

## Egogo Alagiebo: The Portrait of an Oral Artist

MARK IGHILE

*Department of English  
College of Humanities  
Redeemer's University  
Mowe, Ogun State, Nigeria*

**Abstract:** *The oral poet, Egogo Alagiebo, the blind minstrel of Benin City, Nigeria, whose portrait forms the basis of this paper, clearly represents a creative phenomenon which is of immense relevance to both the past and the present, with striking implications for the future. His songs, most of which are embellished by proverbial and philosophical expressions, continuously strike the reflective and critical consciousness of not only the customers of the Airport Road Post Office, but indeed the entire Benin community. This paper examines the artistic personality of Egogo Alagiebo, within the conceptual framework of oral literature and cultural studies, and submits that the poet, x-rayed in terms of his mien, career, popularity, attitude to life and living, is indicative of a certain level of uniqueness -- in relevance and intensity-- that makes him truly influential.*

### Introduction

This paper stems from the series of interviews I conducted with the poet-singer for close to a decade. The poet whose real name is Ehimwonma Omoregie took the pseudonym of Egogo Alagiebo in good faith. His acceptance may not be unconnected with one of his striking convictions that there is something in a name, and that popularity comes in many ways. Ehimwonma Omoregie possesses a near-deceptive physique. Apart from the patches of white hair on his head, which betray his age, his smallish stature does not in any way give light to when he was born. The concept of beauty has little or no place in the life of the artist. For what else can be said of a blind man? His blindness can, to some extent, be said to be responsible for his stack restlessness. He is always in a hurry. And although he gives a sharp impression of someone who is in good command of his memory, the degree of hurry with which he renders his songs shows that he is a little bit far from tranquility. Egogo, who stands at about 5 feet tall, uses a walking stick, and with an aide, he leaves his house at No 30 Ughegie street Benin City every other day for the post office- his regular scene of performance. This paper presents a graphic picture of his professional status from the standpoint of his poetic and thematic strength.

### The Artistic Personality of Egogo Alagiebo

The artist who hails from Obayanto village in Oredo Local Government Area of Edo State is the first born of his father. His father had two wives, and characteristics of a normal traditional setting, he was loved deeply by his parents. His mother Omorowa Omoregie was a kind, dutiful and respectful woman “who never hurt a fly”. Her general success attracted the envy of the second wife. While tracing his misfortune to the air of jealousy that pervaded his father’s polygamous house, Egogo Alagebo made it clear that he was not born blind. The trouble started when he was 18 years old. He had gone to his father’s farm. As he was returning, an insect (Abode) flew into his left eye, and all efforts to remove the insect from the eye failed.

To quote him:

One evening as we were returning from the farm-  
I mean, my father, mother and myself- one insect  
called Abode flew into my left eye. It was a very  
painful experience. We tried to remove it but no way.  
We used machine to remove the redness, but it  
degenerated into sore and the eye became blind. Since  
all parts of the body are related to one another, the  
other decided to join, hence the two became blind.

The artist began his musical career in 1959 under the leadership of a man from Orhinomwon Local Government Area of Edo state. He started with the “flute sound” and later got used to his special drum box. On why he took to the profession, Egogo shook his head and exclaimed “Oma” He paused a little and explained

Such is life.

After the death of my father, things became very  
difficult for me. All his properties were sold yet  
the problem remained. And since I have to live, I  
took to music.

But then, the quality and richness of his songs- the wisdom they embody and his strong concern for a variety of issues that are of great relevance to the contemporary socio-political fortunes of the Binis- which have made him unique and popular in Benin-City- do not in any way show that he is engaged in a forced or an extemporaneous enterprise. The creative and emotional posture of the singer- poet’s work is a clear testimony of his artistic excellence. Illiteracy has not in any way destroyed the course before him. He was not sent to school. Yet the clarity of purpose and the strength of reasoning characteristic of Egogo’s songs are obvious products of a sound mind.

To grasp the fact that the minstrel has been equipped by nature with the resources to actualize his musical project is easy. His smallish stature, which helps him to have the aura of a youth, is a direct advantage to him. He possesses a voice which, apart from the various tones it could be modulated to assume, is fundamentally a tenor one. Egogo Omoriegie carries with him a rather comical mien which heralds his individual presence in any gathering

People have always said that my voice embodies a certain magic which magnetizes listeners. And this is how it has always been for me- right from my youth.

