

LANREWAJU ADEPOJU AND THE MAKING OF MODERN YORUBA POETRY

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My major contribution is that I modernized and professionalized *ewi*. In other words, I raised it from mere mendicancy to professionalism. Nobody can be identified in Yoruba history as having achieved that feat.

(Adepoju 2006: 14)

Ewi, a modern genre of Yoruba poetry that freely draws on the vast repertoire of traditional oral literary forms and inhabits the intersection between the written and the oral, is gaining ascendancy within the urban space. *Ewi* resulted from the impact of literacy and missionary education on Yoruba poetry and remains an enduring testimony to the capacity of the culture to renew itself.¹ Even though contemporary recognition of the genre dates from the 1960s,² the standard practice has been to create a link between it and the efforts of mission-educated poets among the Eḡba of the nineteenth century.³ *Ewi* is expanding in form and value and continues to attract new practitioners. The fact that it survives in various media – public performance, various print media including newspapers,⁴ the audio disc and performance on radio and television – accounts for the tendency in recent times to characterize it as media poetry (Barber 2007: 163). But for all its uniqueness and dynamism, the genre remains largely understudied. The first and only book-length study of an *ewi* practitioner to date is Olatunde Olatunji's *Adebayo Faleti: a study of his poems* (1982).⁵ The driving force behind a resurgence of interest in *ewi* three decades after the publication of that book has been an interest in the poetics of the genre (Foloruṣo 1999; Nnodim 2002; Okunoye 2010).

A new direction that the renewal of interest in *ewi* may take is to estimate the various ways in which individual *ewi* practitioners have contributed to its making. This becomes necessary because, in spite of the tendency to go as far back as a century in tracking the development of modern Yoruba poetry, the most

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¹As an open poetic form, *ewi* also reflects the dynamic nature of Yoruba culture.

²The name was conferred in the introduction to *Ewi Iwòyí* (Akinjogbin 1969), the first anthology of modern Yoruba poetry, which brought poems written by members of a group known as *Eḡbè Ikéwí Yorùbá* [Yoruba Poetry Society] to the attention of a wider public.

³One of the best known of these poets was Josiah Šobowale Šowande (ca 1839–1936). Among his published works are *Ìwé Kèjì Tí Šòbò A-ró-bí-odù*, edited by E. M. Lijadu; *Awon Àròfò Orin Tí Šòbò A-ró-bí-odù* (Abèokuta: Eḡba Government Printer, 1910); and *Awon Àròfò Orin Tí Šòbò A-ró-bí-odù* (Abèokuta: Eḡba Government Printer, 1917).

⁴*Ewi* have been published in books, booklets, pamphlets and magazines. The poems of Olatubosun Oladapo, for example, appeared in his own magazine *Òkin Olójà* (now defunct). Yoruba newspapers such as *Ìšòkan* and *Yorùbá Ronú* have published *ewi* in recent years.

⁵Faleti has been a major promoter and a privileged practitioner of *ewi*. Apart from pioneering the use of the mass media for and encouraging others to develop their craft, his close association with academics in part accounts for the attention his work enjoys.

remarkable developments in its evolution actually occurred in the last half century. Prominent among these are the use of the mass media in western Nigeria in broadcasting poetry from around 1960, the publication of the pathbreaking *Ewì Ìwòyí* anthology at the end of that decade (Akinjogbin 1969), and the mass dissemination of *ewì* through waxed records, audio tapes and compact discs from the 1970s. The early 1990s also saw the flowering of a form of politically motivated *ewì*. Particular figures have featured in many of these developments and no proper history or study of the form will be complete without duly acknowledging the unique ways in which their visions and practices have shaped the tradition. Adebayo Faleti, Lanrewaju Adepoju, Tubosun Oladapo, Alabi Ogundepo, Yemi Elebuibon, Adelakin Ladebo, Ayo Opadotun and Kunle Ologundudu are the better known of these. Adepoju and Oladapo are, without doubt, the most active promoters of the genre (Barber 2004; Waterman 1990a). Their collections were among the first to appear in the early 1970s to mark the new awakening in *ewì* practice. They were also involved in promoting *ewì* in the media,⁶ and later resigned from their jobs as broadcasters to start their individual companies in Ibadan.

