



AFRICAN HISTORIES
AND MODERNITIES

African Battle Traditions of Insult

Verbal Arts, Song-Poetry,
and Performance

Edited by Tanure Ojaide

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African Histories and Modernities

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Editor

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*In memory of
Okitiakpe, Memerume, Oloya, and other traditional African poets and
performers who blazed the battle tradition of insult.*

ABOUT THE BOOK

This book explores the “battles” of words, songs, poetry, and performance in Africa and the African Diaspora. These are usually highly competitive artistic contests in which rival parties duel for supremacy in poetry composition and/or its performance. This volume covers the history of this battle tradition, from its origins in Africa, especially the *udje* and *halo* of the Urhobo and Ewe, respectively, and other African variants, its transportation to the Americas and the Caribbean region during the Atlantic slave trade period, and its modern and contemporary manifestations as battle rap or other forms of popular music in Africa. Almost everywhere there are contemporary manifestations of the more traditional older genres. The book is thus made up of studies of contests in which rivals duel for supremacy in verbal arts, song-poetry, and performance as they display their wit, sense of humor, and poetic expertise.

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Introduction

Tanure Ojaide

There are challenges to studies of Africa and the African diaspora because of the extensive spread involved. Paul Gilroy's canonic *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) emphasizes history and politics but admits that "Black Atlantic culture is so massive" and goes on to say, "The history of the Black Atlantic yields a course of lessons as to **the instability and mutability of identities which are always unfinished, always being remade** (xi, emphasis mine). He sees "artistic expression" as "the means towards both individual self-fashioning and communal liberation" (40). Cultural practices in the diaspora enable identity with the mother continent. Gilroy's reference to culture is more in general terms than specific cultural practices. Recently, Akintunde Akinyemi and Toyin Falola edited *The Palgrave Handbook of African Oral Traditions and Folklore* (2021). This work also has manifestations of some African oral traditions and folklore in the diaspora. This handbook of oral traditions deals with a multiplicity of oral forms.

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Academic inquiries into individual regions or aspects of the diaspora thus exist but such have not yet mapped out the progression of a specific artistic phenomenon in Africa and its migration through the Atlantic slave trade to different parts of the world where captured Africans settled. African old folkloric traditions have transformed into new and unique but similar forms and in some cases African cultural practices that left the continent come back in new forms. Diffusion takes place in new environments but overall Africa and its diaspora share a cultural identity that such practices affirm. One of such traditions is the battle of words, songs/poetry, and performance. In this tradition of highly competitive verbal arts, song-poetry, and performance, the audience is enthralled by its wit, poetry, and spectacle. When Derek Walcott, in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, talks of a culture of flamboyance in the Caribbean, he is mindful of its African origin in many artistic forms that originated in Africa and are still vibrant within and outside the Mother Continent. This work thus sets out to map out and critique the battle traditions of the verbal arts, song-poetry, and performance that have established their respective individual uniqueness and significance in the continent and its diaspora as each case of the tradition's manifestation appropriates elements of the socio-cultural environment in its current and past settings.

The folklore of Africa and the African diaspora is replete with traditions, mostly oral but in modern times could be written, that are "battles" of words, songs, poetry, and performance talent. They are usually highly competitive artistic contests in which rival parties duel for supremacy in poetry composition and/or its performance. What this book attempts to establish is the uniqueness of a tradition of insult or abuse couched in verbal exchange, songs or poetry, and performance in Africa and the African diaspora. Usually, the battle of talents involves organizing rival sides or groups, individuals, quarters of the same town, or towns against towns. In the United States, in addition to individual against individual contests, there are colleges against colleges in Greek Step Shows and boroughs against boroughs, and even East Coast engaging the West Coast in Battle Rap. It is a form of verbal and performance combat between designated sides. It is interesting that the metaphor of battle is used in their respective places to describe the Nigerian Urhobo Udje; the Ghanaian, Togolese, and Beninois Halo; the African-American Battle Rap; the Trinidadian and Tobagonian Calypso; and the Afro-Brazilian Jongo. These battles could be prepared for or take place instantaneously. Africa has many of such traditions as the Udje and Halo which need months of preparation and the Zulu and Tswana Izibongo oral poetic performance

which is done *ex tempore*. In the diaspora, there are also performances such as Calypsos and Greek Step Shows that need preparation while African-American Dozens, like the Nigerian Yabis and “bad mouth,” tend to follow the off-the-cuff method. The artists thus have to train to respond instantaneously and with wit, humor, and strong images to take part in their competitions or when challenged to do so.