When the artist started his musical occupation, he was not trained in Benin. But with a nourishing and professional love for travelling, he was able to move from one place to the other. The urge to broaden and brighten his artistic instincts was overwhelming. He was also not unaware of the marketing strategies of his profession. As he made it explicit in the interview I had with him, the period between 1960-1969 was a time for “speed movement”. Like the energetic troubadour that he was, he made Onitsha, Akure, Ibadan, Abeokuta and Enugu part of his regular places of artistic exhibition. This was in the 60s and early 70s when “pence” and “pound sterling” were still operational in the country. The maximum number of days he stayed in a place was two weeks. This journey afforded him, among others, the opportunity to polish his craft and widen the scope of his performances. Partly because of the loss of his eyes, these adventures were not carried out alone. He was either in the company of his boys (assistants who he initially had) or his senior colleagues. In the quotation below, the artist shares one of his memorable experiences which he had in the course of his undertaking:

It was just before the civil war started. We went to Ibadan to perform. The Ijala poets there are wonderful. We went there to show them some of our secrets in the business but they surprised us. For more than 45 minutes, two Ijala poet-singers chanted incantations on numerous topics. Anyway we still gave them what we had. I will never forget that time.

But since the 1970s Egogo has been performing at home, at least in the state where he has been receiving patronage. His high demand is not unconnected with the uniqueness of his creative quality. His robust and sensitive love for language makes him more appreciated. His sonorous voice blended with phonetic manipulations drive many village heads and other famous leaders in the city to invite him for public performances. Egogo’s personality is undoubtedly rich and without reproach. As highlighted by Isidore Okpewho (1992), the things that the artist brings to literary performance include:

Personal artistic inclination, family background

and personal experience as well as training received  
and the circumstances in which the artist has frequently  
worked that may be said to the formation of a personal style.

While recognizing the complications involved in the use of “personality”, the itemization effected by Okpewho (above) is relevant. What is pronounced in this sense is the conditioning of the popularity of the artist against the ideas expressed in his work and personality. Certainly Egogo’s popularity is not in doubt. There is a charm in him which gives the world the impression of one who has registered his presence in the consciousness of the people. His overwhelming air of pride gives him all the positive marks he desperately needs. For apart from building around him a flamboyant cloak of myth, such an attitude also gives an edge over his contemporaries – the air of confidence and general acceptability, so that even in informal gatherings, appreciable attendance is recorded.

Narrating one of the experiences he had with one of the former governors of the defunct Bendel state, Egogo explained that he does not attend any party for the sheer sake of doing so. Even if the occasion is worth its salt, the proper intimation has to be done:

By that time Kokoma was the musical word of the  
day and during that period I was the man of the time.  
Ogbemudia was a good man who really remembered  
me. But he once invited me hurriedly to a function.  
I didn’t like the haste so I turned down the call.

Egogo’s exposure to various societies through travelling has helped him, not only in coming out with what Ruth Finnegan refers to as “rich and encouraging songs” but also to develop his philosophical disposition to life. The artist’s relationship with people of different sexes and ages and of various ethnic backgrounds has also influenced his thought and human relations. Perhaps the kind and scope of the minstrel’s career need to be articulated. In spite of the non-concrete visual quality of the artist, his creative alertness and the gains of professional discussions are the ready resources of broad experiences. And these are reflected in his works (statements and songs) most of which are rooted on a deep and optimistic vision of life.

The poet-singer clearly lives above monetary enticement and pathetic moments. The former he advances with the strong conviction that though monetary reward is appealing and highly tempting, the freedom of one’s conscience matters a lot. According to him, the last thing he will do in life is to turn a drug addict in order to sing in a mysterious way and earn thousands of naira. In his words:

I cannot say that because money is good and sweet,  
I should go ahead and smoke “moroko” and start  
singing rubbish. I do not look for money that  
destroys the head. I sing my song the proper way.

Those who appreciate good things can recommend me.

His moment of deep reflection and sadness, and the recall of such times form a significant part of his artistic career. From the craft he exhibits in his profession, it is quite obvious that Egogo is in full control of his talents.

It may not be out of context to observe that Isidore Okpewho's oral conceptualization of the topic (The Epic in Africa 65-67) is somewhat relevant to Egogo and his songs. For instance, while respecting and recognizing the constraints of tradition, the artist has been able to stand out as a distinct creative human element. Even when general materials like myths, legends and folksongs are given proper and adequate attention, the individual embellishment is still made outstanding.

On the composition of songs, the poet-singer chooses to be himself. Although how long it takes him to compose one song depends on factors like his psychological set up, the nature of the song, the number of people to be mentioned and how closely associated he is with them, he appeals to a particular aura of creative activity. To him, the greatest tools of a successful composition include: the tendency towards originality, the right frame of mind and a conducive atmosphere. Such environment carries with itself- imposed solitude and general tranquility.