This essay presents Lanrewaju Adepoju as a local intellectual within the Yoruba cultural environment whose poetic career sheds interesting light on Nigerian politics and related social issues. And because Adepoju's poems have not been available previously in English, the appendix to the essay offers a translation of *Ìlú Le* as a sample poem.⁷ The online version of this contribution includes two more of his poems as well as the text of an interview with the poet. Apart from being one of the most visible poets in the *ewì* tradition in the past four decades, Adepoju has also featured prominently in major efforts at renewing the tradition. He is the most articulate promoter of *ewì*, complementing his practice with an exposition of the principles that underlie it. He is at the same time conscious of the sense in which he has enriched Yoruba poetry. Drawing on biographical information, an interview with the poet, and Adepoju's work in various media, the essay draws attention to the dynamics at work in the formation of the knowledge that the poet generates about *ewì*. In turn, this yields insights into the invention of culture in his immediate social environment.⁸

Olatunde Olatunji's *Adebayo Faleti: a study of his poems* has had some influence on the critical reception of *ewì*. Olatunji's effort to relate Faleti to his predecessors and others that came after him enables him to consider comparatively the works of many other poets, including Adepoju. He predicates his interest in Faleti's poetry on what he regards as 'its concern with the timeless and the universal' and the fact that 'his disposition is philosophical' (Olatunji 1982: 116). He consequently adopts his work as the standard: 'Most of the poets after Faleti, especially those who read their poems on radio and television, or perform them on discs, are, however, nauseatingly moralistic or didactic. They see themselves as sages out to expose societal ills or teach lesser men'

⁶They both worked with Adebayo Faleti at Western Nigerian Television/Broadcasting Service where they pioneered the presentation of *ewì*.

⁷I worked with the author to produce this translation.

⁸The political circumstances of Nigeria make this inevitable as Adepoju's work imparts a large dose of social and political commentary.

(Ọlatunji 1982: 122). This critical standpoint has been so influential on the reception of the works of other Yoruba poets that many studies conducted within the context of the formal study of Yoruba poetry tacitly amplify or restate it.⁹ The consequence is that a view of Yoruba poetry that privileges the values and outlook of a particular poet and uncritically applies them to assessing the works of others has been dominant. This, in a sense, denies the fact that the making of *ewì* is the collective achievement of its various practitioners. The result has been a rather subjective outlook, which does not seek a broad-minded understanding of the genre. This is untenable, for no tradition accommodates stasis. The study of Adepọju's work has probably suffered most from this unproblematic transference of values, judging from the works that claim to engage it specifically.¹⁰ An alternative outlook on Yoruba poetry becomes necessary if we seek to appreciate the sense in which the work of each poet is unique. Their individual experiences become relevant if it is the case that their works reflect their circumstances and outlooks on life. In appraising the significance of Lanrewaju Adepọju in the making of *ewì*, this study correlates Adepọju's outlook on the function of the poet with his practice, estimating the effect of his politically charged creative imagination on his social standing and the reception of his work.

Even though Lanrewaju Adepọju has not been an object of any sustained scholarly engagement, various broad studies of *ewì* (Nnodim 2002; 2005; Fọlorunṣọ 2006; Ọlatunji 1982) acknowledge his significance. Adepọju deserves attention in the study of *ewì* because he is one of its most prolific and influential practitioners. He is closely associated with a sub-genre of *ewì* that aspires to social criticism. This has earned him considerable popularity and influence in the Yoruba-speaking part of Nigeria and the anger of successive Nigerian administrations. But for all his output, his work remains understudied and the few critical engagements with his poetry (Fọlorunṣọ 1990; 1997; 2006) concentrate on his later work. This leaves room for a more wide-ranging engagement with his poetry, one that will not only identify phases in his development as a poet but also situate various trends in his work within an evolving poetic vision.

