

Tope Alabi's Aboru, Aboye Abosise: A Case of Influence and Subversion of an African Sacred Text

Adeyanju, Adewumi Raphael¹, Ajala, Adeola Toyosi², Adebagbo Adebajo³

^{1,3}Department of Languages and Literary Studies Adeleke University, Ede, Osun State, Nigeria

²Department of Languages and Linguistics Kings University, Ode Omu, Osun State, Nigeria

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.90500006>

Received: 17 April 2025; Accepted: 23 April 2025; Published: 27 May 2025

ABSTRACT

Tope Alabi, a Yoruba Christian Gospel artiste in Nigeria attracted critical newspaper and social media reviews to one of her stage performances because of heavy reliance on the Yoruba traditional oral resource to enrich her song. Her use of *Aboru Aboye Abosise*, a concept found in Ifa corpus, an African oral sacred text associated with Orunmila, the Yoruba god of wisdom and divination has been interpreted as an affirmation of her belief in the African traditional religion. This paper re-examined the context and the meaning of *Aboru Aboye Abosise* in the song. It further attempted to deconstruct the popular reading of the work, with a view to and establishing that instead of affirming a belief in traditional mode of worship, the song represents a case of subversion of the original reading of the traditional sacred oral text. The study adopted Influence Theory as a tool of analysis. Influence theory is a systematic study of formal models of communicative influence of one person or group on another person or group. It was discovered that Tope Alabi's song derived its strength and meaning through the appropriation of the Yoruba metaphors, proverbs and folk-lore to project her Christian world-views instead of encouraging the traditional practice of offering sacrifice to God.

Keywords: Adaptation affirmation, appropriation, deconstruct, hypertext, influence, intertextuality, imitation, oral, orature, text, subversion.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, Orature has not only influenced Literature, but it has also influenced other sub-genres of creative works like modern songs and stage drama. In many traditional societies, storytelling and oral performances were the primary means of preserving cultural heritage, history, and knowledge. Oral tradition often involves the use of poetic language, rhythmic structure mnemonic devices to aid and impact narratives. Many literary works and other modern artistic performances draw inspiration from orature. Tope Alabi, a Gospel artiste in Nigeria is one of the Yoruba performative artistes whose creative enterprise is highly influenced by African orature. Alabi in one of her performances sang:

Abiye ni mi, Oruko mi ni yen.
Mo de bo, mo ru, mo ye,
Emi ni Aboru, Aboye, Abosise.

A rough translation of the song goes thus:

I am the one that has been born to live,
That is my name
I have become a sacrifice
I am an acceptable sacrifice
I am a living sacrifice
I am an answered sacrifice

The audience's reaction to this song is a mixture of condemnation and adulation, based on their religious perception. Many Christians irked by the song took to Newspapers, Electronics and Social Media, accusing Alabi of promoting idolatry practices. Conversely, many Yoruba traditional religion practitioners celebrated her apparent promotion of their religious practices. This controversy is understandable, creative art, especially songs have a very strong influence on the religious perception of every society.

No wonder, Leo Tolstoy, (2021) claims that real art is not just any human activity transmitting feeling, but it is only that part which for some reason the audience select from it, and attach special importance. Tolstoy argues that, "This special importance has always been given by all men to that part of activity which transmits feeling from their religious perception."

Abiye, Aboru Aboye and Abosise: Etymology

Traditionally words like, *Abiye*, *Aboru Aboye* and *Abosise* have inherent esoteric meanings in the Yoruba socio-cultural settings. The word, *Abiye* is associated with the Ogboni fraternity, the judicial arm of the Yoruba traditional government in the pre-colonial era. This fraternity in the modern day is however viewed with suspicion in the Christendom. *Iya Abiye* is an important female title among the Ogbonis. Many critics also interrogate the idea of Alabi referring to herself as "Ebo", which literally means a fetish sacrifice in Yoruba land.