When I want to compose a song, I move away  
from human company. And in the process of  
my aimless walking, I join words together. I  
like composing at night. That is the best time  
I think fast. When I am through with my homework,  
I come out with it.

A careful perusal of Egogo Alagebo's songs will reveal that they are unique both in relevance and intensity; and these in turn influence their complexities and aesthetics. The direct determining factors of this musical phenomenon include the subject matter of the songs, the psycho-emotional position or state of the artist, and the time constraints. The period of time Alagebo spends composing one song similarly depends on these factors. He explains thus:

The time I spend composing a song depends on  
the nature of the song. If it is a song of birth or  
other joyous celebration I spend quite an appreciable  
time on it. But if it is that of mourning I spend 5 to  
10 minutes. You know I have to ease the tension  
and the bitter reality of the moment. In any case I  
spend 15-25 minutes composing most of my songs.

The creative minstrel is not just a collector of words; he goes beyond grouping sound elements. He is a public affairs commentator, a social critic, an historian, a nation-builder and a healthy politician. Through his musical instrument, he is not only able to sensitize the consciousness of the people to socio-political issues around them, but he is also capable of bringing to order men and women in position of authority. Or alternatively, advancing their cause. That songs can be used to “report and comment on current affairs, for political pressure for propaganda and to reflect and mould public opinion” as articulated by Ruth Finnegan (1972, 272) therefore becomes obvious. And Egogo, the popular Benin singer carries out the roles and even more.

The singer, no doubt has got his share of some unfavorable political situations in the past. Even the present socio-political dispensation to him gives no cause for hope and joy. With a nostalgic pang he laments:

When Governor Ogbemudia was in control of the state  
in the late 60s he promised to give me a helping hand.  
But since he has gone, everything is grounded... All  
welfare services are closed down.

To the artist, the past would not have given room for alarm if the present or current situation in the country had any ray of light. While narrowing down the problems confronting the nation to that of economy and politics, Egogo argues that if the two points of dilemma are addressed, so many other difficulties would be eased or eradicated. In his words:

What we have now is strike. Strikes all over. The teachers  
have refused to go back to work because their demands have  
not been met. The big boss cannot go and teach. The current  
announcement of increase in wages has not helped the  
situation. Traders have already started increasing the cost  
of their products just because of what they have heard on  
the radio- but have not been implemented.

During my series of interviews with the composer I discovered that he has no special partisan political interest, he does not belong to any political party. And in his songs he tries as much as possible to demonstrate his neutral position which does not, in any way, negatively affect his sound and clear political consciousness.

### **Egogo's Thematic Interests**

In considering and analyzing the themes of Egogo's songs, it is perhaps significant to take a brief but critical look at the general uses of the song text. Amorelle Inanga, in a thought – provoking article “The Social Role of Song Texts in Bembe Music among the Egba”, points out

that songs “reflect both personal and social experiences. They serve as an invaluable source for the understanding of human behavior rather than music sound” (73). They entertain, embody the moral code, and reflect directly a people (Ighile. Alan P Merriam’s famous categorization of the roles of song texts is certainly not out of place. According to him; “They reflect the culture of which they are a part, the texts may serve as vehicles of history, legend and mythology, they serve as avenues for relieving psychological tension; they embody the moral codes of society and thus help in correcting erring members they call attention to unsatisfactory conditions and crystalize new demands” (Merriam, 1964,187-208). While the major concern in this section is to explore the idea operational in Egogo’s song texts, it should however, be added that the artist’s resources adequately carry out the above articulated functions.

The poet-singer’s themes range from deep philosophical topics like death – in which he demise of his parents – and the intricacies of life, the fate and essence of agriculture to political issues: past and present. The state of the educational system, which is of great concern and interest to him constitutes a recognizable part of his songs. The specification of the song items gives a strong impression of the individual treatment of each song within the context of their thematic framework. However, cases abound in Egogo’s art of songs which embrace many ideas in themselves. In other words it is possible to find one song containing many themes. Let us cite the instance of a song entitled “Edo ‘Mwen, Oyegun Mwen”. Although the main idea of this musical piece is the glorification of Oyegun, a one-time civilian governor of Edo state in particular and the generality of the people as a whole, the meaning of the song soon disperse to other aspects of human endeavour. In this song, Egogo begins by praising the former chief executive of the state:

Edo mwen o  
Oyegun mwen o  
Edo mwen  
Omo n’ yak he yeke

My Binis  
My Oyegun  
My Binis  
The child I have used  
To defend myself.