LANREWAJU ADEPOJU – THE MAKING OF AN ARTIST

Adepọju attaches much value to his personal history and is always eager to draw attention to it. It not only chronicles his rise to prominence from a humble background but also highlights the sense in which his literacy despite a lack of formal education has enhanced his influence as a local intellectual. Born into a family of twelve in Okepupa, an agrarian settlement near Ibadan, Adepọju

⁹Interestingly, many of the poems broadcast over the radio during the late 1990s were more moralistic-didactic in content, which probably can be understood in the light of censorship. But this does not imply a negative aesthetic evaluation – in fact, audience members often appreciate *ewì*'s moralizing. On the other hand, a moralistic-didactic undertone is frequently reconfigured into a tool for voicing harsh social and political criticism. Some of the poems by Adepọju discussed in this essay appear to employ a moralistic tone as a template for political criticism.

¹⁰The study of *ewì* has not kept pace with developments in the tradition, the consequence being that many trends in *ewì* practice remain unexplored.



FIGURE 1 Adepọju: the poet at his desk

underscores the fact that he ‘did not go to school at all’ (Adepọju 2006: 1). He attributes this to the poverty of his parents as well as their ignorance about the value of Western education. His effort at self-education was initially stirred by the assistance of Muili Oyedele, his cousin, who took him through the first Yoruba primer. He attributes his literacy in spite of his ‘zero level education’ to his determination: ‘I wove basket, I sold firewood and did odd jobs to save enough money with which I bought my first book, *ABD Aláwòrán* in those days’ (Adepọju 2006: 1). He acquired literacy in Yoruba as a young adult and built on the foundation that this provided for his development. Adepọju was raised in a strict Muslim family. His father was a disciplinarian while his mother was ‘soft and caring’. His acquaintance with basic Yoruba values and immersion in the Islamic faith provided the moral platform for his development, while his interest in Yoruba oral traditions stirred his creative imagination. He attributes his decision to move to Ibadan to his desire to ‘continue my continuing education’ (Adepọju 2006: 1). The city gave him opportunity to acquire various vocational skills and to make use of the Western Nigeria Library, which he considered his second home. Adepọju’s quest for literacy in Yoruba and English is significant in the context of the high premium that the Nigerian society places on certificates and formal education. His testimony as a self-taught man thus constitutes a major component of his story as a local intellectual and enhances his sense of self-worth and leadership, all of which he brings into his vocation as a poet. Literacy in particular empowered him as a modernizing agent in the practice of Yoruba poetry.

Adepoju wrote his first poem entitled *Má ùkà mó* [Desist from doing evil] in 1960 but only had the opportunity to read it on *Tiwa-n-tiwa*, a programme on Western Nigeria Broadcasting Service that Laoye Egunjobi was producing, in 1964. His most valued asset is a deep knowledge of Yoruba lore and facility with language. He makes no claim to inheriting the art of poetry because no member of his immediate family practised poetry in a formal sense. He first encountered poetry within his community and learnt early to appreciate such oral poetic forms as *ijálá*, *ràrà* and *esà* that flourished around him. He cherishes values propagated by his immediate society – such as honesty, incorruptibility and consideration for others – as standards with which he claims to be appraising reality, and the foundation on which his outlook on life and society rests.

Adepoju has spent most of his adult life in Ibadan, working at various times as a houseboy, newspaper vendor and petrol station attendant. He became a proofreader with *Ìmólẹ̀ Òwùrò* [Dawn Light] and *Sunday Sun* newspapers before going into broadcasting. His association with WNBS-WNTV started first as a freelance artist in 1964. He later became a contract officer with the programmes department. In his words: ‘Broadcasting and poetry overlap in a very complementary manner. Through broadcasting, my talent began to show. People discovered me. The Broadcasting House was a tough training ground’ (Adepoju 2006: 6). As broadcaster, Adepoju produced and presented programmes like *Kààárò o ò jùre?* [Good morning], *Tiwa-n-tiwa* [What is rightly ours], and *Bàrikà* [Blessing/greetings]. But it was *Ijínjì Akéwì* [The poet at dawn], aired at 6.15 a.m., that offered him the best opportunity to exhibit his talent. It featured short *ewi* performances and attracted such poets as Adebayo Faleti, Olatubòsun Oladapo and Alabi Ogundepo, who were all associated with the station. Adepoju links his decision to leave broadcasting for a career as a professional poet to a desire to be free from censorship on the part of his employers: ‘They wanted to start publishing them [his poems] with the copyright reverted to the corporation. It was the copyright issue that we disagreed upon, and which led to my eventual disappearance from the broadcasting scene’ (Adepoju 2006: 8). He subsequently established his own recording studio and record label.¹¹

