

FORM, FORCE, AND INDIGENOUS FORMALISM: A CRITICAL EDITION OF “EWO GBOKA” BY LATE ALHAJI HAMZA SONFADA BIDA

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a carefully developed critical edition of “Ewo Gboka” (“Money is Strong”), a notable Nupe oral composition attributed to Alhaji Hamza Sonfada Bida. While African oral texts have often been approached mainly from anthropological and sociological perspectives, this study shifts attention to the internal artistic qualities of the composition. Using a Formalist lens, the paper explores its structural, phonological, and poetic features. Drawing on the ideas of Jakobson (1960) and Shklovsky (1965), the analysis shows that “Ewo Gboka” functions not only as a song, but also as poetry, philosophical reflection, and socio-economic commentary. Through tonal patterning, repetition, gradual variation, and metaphorical expression, the composition demonstrates a refined indigenous formal system comparable to written poetic traditions. The paper also contributes to the preservation of Nupe oral literature through annotated transcription and critical explanation.

Keywords: Nupe oral literature; Formalist criticism; tonal poetics; African aesthetics; wealth symbolism; critical edition.

INTRODUCTION

Nupe oral literature represents one of the most intellectually rich expressive traditions in Middle Belt Nigeria. As noted by Nadel (1942), Nupe society developed complex political, artistic, and philosophical systems that supported a vibrant oral culture. This tradition includes praise poetry, hunters’ narratives, didactic songs, and reflective performances expressed in a highly tonal language.

Within this tradition, “Ewo Gboka” holds a special place. Attributed to Alhaji Hamza Sonfada Bida, the composition reflects deeply on the meaning, power, and social implications of wealth. Rather than treating the piece simply as a cultural artefact, this paper considers it as a structured literary work worthy of detailed critical attention.

The objectives of this study are threefold:

1. To produce a reliable and annotated critical edition of “Ewo Gboka.”
2. • To examine its structural, phonological, and stylistic features.
3. • To situate the composition within African oral poetics and broader Formalist theory.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of African oral literature has gradually moved from early descriptive accounts to more analytical and

interdisciplinary approaches. Early scholars such as Nadel (1942) focused largely on social and cultural documentation, often presenting oral texts as reflections of society rather than as artistic creations in their own right. While this work remains valuable, it tends to overlook the internal organisation and aesthetic depth of oral compositions.

Finnegan (2012) made an important contribution by arguing that oral literature should be recognised as a legitimate form of literature. She highlights the importance of performance, audience interaction, and the flexible nature of oral texts. Although her work acknowledges stylistic richness, less attention is given to close formal analysis of structure, sound patterns, and repetition.

Formalist scholars such as Jakobson (1960) and Shklovsky (1965) provide useful tools for addressing this gap. Jakobson’s idea of the poetic function draws attention to how language is organised, particularly through repetition, balance, and patterning. Shklovsky’s concept of defamiliarisation explains how literature makes familiar ideas appear fresh and striking. Although these ideas were developed in relation to written texts, they are equally relevant to oral traditions.

Recent scholarship has increasingly recognised that African oral traditions are governed by their own artistic systems. These include tonal arrangement, call-and-

response patterns, rhythm, and gradual development of ideas. Such features show that oral compositions are carefully shaped and artistically controlled, rather than being spontaneous or unstructured.

Despite this progress, there are still relatively few studies that combine Formalist theory with detailed analysis of specific African oral texts. This gap is particularly noticeable in studies of Nupe literature. This paper therefore contributes by offering both a critical edition and a close formal analysis of “Ewo Gboka.”

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Formalism and the Poetic Function: This study adopts a Formalist perspective, especially Jakobson’s (1960) idea of the poetic function. This approach focuses on how meaning is shaped through structure, repetition, and balance. In “Ewo Gboka,” these features help transform reflections on wealth into a patterned and memorable poetic form.

Defamiliarisation and Metaphorical Expression: Shklovsky (1965) argues that literature renews perception by presenting familiar ideas in unexpected ways. In this composition, money is not treated as an abstract concept but as something with weight, presence, and power. This makes the idea of wealth more vivid and engaging.

Indigenous Formalism: Although Formalist theory developed in Europe, similar principles are evident in Nupe oral traditions. The use of tone, repetition, rhythm, and variation reflects an established indigenous system of artistic expression.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative and interpretive approach, combining textual analysis with insights from performance practice. The aim is to produce a reliable and culturally grounded critical edition of “Ewo Gboka.”

Data Sources: Primary data were obtained through performance reconstruction and semi-structured interviews with knowledgeable individuals familiar with Nupe oral traditions. Secondary data include relevant scholarly literature and theoretical texts.

Sampling Technique: Participants were selected purposively based on their experience and knowledge of Nupe oral performance.

Data Collection Methods: Data were gathered through interviews, oral recitations, and comparison of different versions of the composition.

Analytical Procedure: The study involved reconstructing the text, analysing its formal features, and interpreting its meaning within its performance context.

Editorial Conventions

Tonal Marking: High (á), Mid (ā), Low (à).

- Orthographic standardisation based on current conventions.
- Glossing and commentary provided for clarity.

Validity and Reliability: Credibility was ensured through triangulation, participant feedback, and comparison of multiple sources.

5. Nupe Tonal Poetics Nupe is a tonal language in which pitch affects meaning. In “Ewo Gboka,” tone also contributes to artistic expression. Key features include alignment with rhythm, consistency across repetition, and emphasis through tonal rise.

Critical Text and Annotated Transcription: Stanza I: The Weight of Wealth Nupe Text: Éwò gbóká, éwò nùkú bí bà mí

Translation: Money is strong; money is a heavy burden upon my back.

Commentary: Repetition highlights the central idea and reinforces rhythm.

Stanza II: Spatial Reach Nupe Text: Ewo gba u d’anyi, u gba u d’aba Ewo doko kpe le, u nyi le ma

Translation: Money reaches the east and the west; it extends everywhere.

Commentary: The imagery suggests the wide influence of wealth.

Stanza III: Social Power Nupe Text: Ewo-gi nyi kpa, kolo ma ya Ewo-gi fe nyi doko, zuma ma sa

Translation: The wealthy speak and people gather; where wealth exists, authority follows.

Commentary: Wealth is presented as a source of influence and control.

Stylistic and Structural Analysis: The composition uses simple but powerful language, repetition, and gradual development of ideas to create impact. Rhythm and performance further enhance its meaning.

Ethnomusicological Context: The performance setting—often communal gatherings—reinforces the message and encourages audience participation.

CONCLUSION

“Ewo Gboka” shows that Nupe oral compositions are carefully structured and artistically rich. The paper highlights the need to recognise and preserve such traditions as important forms of literature.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Establish archives for preservation.
2. Include oral literature in academic curricula.
3. Promote standardisation of transcription methods.
4. Encourage interdisciplinary research.
5. Support community involvement.

6. Use digital tools for documentation.
7. Provide institutional and policy support.

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