This panegyric tempo soon diminishes into a sad flashback where the exponent of highlife music recalls the occurrence of 1971 – 1972 during the military regime of General Yakubu Gowon. The then governor of Midwestern Region Brigadier Samuel Ogbemudia made some attempts to assist Egogo. The singer laments that that good old days have gone. Still in the same song, there are varied indications of the need for patience and continuity even in the midst



of poverty. While urging the politicians to remember the needy, the artist recognizes the power of money. Hence he says;

Igho O ma gia guan  
Money has not allowed one to speak.

Another major theme in the songs of Ego is agriculture. His treatment of farming is diversified. First, from the angle of the rise in the cost of foodstuff. This ugly situation he blames on the citizens of the country, Nigeria. While advocating continued and indefinite colonial imperialism, Ego blames the current inflation on the Nigerian people themselves who do nothing but profiteer. He explains:

We said we needed no help, no foreign aid. Now that  
we are governing ourselves things have become  
unaffordable. When we were under the Whites,  
we never bought a cutlass at ₦60.00. With “2 and  
6” (i.e. 50k) we were able to purchase one then.

Another aspect of what the singer refers to as the “dishonesty of Nigerians” is the “hiring process”. Ego Alagebo deplors the activities of daily farm assistants (commonly called jobs), who apart from charging exorbitant prices for the service, also have their assignment uncompleted. Instead of such hired labourers to work fully for the money they receive, they leave even before it is evening. A different explanation for high cost of foodstuff in the markets has to do with the unhealthy propaganda of the government. On the heat of the workers’ demand for the increase in the salaries and general improved working conditions, the government announced a heavy package for the labour force. And though no radical increase had been effected, the sellers, acting on what they have heard, went ahead to increase the cost of their sales to get their own share of the “national cake”.

However, Ego does not fail to address the positive aspect of the theme of agriculture. Using the metaphor of the burnt food rendered inedible as the basis of his reasoning, he voices the inevitability of farming – as a means of sustenance both for the immediate and the future generation.

In discussing another prominent theme, education the composer links the crisis in the sector to the inability of government to make teachers comfortable. He says that the frequent industrial action being embarked upon by teachers throughout the country is a reflection of the administration’s state and status.. In a bid to drive home his conviction, he asks:

Can a hungry man give food to the dog?  
Is it not a well fed man that gives the devil food?  
If proper things were to be given priority then  
teachers’ salaries would have been the most



outstanding. The government should do all in its power to address teachers' needs.

Asked why he thinks the teachers' issue should be "the first among equals" to be tackled, the artist analyzes the relevance of the teaching profession to national development. According to him, apart from the fact that teachers are builders of the future leaders, they also act as an effective check on possible paroxysm of societal ills. This additional function of the teachers, Egogo Alagebo argues, is realizable because through continuous moral and academic instructions, the tendency on the part of the youths to commit crime is drastically reduced.

Some other thematic concerns of Egogo songs are woven around pure philosophy. One of such songs "Eki" focuses on the transience of life. Very much like J.P Clark's position in his poem "Streamside Exchange", the composer remarks that life is like a market place where man like a trader, goes home later in the day. In his words:

We have come to trade in this world.  
The great beyond is our home where  
all of us will go. Those killed and they  
that kill will surely go to the same place.

The above philosophical piece naturally sets in the theme of mourning, a theme which cuts across many of his songs. Usually the objects of these dirges are his parents who died long ago. Through these songs he illuminates his sorrowful state and emphasizes the inevitability of death. Also central to these solemn songs is the presentation of the good qualities of the deceased. Such outbursts are usually embellished with emotional addresses such as the one below:

O mother O mother. My backyard  
The backyard of our house  
O mother O mother...Till next reincarnation.  
When death meets one, one's back is turned  
O mother O mother

The biting pang of loneliness which he experiences as a result of the absence of his parents stirs in him a strong feeling of urge – a drive towards re-union:

I do not see who to call my father for me.  
I do not see who to call my mother for me.  
I do not see who to call my father for me.  
Where you are in great beyond  
Be full of buoyant dews

This mournful expression of a strong desire brings to light, among others, the uncertainty and absurdity of life and all it stands for. The musical demonstration of the poet's wish to go the

way of his parents (below), openly concretizes the fact that the great beyond is the ultimate, and that any attempt to shadow the obvious would be self-illusion and foolery. The artist says:

I am going to my father  
 I am going to my mother  
 No one can be beaten to his home  
 I am going to my home  
 I am going to my father  
 I am going to my mother  
 Let no one block my way  
 I am going home

Some of Egogo's songs focus on the lighter side of the society. These include songs at traditional naming and wedding ceremonies. Explaining what contains in a typical marriage occasion, the computer says that some of the necessary requirements include the presentation of a bottle of dry gin, some kola nuts, a white chalk and more than thirty pieces of coconuts, after which prayers are offered for a successful married life. A popular song which the composer says he normally sings in such happening begins with a poser which has a rhetorical element:

What is it?  
 It is joy  
 What is it?  
 It is joy  
 The joy of the body  
 It is joy  
 The joy of money...