Apart from exposure to the world of books and broadcasting, religion has had a remarkable influence on Adepoju. Though raised in a Muslim environment, he veered for a while into mysticism, identifying with a group known as Servers of Cosmic Light¹² for about twelve years. His dramatic return to Islam in 1985 transformed his work by injecting into it a fundamentalist Islamic vision in the Sunni tradition.¹³ The turning point in his religious orientation came after reading Muhammed Husayn Haykal’s *The Life of Mohammed* (1976) while visiting London. The book stirred the quest for a more fulfilling experience of Islam, transformed his outlook, and accounts for the intense religious commitment he later expressed by founding the Ibadan-based Jam’iyyatul-Ukhuwwatil-Islamitil

¹¹The *Ewi Hit Hot Series*, produced by Lanrad Records Limited and Lanrad Recording Studio, has been his major engagement, but he also runs Wisdom Publications and Adepoju Farming Industry.

¹²This group, in which Mike Omoḷẹ̀yẹ served as Occult Master, also had the late Justice Adewale Thompson as member. Adepoju claims to have been its co-founder.

¹³Adepoju strongly holds that women should not play roles that expose them to the public. They should also be in *purdah*. He therefore considers the idea of women poets as odd.

'Aalamiyah [Universal Muslim Brotherhood], an organization which he serves as its *Amir* or President.¹⁴ This religious experience has marked a radical departure in his work and Adepoju currently combines his calling as a poet with a senior role in the leadership of the umbrella organization of Sunni Muslims in Nigeria.¹⁵

Although Adepoju has emphasized the impact of his return to a conservative form of Islam on his poetic imagination, it is projected only superficially within the broader theistic vision that emerges in his work as a whole. With the obvious exception of poems in which he sets out to propagate particular Islamic doctrines, the vision that pervades his work constantly shifts between the Islamic and the ecumenical, blending Christian, Islamic and traditional Yoruba outlooks. This suggests either a split consciousness underlying Adepoju's work or a deliberate strategy aimed at popularity and relevance in a multi-religious society. His *Oriki Olódùmarè*,¹⁶ a work that conceptually integrates Islamic, Christian and traditional Yoruba theistic visions, testifies to this.

ADEPOJU'S VISION OF POETRY

While Lanrewaju Adepoju makes no claim that earlier Yoruba poets influenced his work, he conceives of his vocation largely in terms dictated by a received tradition of artistic responsibility within the traditional Yoruba society, as well as a moral vision that issues from his religious persuasion. He appreciates poetry as the product of intense contemplation, seeing the poet as both an artist and an influential figure. His vision of poetry emerges from the title of his only published collection of poems, *Ìrònú Akéwì* [The poet's reflection]. He sees his craft as so engaging that the act of creation can only be a product of sustained reflection:

Ojoojúmò lakéwì í ronú
Tironú-tironú lakéwì í rìn
Ádán niyekan òòbẹ̀
Má-yà-mí lalábarò ọ̀dẹ̀ nínú oko
Ìronú lờ́rẹ̀ akéwì ní yẹ̀wù.
 (Adepoju 1972: 1)

[No day passes without the poet engaging in serious thinking
 He is pregnant with thoughts as he moves about
 Just as the bat and the lesser bat are of the same family
 And a hunter has no companion in the wild apart from his ammunition bag
 Deep thoughts are companions of the poet in his inner chamber.]

¹⁴The mosque that bears the name of UMB is located at Old Ifẹ Road in Ibadan.

¹⁵He is currently the national vice-president of the Ahl as-Sunnah organization in Nigeria.