The phrase, "*Aboru, Aboye, Abosise*" serves the purposes of both salutation and benediction in the Ifa tradition. The standard format of the greetings, during the Ifa divination is "*Aboru Aboye Abosise*" from the person initiating the pleasantries, and the response is, "Agbo Ato Asure Iworiwofun". The origin of the expression is credited to *Ogunda Meji, an Odu, (an Ifa corpus)* which states Orunmila (Baba Agbonmiregun) once tried to consult with Olodumare, (the almighty God). It was impossible for him to achieve his desire without passing through Olodumare's three daughters, called "Awon Iyaami." In order to surmount this obstacle, Orunmila had to consult Ifa which instructed him to make offerings to the three women. He prepared the offerings and laid them close to the river where the ladies bathed, when they saw it, they were impressed with Orunmila generosity and granted him access to Olodumare.

In the Yoruba cosmology, those three women referred to as the daughters of Eledumare are variously referred to as Awon Iyaami Osoronga, Eleye, or Aje, (witches). These powerful women rightly qualify to be regarded as forerunners of the modern-day feminist activists. Aje or witches are held in awe in most superstitious societies, because of the belief that they possess some supernatural powers that can be used for either good or evil purposes. It is for this reason that their names and assumed presence conjured both terror and admiration in such societies.

Alabi in the 11th July, 2023 edition of the Punch Newspaper countered the raging narratives by claiming that, *Aboru Aboye Abosise* is a pure Yoruba expression and not an exclusive preserve of the animists. "If some people say they want to use the language in their own style, it is not bad. We have also decided to use it in our own style." She cited Romans 12:1, to justify her claims, "Brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service." Alabi explains that, "acceptable' is Aboru while living sacrifice is Aboye."

Adaptation for Creativity

Tope Alabi has either consciously or unconsciously engaged in act of adaptation for creativity sake. Adaptation can be briefly defined as an openly acknowledgement and extended reworking of other text. Linda Hutcheon {2006:3} describes adapters as those who borrow existing texts (stories) and relate them in their different ways:

They use the same tools that storytellers have always used: they actualize or concretize ideas;

they make simplifying selections, but amplify and extrapolate; they make analogies, they critique or show respect and so on. But the stories they relate are taken from elsewhere not invented a new.

Any speaker, familiar with the Yoruba mode of greetings cannot fail to associate the controversial expression with Ifa religious practices and trace its influence as the traditional oral resource in Alabi's lyric. There are special greetings for different occasions, professions and classes of people. The Yoruba Obas are priest kings so,

they are saluted as Kabiyesi followed by a prayer " Ebo Afin, Eru a da " which simply means that, may the Oba's sacrifice be accepted. Farmers are greeted with "Aroko-bodun-de" (may this planting season bring joy and festivity). Travelers are greeted with "Ona ire ona iye" (wishes for journey mercies).

From various Ifa verses, it can be established that language had existed before Orunmila. He was however, a renowned linguist "Afede keyo", (language scholar) and also a literary artist and master of Orature. His compositions are long fictional narrative poems in which he often appears as the protagonist. The poems are enriched with the appropriations of literary devices like allusions, puns, repetitions and alliteration. Ifa verses are rendered in parables and riddles, so that only the deep can decipher their meanings: "Aigbofa ni anwoke Ifa kan ko si ni para "

Ogunda Meji and many other Odus (Ifa corpus) belong to the genre called etiological tales like myths, folktales, and legends. They are fictional narratives that explain why something is the way it is. A Yoruba folktale for example, explains why the pig forages refuse dumps. We have similar examples in the Bible. In Genesis, the snake was condemned into crawling, as his punishment for enticing (seducing) the woman to eat the forbidden fruit. The rainbow is regarded as a reminder of God's promise never to destroy the earth with water again.