It is important to note from the beginning that anthropologists have found cultures where verbal challenges exist in other parts of the world. As Matthias Röhrig Assunção puts it in his chapter:

Recent work has shown the importance of verbal challenges, mainly in poetic forms, in countries as diverse as Indonesia, Italy, Fiji, Bolivia and Turkey (Bowen, Mathias, Brenneis and Padarath, Solomon, Dundes et al.,). This suggests the widespread prevalence of ritualized verbal challenges between males. Similarly, stick-play (and fighting with sticks) has been a feature of many societies in Europe, Africa and Asia. Irish and Portuguese men excelled in it, as well as many Southern African peoples such as the Zulu. It was or is also prominent in the Philippines, Southern India and the plantation societies of the Caribbean. (Gallant, Hurley, Coetzee, Ryan, Brereton 167–75, Zarrilli, Oliveira, Wolf)

Flying contest was said to have been practiced in Scotland from the fifth to the sixteenth centuries. While traditions of verbal challenges existed or still exist elsewhere in the world, the most elaborate satirical and poetic “battle” of words, song-poetry, and performance practices are found in Africa from where they spread out during the slave trade to the Americas and the Caribbean, among other places, where they were practiced in new environments which brought about transformation and syncretization.

In most of the African battle traditions, there are meticulous and elaborate preparations of the songs and their performance. The groups keep their songs and performance or dance steps secret until the public outing to produce a sense of surprise and novelty of their artistic work. With varying differences, two known opposing or rival sides are established. In the Udje tradition of the Urhobo people of Nigeria, the battle of songs and performance between Iwhrekan and Edjophe is legendary, as that between Ekrokpe and Ekakpamre. The Ewe people who live in the southern parts of Ghana, Togo, and Benin also have the Halo tradition. In the Ewe Halo battle of songs and dance, the subjects of the satirical butts are invited to the arena to witness what is composed against them performed. It is said that for the subject of the song to express anger, nervousness, or disquiet

shows that the song has succeeded in its objective of destabilizing its subject. For this reason, the subjects of Halo songs often laugh with the audience as if the songs have had no effect on them.

There are continuities and manifestations of the African genre of insult in the diaspora. Like the Ewe Halo, in the Dozens, the two opponents keep a bold face and whoever gets angry or flares up is adjudged to have lost the contest. The Trinidadian Calypso during Carnival also demands weeks or months of preparation from its participants. Like the Udje, the participants keep their songs and performance secret until the time of public performance. That legendary rivalry between Oloya of Iwhrekan and Memrume of Edjophe is comparable to the calypso war (picong) between Sparrow and Kitchener and also between Sparrow and Melody.

The tradition of artistic insults or abuse in Urhobo and Ewe societies originates from similar socio-cultural and political objectives of deploying language as a weapon to fight the enemy or rival and concluding with performance to so enrage the other side as to humiliate it. The songs and performance in the form of dance are composed as highly imaginative poetry meant to “wound” the other side. While this is taken as a purely artistic contest in most parts of Africa and the African diaspora, in some of this tradition of insult or abuse, as of *Halo* in its heydays, it assumed a violent confrontational nature. This turned to violence in many places and might have led to its suppression or abolition as among the Anlo-Ewe of Ghana. The social unrest it caused might have led Kwame Nkrumah to ban its practice as a matter of law and order decision. Among the Urhobo, the colonial government used customary and magistrate courts in Warri/Delta Province to suppress Udje songs and their performance with stiff penalties against those sentenced for libeling with their songs. In all the regions of the African world where the battle of insults is practiced, the style allows or allowed exaggeration, choice of fictional materials, and underhand techniques to describe the subject in such a way as to humiliate him or her. Among the Ewe and Urhobo even the dead are still subjects of biting songs. A major objective is to describe somebody or the subject of the song so as to be laughed at; hence there is copious use of humor, caricature, burlesque, irony, and other techniques that achieve the objective of being laughed at and humiliated. The attributes of Udje and Halo are carried over into Jonggo, the Dozens, and Calypso.