¹⁶*Oriki Olódùmarè* is significant in this regard as it brings together selections from many of Adepoju's *ewì* in praise of God. Such names as *Ọba Mímó* (Holy King), *Ọba Ọ̀go*, (King of Glory) and *Olórun*, which are Christian, thus co-exist with *Olódùmarè*, and *Allah* and *Yarabí*, which are Yoruba and Islamic respectively.

This outlook on the vocation of the poet does not accommodate hasty and thoughtless utterance. In Adepọju's estimation, the business of creating poetry is so demanding that only a few people qualify as poets. As he states in *Ìrònú Akéwì*: '*Ojúlówó akéwì tí mo mò, / Wọ́n kò pọ́gún / Ayédèrú akéwì tí mo mò, / Nwọ́n pọ́ jẹyẹ oko lọ*' (Adepọju 1972: 1) [The genuine poets that I know are fewer than twenty / The not-so-serious ones known to me / Exceed birds in the wild in number]. The rigour that he ascribes to the making of poetry suggests that he subscribes to a vision of poetic craft that recognizes a great deal of artistic discipline fused with social sensitivity. It is no surprise that he also attaches importance to originality. He sets an incredibly high standard for poets in a way that rules out obvious borrowings from other artists:

*Ojúlówó akéwì kan kì í korin olórin
Ọjọgbón akéwì kan kì í jẹgbé rẹ lólè ọ̀rọ̀.*

[No genuine poet appropriates the songs of others
No knowledgeable poet robs others of their lines.]¹⁷

This standpoint in a way poses a question as to what constitutes Adepọju's idea of tradition and the shared heritage of poets. He devotes little attention to theorizing a common tradition on which Yoruba poets draw, but instead clarifies his outlook on poetry and, in the process, expounds his vision of socially situated poetry. The poet who emerges in his theory and practice of poetry is intensely sensitive to the affairs of the immediate society and feels a considerable sense of responsibility to propagate justice, truth and responsible governance: 'The role of the poet is to educate and create public awareness, to monitor political promises and their implementation. It is also to remind the public office holders to be alive to their responsibilities. . . . Whenever one looks at the political situation in Nigeria today, what is happening calls for the intervention of the poet most of the time' (Adepọju 2006: 10). He does not see any potential conflict between religion and culture so long as religion provides the ethical basis for the poetic imagination:

I have never believed that religion and culture are antithetical; rather they are complementary to each other. In Islam, for instance, there is a culture of justice, equity and humility as well as honesty in relation to others and total submission to the authority of Almighty Allah. What is objectionable to Islam is idol worship which some ignorant people think is part of their culture That is why I have waged relentless war against it and I have expressed my religious beliefs about all these. (Adepọju 2006: 5)

In works that are critical of public office holders, Adepọju thrives on the assumption that he is close enough to the populace – from whom he thinks the politicians are alienated – to know their expectations. The poet in his opinion is thus an activist: 'An *akéwì* is a poet who mirrors the society, using events around him to create imagery for entertainment, information, education and admonition

¹⁷This is consistent with the definition of an *akéwì* in the preface to his collection of poems. There is also a sense in which he seeks to express his distinctive vision of the vocation of the poet. Faleti and Ọladapọ have also contributed to this discourse.

as well as counselling, as the case may be He must not sit down and watch complacently when things are not normal in the society' (Adepoju 2006: 10). This is probably the most distinctive aspect of Adepoju's poetics. The poet should be an advocate of the violated, boldly propagate the best of values, and confront whatever constitutes a barrier to realizing the shared desires that flow from these. But the poet constantly creates the impression that his outlook represents the perspective of most members of the society. This underestimates the complicated nature of contemporary society. His way of assigning the poet a special role emerges from the way he accords the poet the power to speak for all and serve as the moral conscience of his society. Adepoju's commitment to the social uses of poetry only partly accounts for his engagement. So long as the chaotic state of affairs that prompts his responses persists, his type of poetry will remain both necessary and popular.