African folktales are stories with very deep meanings. In *Osa meji*, Obatala Oseremogbo abandons his own well, (wife?) to draw water from the well of some powerful women called, *Awon Eleye*, (the witches). The story in *Osa meji* has a parallel in book of Proverbs which, admonishes young men to avoid adultery:

Drink water from your own cistern,
running water from your own well.
Should your springs overflow in the
streams of water in the public squares?
Let them be yours alone, never to be
shared with strangers." (Proverbs 5:15-22)

There are many examples of etiological tales in Ifa. *Odu Ejiogbe* explains how the pigeon became the mother of twins and came home to live with the humans "Eji mogbe mi o gbe enikan, O difa fun Eye oko ti ofi ojojumo sokun airi omo bi. "(Ejiogbe is the one that made divination for the pigeon when she was daily crying of childlessness). *Obara Meji* warns against the danger of ambiguity by explaining the reason melon pods are clobbered to extract their seeds. "Aisoro yan oro lo pa baale Bara" (The patriarch of the melon was clobbered to death because of failure to give clear instructions to his children). Another Odu explains why the monkey cannot run on ground "Ere lo ba Edun nile lo dole, Edun o mo ere saa. Igi ni ile Edun." (When it comes to running on the ground, the monkey becomes a lazy one. Monkeys can only jump from trees to trees). In another Odu, the wife becomes "Iyawo or Iya Iwo, "(suffering from Iwo) because of Orunmila's harrowing experience in Iwo town.

In *Iwori Meji*, a Babalawo helped the men folk to take over the administration of the Egungun (masquerade) cult after many years of oppression from the womenfolk. Since then, the Babalawo has been immuned to Egungun's flogging "Iwori o weku, Egungun ko gbodo na Babalawo "(Iwori must not put on a mask, let no Eguugun flog a Babalawo). Ifa is also fond of using personification.

Such concepts as Iku, (death) Ori, (head) and Iwa, (character) are often personified in many Ifa verses. In *Oyeku Meji*, Orunmila outwitted Iku, (death) with the help of Esu. Iku was blackmailed after being tricked into eating Orunmila 's food. "Iku ki jeun eni tan ko tun pani". (Iku must not kill a benefactor)

All these didactic tales are allusions and parables meant to teach moral lessons like endurance, obedience, tolerance, loyalty, honesty, piety, danger of ingratitude etc. Ifa corpuses have either inspired or have been inspired by Yoruba proverbs that are easily accessible for speakers use. These African oral resources have been adapted and appropriated by many creative writers; playwrights, poets, song writers and producers of popular cultures to enrich their works and Alabi is no exception.

Aboru simply means an offering that is accepted. *Aboye* means a sacrifice of survival. *Abosise* is amen to the sacrifice. The three concepts are personified to guide people on how to commence a sacrifice that connects one to Eledumare. Wande Abimbola (2014:2) made a distinction between the Yoruba sacrifice and the Christian offering. According to him, Ifa offering is neither a sacrifice of atonement or redemption from the bondage of sin. Its main purpose is to maintain the office of the Babalawo.

Theoretical Framework: Influence and Originality

Influence theory is a systematic study of formal models of communicative influence of one person or group on another person or group. Every creative work as a cultural product is accessible for borrowing appropriation, adaptation and transposition and used in contexts. Gerald Gennet's (1979) one of the major proponents of Influence Theory in his discussion of literary works that are presumably related developed the notion of "hyper textuality" and postulates that the precursor text is the hypo text, while the imitator text is called hypertext. Gennete asserts that the "hypertext gains by its reader's awareness of illuminating relationship with its hypo text." Harold Bloom another proponent of Influence Theory (1975), in his work, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* postulates that all writers are first readers and subject to influence, but writers only resort to "defensive narcissism" to protect their intellectual pride.

In order to do justice to this discourse, both Alabi's song and *Ogunda Meji* will be treated as two separate literary texts for easy analysis. Ato Quayson (1997: 15) is of the view that the traditional African oral forms of discourse are "ultimately text in their own right." It is very glaring that Tope Alabi's song has a very strong intertextual relations with Odu Oguda Meji; therefore, it should be regarded as the hypertexts of the later. The adaptation of *Aboru*, *Aboye* and *Abosise* to explain Romans (12:1-2) is purely an act of act of transposition.