A major characteristic therefore of this tradition is a formally or informally arranged schedule of song-poetry performance in which one side has its turn and the other side watches and listens and then the roles are

reversed the next time. The Udje and Halo are yearly contests and often fall on festival times or other arranged times. One can say the same of Calypso during Carnival time and the African-American Greek letter organizations' Step Shows. However, in other practices as in Battle Rap or dissing, the responses could be as soon as provoked because of the availability of modern technology, radio, and television. There appears to be an underlying religious aspect to some of the traditional practices as a restraining factor to human excesses in going beyond bounds and causing chaos. This might be seen as necessary with the use of fabricated materials that could be carried too far. In any case, each side plays the role of performer and audience in alternate seasons, years, or times. One can infer from the openness of the performance with known provokers or challengers as a mark of boldness that is related to masculinity as practiced in such societies. Udje, Halo, Capoeira, the Dozens, and Battle Rap seem to be used to express masculinity in their respective societies. Nothing is hidden or taken as personal as such but seen as a communal or social responsibility to attack and be attacked with satiric songs. It is a utilitarian artistic genre with moral and ethical objectives to not only deter folks from breaking established socio-cultural codes but also maintaining normalcy in society where deviants could cause disharmony and chaos.

As a result of listening to insults against oneself or one's side, one is provoked to compose another song or songs to respond or retaliate to so hurt the other person or side as to deter from further verbal assaults. Thus, many songs are responses to earlier provocations in songs and this cycle goes on and on till one side springs a surprise that becomes the beginning of another thread of songs. The tradition has at its roots a dialogic tendency of responding to the latest insult, verbal abuse, or song which itself elicits further responses. So the tradition is self-growing as each song takes off from or builds upon an earlier song as the Urhobo, Ewe, Swahili, and Trinidadian/Caribbean, and Afro-Brazilian song-poems testify. It should be noted that some of the traditions are more restrained than others in provocation. While Udje attacks those related to or who assist the *ororile* and *obo-ole*, the poet and performer respectively, it is taken as unethical to insult folks for natural deformity or other forms of natural challenges unless they are seen as assisting the principal actors of their sides in the composition of the song-poetry or its performance.

Many works in the form of essays, book chapters, and entire books have been written on specific traditions such as Udje, Halo, the Swahili Malumbano, the African-American Dozens, Battle Rap, Hip-Hop,

Calypso, and Jongo, among others. However this current project is to put these similar traditions of Africa and the black world in one book so as to foreground the similarities as well as differences and uniqueness arising from their respective socio-political and cultural backgrounds. The essays in this book thus delineate the battle traditions of insult through verbal arts, songs/poetry, and performance from their presence in Africa, especially the Udje and Halo of the Urhobo and Ewe respectively and other African variants, their transportation to the Americas and the Caribbean region during the slave trade period, and their modern and contemporary manifestations as Battle Rap, Yabis, or other forms of popular music in Africa. Almost everywhere there are contemporary manifestations of the more traditional older genres. While this study focuses on socio-cultural subjects, there is a geographical aspect to it. If these traditions migrated from West and Central Africa, where are the “transplants” of the tradition in the so-called New World? The study affirms the vast geography of a diaspora in its dispersion of the Mother Continent’s cultural practices to other lands far away. In this case, the United States, Trinidad and Tobago, Cuba, and Brazil, among others, are new lands in the practice of these artistic confrontational contests. It is instructive to know from this study that cultural practices do not only move from the Mother Continent into the diaspora but transformations and syncretizations of these artistic practices also go back from the diaspora to Africa and back again to the diaspora. This appears in the diasporic continuum as some African musicians play in the United States and black musicians outside the continent visit for crowded shows. This practice is what Gilroy refers to as the “magical processes of connectedness that arise as much from the transformation of diaspora cultures to Africa and the traces of Africa that those diaspora cultures enclose” (199). There is evidently an emergent circulatory nature to practices of insult that go beyond the oral to new media that have the capacity to drive home what can now be termed globalized practices.