Adepoju's understanding of the mandate of the modern Yoruba poet tolerates the commercialization of *ewi* to make the poet a publicist either for government or for individuals. This equates what the *akéwì* does with the mandate of media organizations and advertising firms. He rationalizes this by maintaining that the vision of the artist as an implacable critic is unjustifiable: 'An *akéwì* does not need to be an opposition party to all programmes and activities. As he is able to rebuke where people misbehave, he should also acknowledge good things and virtues in some decent politicians where such occur If one continues only to see the ugly side of people, everybody will lose respect for one' (2006: 14). Not many will agree with Adepoju on this. In fact, Adeyinka Fọlorunṣọ establishes a link between the commercialization of *ewi* and what he regards as the waning popularity of Adepoju's poetry:

Adepoju's praise-singing tendencies are reminiscent of the oral mode of performance traced to Oyo where court bards performed . . . mainly for entertainment Most of the praise-songs Adepoju composed during the political struggle in Nigeria in 1983 show his bias, and made him lose the confidence and respect of the people he was supposed to serve. (Fọlorunṣọ 1990: 260)

Fọlorunṣọ substantiates his argument by underscoring the inconsistency of Adepoju at this time, especially the ease with which he terminated his support for Bọla Ige of the Unity Party of Nigeria and endorsed the candidature of Ọmọlolu Olunloyọ of the National Party of Nigeria in Oyo State. Many of Adepoju's fans cite the effort of the poet to present the position of the Babangida government in *Àlàyè Ìjọba* [Government's explanation], which came out as a sequel to *Nìbo là ñ lọ?* in 1987 as the very act that made him lose the confidence of many of his admirers – because *Nìbo là ñ lọ?* appeals to many as presenting him at his best.¹⁸

¹⁸While *Nìbo là ñ lọ?* presents the poet as a fearless advocate of the masses, *Àlàyè Ìjọba* presents him as an intimidated and harassed apologist of the same government that the earlier work criticized.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ADEPOJU'S POETIC CONSCIOUSNESS

There is a link between Adepoju's vision of poetry and his development as an artist. He is one of the few poets to have produced *ewi* in various media. If *Ìrònú Akéwì* is to date his only book of poems, he also played a major role in pioneering the production of *ewi* on disc. Rita Nnodim acknowledges that 'Olatubosun Oladapo as well as Lanrewaju Adepoju appropriated the technology of waxed records and later cassettes to produce lengthy poems' (Nnodim 2006: 155). Most of his work therefore circulates on audio tapes in the Ewi Hit Hot Series. This accounts for the broadening of his audience as the tapes penetrate widely in the Yoruba-speaking area. All the same, much of Adepoju's work thrives on the principles that sustain the tradition of *ewi* performance on radio, attaching importance to topicality and aspiring to mass appeal. This bears out the fact that *ewi* is not an ideologically neutral practice but instead articulates popular viewpoints within an imagined Yoruba community. Adepoju's audience constantly shifts between the Yoruba-speaking community in south-western Nigeria and the country at large, depending on the issues he engages. The shift from the fixed notion of his audience that emerges from *Ìrònú Akéwì* – one constituted by literate Yoruba people – to the country-wide appeal of *Èyin Omọ Nigeria* indicates a growing sense of relevance on the part of the poet and testifies to the possibilities of broad engagements in *ewi*.

Adepoju's early poetry, from the 1960s to the mid-1980s, projects Yoruba ethics, culture and religion. *Má mọ̀bùn ọ̀yá* [Never marry a dirty woman], *Èniyàn laṣọ̀ mi* [Humanity is my cloth/covering], *Ọ̀rọ̀ Obìnrin* [Concerning women] and *Ìgbà layé* [Times change] – all of which are in his 1972 collection – propagate Yoruba values relating to womanhood, communality, and the transient nature of life respectively. But other poems in the same collection are critical of practices that the poet considers unreasonable. For instance, *Àwọn Onínààkúnàà* [Wasteful spenders] decries the subtle manner in which *asọ̀ ebi*, the special uniform made for particular social functions among the Yoruba, promotes vanity, waste and flamboyance. Other poems in the collection make efforts to balance issues in a way that projects a liberal outlook. For instance, *Ìwà Ọ̀kúnrin* [Antics of men] and *Má mọ̀bùn ọ̀yá* present counter-arguments that critically appraise the antics of men and women respectively. This has given way to rigid subjectivity in Adepoju's later poetry. *Diẹ̀ Nínú Oríkì Ọ̀sàngó* [A short praise of Ọ̀sàngó], which eulogizes Ọ̀sàngó – the Yoruba god of thunder – is not likely to find a space in his recent work, which is very discriminating in religious terms. His fundamentalist Islamic vision comes out strongly in *Ọ̀rọ̀ Olúwa* [The word of God] (1990), *Takúté Ọ̀lórún* [The divine trap] (1992), *Idájọ̀ Ọ̀dodo* [Righteous justice] (2000), *Ìronùpìwàdà* [Repentance] (1993), and *Oríkì Olódùmarè* [Celebration of the Supreme Being] (2000).