Alabi like any borrowing artist may likely suffer from Bloom's "Anxiety of Influence" *because* of the misleading and negative perception of writers who engage in intertextuality as being unoriginal and derivative. The study is of the view that African artists are influenced by their cultural environments should in no way be seen as a sin or lack of originality. Ralph Emerson, (1883:170) had several years ago claimed that the original is not original, "there is imitation, model and suggestion to the very Arch Angels, if we knew their history, the first book, tyrannizes over the second. Read Tasso and you think of Virgil, read Virgil and you think of Homer, and Milton forces you to reflect how narrow the limit of human invention." In fact, Aristotle's *Poetics*, greatly influenced by Plato's thinking has reduced the whole literary field to an act of imitation (mimesis).

Influence for Subversion

Influence can involve taking an antithetical ideological position which may result in the deliberate subversion of the original reading of the hypo text. There are many reasons behind act of adaptation, it can be for economic, ideological (political or religious) or aesthetic purposes. Hutcheon states that an adapter "may likely want to contest the aesthetic or political values of the adapted text as to pay homage". Alabi gives a subtle hint of her intention to subvert the reading of Yoruba concept of "Ebo" from the material point of view. She said, "Mo ti di ebo... Ebo temi kii se ebo kanka tii ntagun laya," (I have become a sacrifice, but not the gigantic offering that confounds the vultures)

The is a direct allusion to the Yoruba saying that a Babalawo can prescribe gigantic offering that confounds the vultures. (Ebo kanka tii nka Igun laya). Alabi's rejection of the traditional mode of worship can said to have taken a clue from Apostle Paul's rejection of Judaism. Abram was chided by God for failing to realize that the presence of the birds of prey on his offering was the sign of its acceptance.

The Lord told him, Bring me a three-year-old heifer,
a three-year-old goat, three-year-old ram, and a young
turtle. So, Abram presented all these to him and kill them.
Then he cut each animal down the middle, and laid the
halves side by side... when the birds of prey came
down the carcasses, Abram drove them away. (Genesis15:11)

The Yorubas will rather call on the birds to consume their sacrifices “Igunnugun gba ebo mi, Akalamagbo gba ebo mi. Eje ki ebo ko fin, e je ki ebo lo da”. (Let the vultures and ravens consume this sacrifice so that it can be accepted)

Adaptation is not about reproduction of an old text; it is about recreation and interpretation in a new medium. Since the adapter is first an interpreter before a creator, the creative transposition of the adapter text will be influenced by the temperament talent of the adapter (Gardies1998:68-71). whose intention according to Hutcheon, (7) is either to “consume and erase the memory of the adapted text or call it into question is as likely as the desire to pay tribute by copying”.

Alabi is not alone in appropriating cultural materials for subversion in order to propagate the gospel. Bishop Ajayi Crowther, while translating the English Bible to Yoruba engaged in what Stam (2005b:42-44) refers to “Transcultural adaptation” which often involves the adapter to purge an earlier text of the elements that his new audience’s culture in time or place may offensive or controversial. Crowther used the Yoruba concept of Esu to explain an entirely different concept of the Christian Satan because of the seemingly similarities between a rebellious Christian angel and Esu, the Yoruba trickster god. This same Crowther deliberately rejected the real Yoruba translation of some words like: Prayer to Iwure, Priest to Oluawo, Amen to Ase. Instead, he transposed such Arabic words as; Adua (prayer), Alufa (priest), Amin (amen).