Similarly, there is a historical aspect to the tradition. Which of the African diaspora practices are the farthest and which the closest to the present in history? The retentions tend to be strongest in the diaspora where there were captured Africans in small islands such as Belize and Surinam or large African populations of the same ethnic group as in Brazil and the Caribbean. There have been studies in history, including Curtin’s and Gilroy’s, which give a good idea where captured Africans of different ethnic nationalities were taken to during the Atlantic slave trade. It has been established in many studies that people from present-day

Mozambique, Angola, and Congo said to be of Bantu stock were shipped at particular times to Brazil. Maroon communities in the Caribbean and South America seem to recreate ancestral cultural practices without slave master interventions such as banning artistic practices they feared were means of secret communication among the enslaved population. Thus, small islands and physically cut-off African settlements in the diaspora retain more of the African practices. Are some of the practices twice or thrice removed from the original practices in Africa? As often happens in diaspora studies, what are the strengths of the retentions and absorptions? In other words, how much of the original is reflected in the syncretism of cultures from Africa, Europe, Asia, and indigenous America in the diaspora traditions of these songs and performances? There is a measure of absorption of other cultural practices in the Brazilian case of Jongo where Portuguese Christian culture is absorbed into the tradition to have not just Jongo (caxambu) but also Calango and the king's procession.

From the history of the Bantu-speaking people's forced migration to Brazil, there can be seen a difference in the battle tradition of Jongo which derives from Umbundu for riddle from the tradition that Africans from West Africa, especially the Yoruba, Ewe, and Urhobo, whose songs of insult performed in a public space for communal entertainment and identity. As some of the essays will reveal, these performances enable not just a sense of group solidarity but also a sense of individual and community competition. Having a sense of belonging and a competitive spirit are important values to the African.

And there is the language angle to these songs. Sub-Saharan Africa has a plethora of tonal languages. Coincidentally, the Ewe of Ghana, Togo, and Benin Republic have similar myths of origin and language with the Urhobo of Nigeria. While both ethnic groups appropriate a distant Ife relationship and their respective legendary figures of Agokoli and Ogiso seem to have similar traits, their languages have so much in common that some names like Akpome and Kome are the same. They have *kp*, *gb*, *rh*, *vw*, among other consonant clusters. However, in their "migration" to the Western Hemisphere, the song-poems are composed and performed in English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese, depending on the nationalities of their composers and performers. The Bantu groups from Kongo-Angola seem to have formed 25–30 percent of captured Africans brought to Brazil in the late eighteenth century. Since their languages were mutually intelligible, they were able to practice their cultural traditions. Jongo apparently derives from Umbundu "songo" or Kikuyu "zongo" which

relate to a “bullet mouth” that tells the aggressiveness of words. Matthias Röhrig Assunção mentions in his chapter on Jongo how the Portuguese language has affected the rhyming contest among blacks in the Paraíba Valley of Rio de Janeiro State.

So, what is glaring about the battle tradition of insults through verbal exchange, song-poetry composition, and performance of Africa and the African diaspora is one cultural phenomenon undergoing varieties of transformations and drawing on new realities and experiences to be defined for what it is—a battle of poetry/songs and performance of the African world. And, as will be expected, what are the ongoing new forms of these traditional artistic forms? There is no doubt that a diaspora involves carried-over practices that entrench the cultural identity of its people and this artistic tradition of songs and performance does that for Africa and its diaspora.

Both Halo and Udje, from their respective histories, trace the origin of the artistic battle traditions to social and human efforts to channel their anger, rivalry, competitiveness, and hostilities from the physical to the artistic. Instead of rivalry to be exhibited physically, they surmised it would be better done artistically. The sparring of partners through the resources of the imagination ennoble the two sides in their pursuit of artistic excellence and entertainment. Which of the parties is more quick-witted, poetic, humorous, and performative? The audience always seems to know the rules of the artistic practice and adjudges one side winner of the two-side contest.