A new phase in the development of Adepoju's work, starting from the 2000s, has seen him deploying his poetry in publicizing achievements of administrations and celebrating dignitaries. Works produced within this practice are normally commissioned and are intended to sell the patrons to the public. Adepoju does not see this as contradicting his professed commitment to objectivity and truth. With regard to his engagement with public office holders, he maintains that the business of government is important enough to attract the attention of poets. He prefaces *Ìjọ̀ba Gbèngà Daniel* with an apology: '*Àwọn aṣájú wa ò ẹ̀ se yọ̀ silẹ̀ nínú*

iṣẹ orin ewi/Sààsà lètò tí wọn ẹ tí ò ní kàn wál/Ohun tí wọn bá fowó wa ẹl/Sèrìà ní kó yẹ gbogbo wal/Òun la fi lè mọ yàtò nínú olóṣèlú/Atòjèlú lásán/Kíró ó sálọ kó kòótọ ọrò' [We cannot discountenance our leaders in ewi/There is hardly any policy that they promote that does not concern us/It is necessary to show concern/About how they manage public resources/That's the way we will know the difference between constructive politicians/And mere riders on the gravy train/So as to dispel lies and reveal the truth] (*Ìjọba Gbéngá Daniel*). In *Ìjọba Tinúbú* [Tinubu's Administration], *Tinúbú Fomọyọ* [Tinubu Excelled] and *Ìjọba Gbéngá Daniel* [Gbenga Daniel's Administration], all recorded *ewi* within this sub-genre, the poet stresses that his impressions of the various administrations are a product of his personal investigations. But this does not stop him from constantly rating his patrons in superlative terms. In praising the accomplishments of Gbenga Daniel as governor of Ogun State, for instance, he says: '*Bó bá jé tí bí wọn tí ń ẹjọbal Àpẹrẹ gidi lOlúgbéngá*' [As far as governance is concerned, the administration of Olugbenga is a model]. Equally, he celebrates Bola Tinubu as governor of Lagos State in *Ìjọba Tinúbú*, saying: '*Tinúbú tayọ àgbá ọfífolỌpolọ tó jùre ló fi ń ṣiṣẹ ire*' [Tinubu is far from being an empty barrel/Because he excellently executes good jobs with a sound mind]. *Tinúbú Fomọyọ* (the full text of which is available in the online version of this article) exemplifies the work of the poet in this new phase in the diligent way it advertises and documents the achievement of the government. The value of this effort for the patrons consists in its ability to reach members of the public, most of whom do not have access to published documents on the track records of governments in their preferred medium.

In spite of the shifts in Adepọju's poetry in terms of concerns and consciousness, the desire to instruct, mobilize and inspire action continues to drive his work. His favourite formula for signing off in his recorded performances – '*Èmi ní Lánrewájú Adepọju/Ti í forin ewi kilọ iwàlṣe kilọ*' [I am Lanrewaju Adepọju/The one who uses *ewi* to guide conduct/warn] – confirms this. *Má ṣikà mọ* probably set the tone for the didactic in his work in the sense that the image of the poet created in the poem pervades his poetry. This has manifested in various forms. He probably uses poetry to propagate partisan political causes more than any other modern Yoruba poet. His work celebrating Ọbafẹmi Awolọwọ, whose political project inspired a pan-Yoruba political consciousness, illustrates this. Christopher Waterman (1990b) has also attributed this role to Yoruba musicians in the Juju tradition. Not content with merely endorsing Awolọwọ's policies, Adepọju went ahead to demonize Awolọwọ's opponents:

*Omọ Yorùbá,
Níbo lẹ tún ń lọ lótẹ yii?
Iwájú lẹ fẹ lọ ní àbérò èyìn lẹ fẹ maa ẹ?
Bẹẹ bá dibò fỌbáfẹmi Awólówò lótẹ yii
Láílái lomọ yín ó wà nínú igbèkùn.*

[Yoruba people,
Where are you heading this time around?
Are you heading forward or have you opted to be left behind?
If you fail to vote for Ọbafẹmi Awolọwọ this time around
Your children may forever be in bondage.]