Apostle Paul in Acts 17, during a visit to Athens, the citadel of the many Greek gods was at the Areopagus, or Ares Hills. Ares is the Greek god of war like the Yorubas’ *Ogun*. Paul noticed an altar dedicated “TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.” He concluded that the Greeks were ignorant of the true living God. He masterfully borrowed the concept of the “unknown god” to share the gospel of Jesus Christ by trying to change their traditional perception of the god to his Christian God. Apostle John in the introduction to the gospel John also borrowed the concept of “Logos,” a Greek word meaning” word, reason or plan” to establish his doctrine as vehicle in conceiving the role of Jesus Christ as the principle of God active creation.

Eliot (1972) stressed the importance of influence in any literary discourse. He urges writers as a matter of aesthetics to harness individual talent in recording the past. According to him, “If we approach a poet without prejudice, we shall often find out that not only the best but the most individual parts of his works may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors assert their immortality most vigorously.” Wole Soyinka, (1997, p.4) shares the same sentiments when he acknowledges the limited amount of originality in creative ideas admitting that “though innovations have a slightly larger scope, but what we all do mostly is renovation and development of existing ideas”

The beauty and uniqueness of Alabi’s work is the ability to appropriate the materials from her cultural environment. Her attempt to divorce herself from the influence can be interpreted as what Ann Jefferson, (1982, p.75) a Russian formalist describes as an act of defamiliarization. Defamiliarization takes place when a creative person attempts to invest a work in a new lease of life, in order to refresh his perception of reality. An imitator defamiliarizes the borrowed elements of his work through the use of metaphors and allusions. In the process, the original work is effaced or swallowed up in its new context. Alabi in her song, creatively employ this to establish her individuality.

We can also relate these strategies to the views of theorists who de-emphasize the role of the author in the literary work, for instance, Jacques Derrida (1988) claims that writing is an orphan while Roland Barthes (1975) says that there is no father author. This position will have serious implications because through this denying technique, history is undone as appropriation forces the reader to accept that originality is not the best way to appraise a work.” The force of language is identified as an impetus for each act of imitation, since it is influenced by the socio-linguistic and literary codes of that period. African writers have been observed not to take their language lightly even when they write in foreign language. The influence of their indigenous language is always so strong that one can notice that the writers are only using the foreign language to express African thoughts. Alabi in using the Yoruba language to propagate a foreign religion exploited all the cultural elements of the language.

Barthes argues that the intertext is not necessarily a field of influences; rather, it is a field of figure, metaphors,

thoughts and words. According to Still and Worton (1991), Barthes relishes borrowing some "delicious" words and uses them dexterously to silence his critics, claiming that works are "enriched by social heteroglossia, the historical and social determination of specific languages. Barthes' position is very relevant in explaining intertextual practice among Africans with the rich oral tradition at their disposal. African writers and other creative artists can easily draw from the common pool of African proverbs, metaphors and other rhetorical devices to enrich their productions. This is what Alabi has done in her song.

Still and Worton (1991) also critically examine the positions of Barthes and Gerald Genette. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes coins "cryptogram" and agrees that though a text may be a spontaneous and transparent expression of writer's intention, it must necessarily contain elements of other texts. He proceeds to claim that "cryptogram" is the impossibility of living outside the text. After all, the "book creates meaning and the meaning creates life" He then pronounces the death of the author, and the rejection of authority in every respect. Genette has a more radical approach to the discourse of intertextuality. In his Introduction, *L'architexte* (1979) contends that poetics should be concerned, not with individual text, but with the "architect, "thematic" etc, which determine the nature of any individual text.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The study aimed to deconstruct the subsisting popular reading of Alabi's use of the expression, *Aboru*, *Aboye*, *Abosise*, and after a critical examination of the context and the meaning of that expression, it is established that instead of affirming a belief in traditional mode of worship, the song represents a case of deliberate adaptation of the traditional sacred oral text for the purpose of subverting the original reading in order to project her own religious biases.

The study adopted influence theory as a tool of analysis. The theory is a systematic study of formal models of communicative influence of one person or group on another person or group.