The objectives of the founders of this tradition is to use it as a peace-building mechanism to manage the many conflicts that beset them at various levels of social habitation such as individual personalities, quarters of the same town, villages, and even towns. Thus, the tradition is a conflict resolution and peace maintenance mechanism because without it there would be a lot of physical conflicts that undermine the stability and peace of society. In the infinite wisdom of the old in traditional African societies, they devised a means to avoid bloodshed which had depleted many of their communities and worsened the chaotic state during the slave-raiding period for an agreed-upon novel way of settling scores—not by physical fighting but verbal/poetic shots that would bring out the best in their imagination, entertain them, and, in fact, bring them together on occasions, and laugh at each other, and reflect on their own lives. Masculinity was no longer a macho thing of physical prowess of fighting or wrestling,

violent undertakings, but an artistic contest of the most imaginative, poetic, witty, humorous, and artistically superior.

Similarly, the battle traditions of insult in the diaspora play a role in the societies. For example, as both Michele Randolph and Maliek Lewis will emphasize in their chapter, the Dozens is a rite of passage for young blacks. To them, “The Dozens trains a participant in the art of self-control; to remain calm and unfazed when a form of violence is being enacted upon you. Participants learn the value of self-respect and self-love; they learn the value of a sharp mind in order to defend themselves as well as how to disguise their vulnerability and insecurities. The engagement in the verbal game readies the participants to the experiences that are inherent in the oppressive society in which they live.” The Greek Step Show, Calypso, and Jonglo also teach discipline and self-control in the face of pressure.

For peace to be kept the founding fathers (and mothers) knew that the people, community, and audience must gain something to make turning away from violence worth it. The artistic verbal arts are almost always couched in laughter. As the Urhobo say, laughter is “sweet” (Ewhe vwerhere). The practitioners of these artistic battles expect intellectual and physical forms of delight in the witty and poetic verbal arts and also their sheer humor. Wit and humor are thus essential parts of the tradition. After each performance, the audience/spectators share their responses to the beauty and wit of the songs and performance. They relish the images and stunning tropes deployed to sing about a person. Highly imaginative metaphors are used to describe opponents to elicit laughter in these insults especially in Udje, the Dozens, Jonglo, Calypso, and Yabis. As already noted, there is fabrication of materials to meet the demand for humor. A performance of these battle arts without humor is dubbed a failure. It is not surprising about the stretch of facts and the imagination in Calypso, Udje, Halo, the Dozens, and Capoeira and Jonglo to deploy so much that would make the audience or spectators to burst out laughing. No wonder, too, many of these practices take place during festivals when folks are expected to be relaxing and having holidays. Laughter, after all, is a good communal medicine to avert physical and violent confrontations.

These battle traditions of words, song poetry, and performance migrated from Africa through the European epochal rupture of the people in the three-century-long slave trade in which over 15 million youths were captured and forcibly taken to plantation farms and servitude in the Americas, the Caribbean, and Europe. This study is aware of the Arab/Muslim slave trade and the fact that Africans were taken as far as Jeddah,

China, and even Russia. There are also people of African affinity in Oceania. However, the focus here is on Africa and the diaspora in the Western Hemisphere where the Atlantic slave trade brought many Africans for labor to enrich an emergent capitalist Western coalition.

A lot of mediations have entered these battle traditions of verbal arts, song-poetry, and performance. As would be expected of diasporic traditions, diverse experiences of history, geography, environment, social adaptations, and innovations have diversified the unique African tradition. Even within the African homeland, colonialism, modernity, and globalization have transformed things to change within the indigenous languages and local settings of verbal and artistic practices. These transformations are foregrounded in foreign languages such as English and Portuguese. In the diaspora, many languages used by blacks are creole or patois and so bear Africanisms especially of Bantu languages and terms in Jongo in the European languages.

This unique tradition that exists in Africa and its diaspora in various forms affirms artistic excellence in the verbal arts, poetry, song, and performance. Its practice raises the stakes in its competitive nature to always heighten the tempo. In that way, there is increasing intensity as each side sharpens its wit for maximum impact of attack and counter-attack. The objective of each rival side's words is to either wound the opponent's psyche or ego or provoke and challenge so brazenly to elicit a sharp hostile response. Duels such as between Ekakpamre rivals and also between Oloya of Iwhrekan and Memerume of Edjophe in the Udje practice show the dialogic nature of this artistic practice. The same nature of combative rivalry is exhibited among the Anlo and Aja Ewe people of Ghana, Togo, and Benin. The composers of the poems or verbal forays are insistent on not using the same images twice but always keeping their words fresh, poetic, and memorable. Writers and performers in regions of this tradition have a lot to borrow from their works in Africa, North America, the Caribbean, and Latin America.