It is instructive to note that the richness and timelessness of Egogo's art is to a large degree, a direct function of his wise sayings. Virtually all his songs are awash with proverbs. Partly due to this reason, and also considering the fact that his thematic vision tallies with healthy philosophy and neutrality in issues of national and international matters, he has been able to draw rewards from men and women of different human endeavours. His popularity is certainly not in question. And his ability to sustain himself as an artist is an affirmation of his wide acceptability.

### **Proverbs in the Songs of Egogo**

Like the Idoma people (Amali, 1985) Egogo treats proverbs as life itself. In his proverbs lie distant and immediate history, profound concretized thoughts, wisdom and practices of his people expressed in impressive and dignifying language. This factor of language, which is a passionate instrument used in articulating what Amali refers to as "the soul and backbone of verbal arts" (1985, 31) is a realistic function of the African context. Ruth Finnegan (1970:390) presents the idea more clearly. According to her:

In many African countries; a feeling for language,

for imagery and for the expression of abstract ideas though compressed and illusive phraseology comes out particularly clearly in proverbs.

Egogo strongly believes that there is no viable way one can compose a “colourful” “spiceful” and yet “serious” song without having recourse to proverbs. To pursue his point further, the poet- singer stresses the fact that since his songs are for those who appreciate the culture of his community, proverbs must be given their proper place. He uses a proverb to clarify his conviction, and also consolidate the impression that learned people armed themselves with such instruments:

The clever enjoys proverbs while the  
villagers, the unsophisticated do not.

Some of Alagebo’s proverbs rebuke or disgrace another into compliance. The expressions he used in songs centering on education give credence to this observation. Granted, the socio-economic situation in the country is unfavourable, but this ugly phenomenon he argues, should be eagerly addressed adding that teachers welfare should be a priority if educational standard must advance:

It is only a well fed man  
that gives food to the devil

Also using another proverbial expression, this time to stress the importance of farming Egogo says:

Burnt food cannot be eaten.

The above proverb which has a satiric undertone, paints the picture of a life, or rather, a situation void of food cultivation and its devastating consequences.

The use of allusion in proverb is not obvious in all cases. This is because knowledge of the situation in which proverbs are cited, an essential part of understanding their implication, may be lacking. When Egogo says frequently that

The law of Ewuaré will live forever

he is not merely expressing a wish. But he is in fact alluding to a well known story- the tale of a prominent Oba in Benin Empire.

Some proverbs, apart from referring to specific experiences, reflect general truths. Examples of such a category are: “water does not get dry in sugarcane” and “the child is the backbone of the house”

In terms of form and structure, the proverbs of Egogo are composed in a variety of ways. While some are expressed in direct statements (as the earlier examples given above indicate), others are put in the form of a question. For example

Can a hungry man give food to the dog?  
Is it not the well fed that gives the devil food?

It is important to state here that in addition to terseness and relative fixity, most sayings termed as proverbs are also marked by some kind of poetic quality in style or sense, and are also set apart in form for more straightforward maxims. By this observation therefore, the economy of expression and the metaphoric, figurative and symbolic quality of proverbs becomes bits of the overall characteristics.

## CONCLUSION

Apart from articulating in broad terms the art and thematic concerns of Egogo, we have also been able to situate the artist within a specific social setting. This contextualisation brings to the fore the strategic interplay between the society, the artist and the art.

## NOTES

1. I first met Egogo in 1986 when I went to the Airport Road Benin post office to purchase some bank draft for a higher course. Many people were gathered round him to enjoy his music. The rhythmic and sonorous quality of his songs also captivated me. I began to develop strong interest in the musical phenomenon. But we never had a serious discussion until February 4, 1993 after which we have had several interactions and interviews spanning close to a decade.
2. Although the artist has forgotten the name of his tutor, he still remembers very vividly that he is from Oghobo village.
3. 'Oma' is a verbal and histrionic way of expressing self-pity and anguish.

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