The study established that Tope Alabi's song derived its strength and meaning through the appropriation of the Yoruba metaphors, proverbs and folk-lore to project her Christian world-views. Her creative lies in the originality that she has brought to bear on the hypo text and the relevance of her song as the hypertext to an entirely different socio-cultural milieu.

The study concludes that whatever the source of *Aboru*, *Aboye*, *Abosise*, it is the imagination and organizing skill which produced Alabi's beautiful work that should be used to appraise the song as a work of art. The song is authentic and original as long as the composer is able to exploit the existing traditional materials to express her modern Christian world view. This position is similar to John Winterich (1942, p.34) observation that whatever the sources of Homer's *Iliad*, it was his own imagination and organizing skill which produced the beautiful work that many generations continue to hail as a masterpiece."

It is therefore the recommendation of this study that Alabi and other every creative artist must be conscious of the living heritage of their culture, at the same time, be aware of their own place in it and relationship to it. This relationship can be established when the writer contributes something to the whole system.

Alabi's song derived its strength and meaning through the appropriation of the Yoruba metaphors, proverbs and folk-lore to project her Christian world-views. The strength her lyric also lies in the originality that she has brought to bear on the hypo text and the relevance of her song as the hypertext to the new socio-cultural milieu. The study concludes that whatever the source of *Aboru*, *Aboye*, *Abosise*, it is the imagination and organizing skill which produced Alabi's beautiful work that should be used to appraise the song as a work of art. The song is authentic and original as long as the composer is able to exploit the existing traditional materials to express her modern Christian world view.

REFERENCES

1. Abimbola, W, (2014) *Ijinle Ohun Enu Ifa*, Ibadan: University Press PLC.
2. Alabi, Tope, *The Punch Newspaper*, Lagos, Nigeria in the 11th, July, 2023 edn.

3. Bakhtin, M. (1981) *The Dialogic Imagination*, Austin: University of Texas.
4. Barthes, R. (1975) *The Pleasure of the Text*, New York: Hill.
5. Bayley, J. (1966) *What is Art?* - excerpt from *Toystol and the Novel* in Bloom Harold(ed.) Leo Tolstoy. New York: Chelsea House p.141-152
6. Bloom, H. (1975) *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, London: Oxford Press.
7. Darley, A. (1997). Second-order realism and postmodern aesthetics in computer animation. In J. Pilling (Ed.), *A reader in animation studies* (pp. 251–265). John Libbey.
8. Emerson, R. W. (1883), *Quotation and Originality: Complete Works*, Gorge Routledge and Sons Ltd.Vol.8, pp.170-172.
9. Jefferson, A, (1982) “Russian Formalism” in A. Jefferson and D. Robey (eds) *Modern Literary: A comparative Introduction*, London: Batsford Academic Education Ltd.
10. Gardies, Andre (1998) *Le narrateur sonne toujoursdeux fois*. In Gennette, Gerald, *Introduction a l'architexte*, Paris: Suil
11. Hutcheon, Linda (2006), *A Theory of Adaptation*, New York: Routledge and Frances Group.
12. Eliot, T.S (1972) *Selected Essays*, London: Faber and Faber.
13. Quayson A. (1997). *Strategic Transformation in Nigerian Writing*, Oxford: James Currey, Miliana Press.
14. Renza, L. (1985) "Influence" *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, Lentrinchia Mcluaghghin, New York: Penguin Group.
15. Still, Judith and Worton, Michael (eds), *Intertextuality Theories and Practices*, Manchester University Press, 1991
16. Waugh, P. (Ed.). (2007). *Modern literary theory: A reader* (4th ed.). Arnold.
17. Winterich's, J. (1942) *Introduction to Homer's Odyssey*, New York: The Heritage Press,1942
18. Soyinka, W. (1963). *From a common black cloth: A reassessment of the African literary image*. *The American Scholar*, 32(4), 387–388.
19. Stam, R. (2005). *The dialogics of adaptation*. In J. Naremore (Ed.), *Film adaptation* (pp. 57–76). Rutgers University Press.