the sea responds to Oduduwa’s call; the poet confirms it by declaring that:

*The woman’s eyes*  
*Knock over, upsetting*  
*The palmwine calabash*  
*Of equilibrium in his inside. (Okai, 66)*

The term “the woman” refers to the ocean and the adjective “his” in the phrase “his inside” suggests that it is Oduduwa himself. The deity Oduduwa is no longer at ease since he hardly controls his internal “equilibrium” while accomplishing the duty Olodumare assigns him, and he is restless. So, Atukwei Okai uses a vast range of imagery words that question the readers and appeal to the latter mental understanding. In this regard, the celebrated Nigerian poet Niyi Osundare assumes that,

*Poetry is a lifespring ...*

*Poetry is man meaning  
To man [13].*

I share Osundare’s point of view. Let me explain that the term “man” in Osundare’s piece of poetry means ‘human being,’ be it male or female. A poem does not explicitly enlighten everything, for “within a short space a good poem covers enormous mental ground, and often, towards its finale, provides one with an epiphany or a revelation.” [14] Consequently, there is no time for descriptions and long narrations in a poem. Atukwei Okai’s poem is not an exception to this rule; he condenses his thought in short notions and concepts. Words like “awake with wonder,” “shut in dream,” “ocean furnace inside” shorten the ocean’s acceptance. It is worth noticing that the poet invents “windows” and “doors” for the sea. While “windows” are conscious because they are “awake,” “doors,” on their part, indulge in “dream.” Okai does everything possible to create a make-believe world where a divine entity, and the ocean are performing a conjugal duty.

At one point, the poet leaves Oduduwa address directly the Ocean by using the first person singular talking about himself and the second person singular to refer to the sea. Oduduwa invokes three items he says: “My sun,” “My rain,” “My milk.” After each of the three invocations, there is thrice the repetition of the phrase: “I woo your water.” The deity implores the ocean first to allow him to “bring forth the earth;” secondly to let him “awaken the worm” and finally, he declares he intends to “wash our hands off water.” The use possessive adjective “our” here implies that both Oduduwa and the ocean are concerned. Let me quote the extract I am analyzing:

*Before before before  
My sun,  
Before my sun sets in the yolk of your egg, ,  
I woo your water and bring forth the earth.  
Before before before  
My rain,  
Before my rain retires into saliva of snail,  
I woo your water and awaken the worm.  
Before before before  
My milk,  
Before my milk honeymoons in your palmwine,  
I woo your water and wash our hands off water. (Okai, 66-67)*

The recurrence of the time adverb “before” three times three, making it nine, indicates a warning Oduduwa is giving his wife, the ocean. He does not want to surprise Olokoun with the outcomes of their conjugal duty, so he is telling her beforehand that he is going “to bring forth the earth,” to “awaken the worm” and to “wash [...] [their] hands off water.” In short, Olokoun, the ocean, has to know Oduduwa will transform part of her watery estate into dry land, into the earth. Oduduwa is full of amiability and love towards his wife, he considers her as an equal partner worthy of respect, and so he does not let her wake up and discover she now becomes dry earth. Hence, the repetition of the time adverb “before” three times three.

After this amiable ‘caveat’ the protagonist (Oduduwa) himself does, the poet, Atukwei Okai takes up the floor once more to continue his narration about the sexual intercourse between the god, Oduduwa, and his ocean lover, Olokoun. There is violence in the queer meeting; one guesses it through the use of words such as: “struggling,” “fury.” Here is the quotation about this part:

*And in his woman’s heaving-inside  
Oduduwa is coming  
Oduduwa is coming  
The woman is struggling, Oduduwa is coming.  
With  
The fury  
With  
The  
Fan-  
Fare  
Of the freed,*

*With  
The  
Rush-  
Ing  
And  
The  
Gush-  
Ing  
Of waterfall,  
Oduduwa is coming, Oduduwa is coming. (Okai, 67-68)*

It has all been a physical performance activity; the typographical appearance of this part shows that one makes an effort, for the verses become monosyllables and give the impression that someone is panting because he is finding it difficult to breathe easily. It is true that a deity’s come, that is to say, his orgasm might not be an easy task. Oduduwa achieves it “With songs / And stars.” (Okai, 69). The ocean wakes up with “sunlight” and “dawn birdsong” (Okai, 69). Oduduwa, the sea goddess Olokoun’s husband, speaks up once more for the last time in the poem, he says:

*So long, silences, I home go now.  
[...]  
Fishes in the sea swallowing my song sail  
Silently  
Over my sea. (Okai, 70)*