Studies such as Mathias Iroro Orhero's on reincarnations of Halo and Udje in the respective poetic works of Kofi Anyidoho and Tanure Ojaide show how the tradition is ongoing in recent times. Funso Aiyejina has written on the literary works of Earl Lovelace who is also indebted to the Calypso tradition. There is an enduring contemporaneity to this tradition of insults. What is significant is using artistic, verbal, and performance resources of the past to address contemporary challenges. If traditional Udje and Halo embarrassed social deviants to fall into line, poets,

dramatists, and fiction writers of contemporary times in Africa and the diaspora satirize to make folks keep to values that hold society together. Writers integrate these traditions into their artistic works to give a cultural identity from subtle to more brazen patterns. Many observers see the influence of Jonggo on evangelical songs in their rhythm and general patterns in Brazil.

At this juncture, let me summarize the content of the book. After this introductory chapter about the nature, pattern, and significance of the battle traditions of insult in the African Atlantic world, there are three broad sections: African Origins, Diasporic Manifestations, and New Transformations and the Circularity of Diasporic Traditions. About five essays/chapters focus on each section to elucidate the totality of that phase or pattern of verbal arts, song-poetry, and performance. The African Origins consist of Urhobo Udje, Ewe Halo, rivalries in polygamous Yoruba households, Swahili Malumbano, and Shona traditions of abuse. The section on Diasporic Manifestations deals with the Dozens, Greek Step Show, Battle Rap, Jonggo, and Calypso. The third part of the book shines light on further new manifestations of the African and diasporic traditions in the global era. This part deals with “New Transformations of Diasporic Traditions.” These new transformations include Yabis, Tanzanian Bongo fleva, and the recuperation and reconfiguration of the battle traditions of verbal arts, song-poetry, and performance in modern literature.

Each chapter builds upon preceding chapters to reinforce the battling nature of the specific genre. In some instances, two essays reinforce each other as the two essays on Jonggo in which Tonia Leigh Wind’s “Oral Tradition and Cultures in Dialogue: Ondjango Angolano and Jonggo da Serrinha” in fact quotes from Matthias Röhrig Assunção’s “Stanzas and Sticks: Poetic and Physical Challenges in the Afro-Brazilian Culture of the Paraíba Valley, Rio de Janeiro.” Assuncao’s essay appears to take off from where Wind’s ends to include Calango and Folia which though of African origin have Portuguese and Catholic influences. Similarly, Michele Randolph’s and Maliek Lewis’s chapter on the Dozens presages Matthew Oware’s chapter on Battle Rap. Going through the tradition, there are comparisons as of legendary rivalries as in Nigerian/Urhobo Udje between Memerume and Oloya and in Trinidadian Calypso between Sparrow and Kichener and Lord Melody and Mighty Sparrow at different times. And finally Mathias Oerho’s essay on contemporary African poetry relates to Udje and Halo. There is thus overall connectedness of all the essays which brings out the similarities, varieties, and contextual specificities of each.

These crosscurrents indicate the diversity that the battle tradition of insults has come to encompass. As already discussed, the essays in this section affirm their African predecessors to which they owe much in style. However, the respective environments in the diaspora establish their role and mode of composition and performance. The case of African-Americans using the Dozens and Battle Rap to overcome the stress of the racist capitalist system of the United States is an example of the adaptability of each manifestation of the tradition in the so-called New World.

All the chapters form a cohesive statement about this African tradition and its spread to the diaspora. Historically these traditions started at different times and different places but later time and space are shrunk as the current phenomenon of global hip-hop which appears in localized versions but remain authentically African and whose roots go deep into pre-slave trade and precolonial times through slavery, colonialism, up to the present. The changes will continue to go on in the tradition and one cannot predict what it will look like as artists and people all over the world embrace its composition and practice.

The things we share culturally are relevant to today's demands. The battle tradition grants democratic space to all actors to respond—talk back on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp. It levels speech and makes it “free” in a sense that nobody has the last word and so there is a dialogic sequence that helps to bring to the fore the issues that need to be addressed toward a society of shared views/opinions in which there is often as much disagreement as agreement.

One may ask, what is the significance of this book on the African battle tradition of the verbal arts, song-poetry, and performance? Many of these traditions are steeped in indigenous knowledge from which they derive their values, significance, and contemporaneity. The fact that many African societies set up this arrangement of song-poetry contests to avert conflict and maintain peace in the community is a laudable practice. One could imagine if many street gangs of today, as in many cities in Africa and the United States, were to accept to “battle” without guns, so many lives would be saved every day, week, month, and year. This peace mechanism should be studied by NGOs worldwide dealing with conflicts within nations and gang fights within and between streets.

Also the emphasis on sharp imagination and humor in the verbal arts, whether of riddles/Jongo, the Dozens, Battle Rap, Udje, or others, is an intellectual development that shows how words have psychological and mystical power in human existence. The use of proverbs and highly

imaginative metaphors and riddles represents the archiving of African traditional knowledge and wisdom. So much is embedded in these traditions that this book presents.

This project relives cultural Pan-Africanism. People of Africa and the diaspora have a unifying culture wherever they might be now in these battles of poetry and wit. In addition to bringing black peoples together, these cultural practices add to other artistic indices to affirm an identity to their practitioners and to those who identify with them. If Anglo-Saxon folks form alliances as AUKUS bringing Britain, USA, and Australia, based on race, why should black nations not form alliances for strategic advantage?

One of the objectives of this book is to mend the contemporary rift between groups of Africa-descended folks. In the United States, for instance, there are testimonies of rifts between African immigrants and African-Americans. Often the subalterns are under pressure from the elite class and there are enough problems on economic, class, race, and police, among others, to exacerbate the condition of minorities in the United States of America. The tendency of the low-class folks to vent their anger against immigrants from Africa comes from a simple conclusion as if those who came in recently take away jobs from them. This thinking causes rifts among people of the same ancestry. By studying and being convinced that the connections of verbal arts, song-poetry, and performance in disparate African societies across the world are more than coincidence but direct racial cultural practices will help to mend the rift.

Above all, these works of battle poetry earn a big place in world cultural contributions. Udje, Halo, Malumbano, Battle Rap, Calypso, and Jongu, among so many others, are living testaments of arts and culture that are black contributions to world popular culture. It is a genre in multifarious variants that UNESCO should help map out in digital form not to lose one of the most vibrant genres that Africa, its diaspora, and humans have ever created—artistic battle for excellence. This is compelling as there are newer forms in written forms of the once oral-only battle warfare of poetry and its performance.

In conclusion, this study looks at the tradition and its manifestations in different places and times. It has refused to die and so transforms into new forms in old and faraway places. There is relevance to its existence in always being there to address new issues and challenges that make life a continuous battle to make things better. There is no last word. Life is competitive and the drive to outperform others in an artistic tradition which does not carry the physical consequences of its content is marvelous.

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PART I

African Origins



Battle by All Means: Udje as Oral Poetry and Performance

Tanure Ojaide

“Battle” as both a metaphor and a reality in its adversarial implications is at the core of *Udje*, the oral song-poetry and performance tradition of the Urhobo people of Nigeria’s Delta State. It is a special kind of dance which takes place annually on an appointed day when rival groups perform songs composed with often exaggerated materials about their opposite sides. Each of the two paired groups performs on alternate years for its rival side and large audiences to watch and listen to. Udje is thus a highly competitive oral poetic performance genre that enacts the form of warfare in an artistic manner. This unique traditional African poetic and performance genre has been studied by scholars from different perspectives. While early works on it as of J.P. Clark in the 1960s, G.G. Darah’s and Tanure Ojaide’s of the 1970s and early 1990s respectively were collections of the song-poems and their transcription and translation into English with comments, udje study has advanced into theoretical dimensions in the twenty-first

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