The last three verses of the above quotation are a pun, and here the consonant “s” gives the impression that a whistle is being blown all along. Oduduwa and Olokoun first give birth to children “fishes.” The poet becomes overwhelmed about the outcome of the spousal duty of the two deities. Before the earth, fishes were born this is how the poet accounts for that fact:

*And  
The fishes  
And the sperm-fishes in the sea,  
They Oduduwa’s children in her sea,  
They  
Oduduwa’s come, Oduduwa’s sperm,  
In her warm responding hallelujaing inside- (Okai, 70)*

The fishes bear witness for what has just happened between the lovers. However, fishes are not the only “children,” they cannot be the only ones. Their brother who is the earth is just about to appear, and he does so in music, Okai blows a whistle eighteen times. The sound of the blowing is “kpiri.” Okai repeats it eighteen times, to let everybody bear witness of his merriment, and at the same time he bursts into a song in Yoruba, the meaning of which in English is: “The fish lives in the sea so it does not fear the cold.” (Okai, 123) The fish does not fear the cold as Oduduwa does not hesitate to walk on the sea. There is a magic like occurrence here for:

*Oduduwa is walking upon the waters -  
And the water is turning into palmwine pito.  
And the agyegyewa is bending the air into sounds  
And the tom-toms are retailing the fable  
To the tearful ears of Obatala. (Okai, 71)*

Great music follows the deity’s marvelous walk with his “talisman-toe” adorned feet upon the sea. The “talisman” allows Oduduwa to defy the gravity law.

*Oduduwa is walking upon the waters –  
And the waters are withering  
Into warm moist dry-walking  
Earth. (Okai, 72)*

The waters set themselves into Oduduwa’s talented and faithful ally because they wither as soon as the “talisman-toe” touches them. Oduduwa’s outstanding deed is full of harmonious noises coming

from different types of musical instruments: the “pito,” a whistle; the “agyegyewa”: one of the highest drum in the Republic of Ghana, [15] and the tom-toms.

However, not everybody is joyful, Obatala, another Yoruba divinity, feels betrayed. As soon as he finishes snoring underneath his “drunken / Dream ears /,” he is now surprised and his “tearful ears” become offended when he hears about “the thorny truth” of Oduduwa’s success. (Okai, 72). The use of the qualifying adjective “thorny” indicates how painful Obatala feels about the birth of the “Earth.” It proves that deities share the same emotional state such as disappointment, jealousy, and resentment as human beings. Olodumare, the supreme God, rewards the lesser god who obeys him quickly and faithfully. It is worth pointing out that “the Earth,” Oduduwa and Olokoun have given birth to, is not an unproductive dry earth; it yields yam and fruits. (Okai, 72). Oduduwa’s obedience to the supreme God sets him as an important god that Yoruba people reckon with in their society.

Okai starts his poem with the first verses of the “Lord’s Prayer” in the Yoruba language, and as indicated further above, he ends with the last verses of the “Lord’s Prayer” in the same language. He makes sure he gives us the English version of that prayer in his text. (Okai, 72 & 73)

Yoruba’s version	English’s version
Nitori ijoba ni tire	For thine is the Kingdom
Agbara ni tire	The power
Ogoni tire	And the glory
Lailai ati lailai	Forever and ever forever and ever
Aami	Amen

A noticeable syncretism covers Okai’s verses. Although he is discussing an African traditional divinity, he does not forget the Christian religion that Africans have acquired owing to western colonisation. He accepts the god of the West, but he is proud of his multiple gods and goddesses too. He is so delighted in his African civilisation that he is capable of daydreaming about its myths and re-telling them the way he wants.

### CONCLUSION

Literature does not come out of a vacuum; it sets its roots deep down into the milieu where literary men live. Atukwei Okai gathers elements from diverse sources to embellish his original poem. Indeed, he does not allude to the biblical holy book of the Genesis where the Christians’ God creates the Earth. Moreover, his allusions to the “Lord’s prayer” insinuate the existence of divinities everywhere in the world. Africans know about gods before the white man’s arrival with his colonizing project. They have more gods and goddesses than the white man who has only one jealous and intolerant God. The African divinities are not prejudiced they cohabit in the same areas. Oduduwa does a task, Olodumare first assigns to Obatala; but the two deities will not fight each other, and they will not start a religious war for that. It is true Obatala feels offended, but instead of abusing Oduduwa he blames himself for his carelessness and bursts into tears. “Fanfare for Oduduwa” is a lesson of African religious tolerance.

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