(*Ọbáfẹmi Awólówò* 1979)

Adepoju's work continues to construct a pan-Yoruba political vision, and the fact that he openly identified with Awolowo's political aspiration may be seen as a way of promoting the Yoruba cause. This in turn has helped him to recommend himself as a mouthpiece of the people. But whatever gain such a project of strategic self-positioning can earn any poet will be lost if he identifies with unpopular candidates. The question that arises is whether a poet should take the risk of participating in partisan politics, considering the damage that this can do to his reputation. Related to this is the question whether professionalizing the practice of *ewi* is consistent with the aspiration of the poet to fairness and objectivity. Further proof of the didactic quality of Adepoju's work is that it propagates ideals that are based on his religious convictions without considering the implication of this for sustaining his audience. For instance, the Islamic vision in his recent poetry does not tolerate traditional Yoruba assumptions about ancestors. He labels those practising traditional Yoruba religions as *aṣẹbo* [idol worshippers] in *Oriki Olódùmarè*.

Adepoju was at his best as an advocate of the Nigerian masses in the days of the military. This is why *Ìlú Le*, which is appended with a translation to this essay, gives some insight into the passion with which he did this. His bold engagement with the military was a way of defending the interest of the common people. This explains why studies of resistance to the military in Nigerian popular culture (Bojunde 2001; Olukotun 2002; 2004; Williams 1999) accord his work considerable attention. The annulment of the 12 June 1993 presidential election in particular provoked the rage of Adepoju and many other Yoruba creative artists, inspiring bold and rousing *ewi*.¹⁹ Adebayo Williams remarks that 'Lanrewaju Adepoju and Gbenga Adewuyi (sic), much lionized as *ewi* poets, were so daring in their personal attacks, so liberal with savage excoriations, that between them they probably cost the Babangida government its remaining authority and legitimacy in Yoruba-land' (Williams 1999: 358). Such other Yoruba poets as Faleti, Oladapo, Adewusi and Ologundudu also responded to the aftermath of the 1993 election. What many of them only engaged under the pressure of the moment is what regularly provokes Adepoju's poetic response. The most remarkable of his works during the military era are *Ìpinnu* [Resolve], *Nibo là ñ lọ?* [Where are we heading?], *Ètómòniyàn* [Human Rights] and *Ìlú Le* [Hard Times].²⁰

Nothing illustrates the shifts in Adepoju's consciousness more than the strategies of self-definition that he adopts, a feature that probably originated in the context of *ewi* performance in the mass media. He signs off his performances at various times as '*Lánrewájú Adépòjù tí í fohùn didùn*' [Lanrewaju Adepoju whose voice is melodious] (*Ọbáfẹmi Awólówò*), '*Lánrewájú, Ọba Akorin/Ajagunlà Musùlùmi, Alààsá-Ìbàdàn/Tó maa ñ forin ewi ẹ ẹ 'kìlò*' [Lanrewaju, the king of singers/Crusader of Islam, holder of the Alaasa title in Ibadan/The one who instructs with *ewi*] (*Kádàrà*), and '*Bòròkìni akéwì tí í korin/Ewì ní tòjò tẹ̀rùn*' [The

¹⁹The election would have led to the installation of Moshood Kashimaawo Abiola, a Yoruba man, as the president of Nigeria.

²⁰Each of these addressed topical and popular issues when they were produced. *Ìpinnu* responded to the annulment of the election of Abiola; *Nibo là ñ lọ?* was addressed to the military administration of Ibrahim Babangida; while *Ìlú Le* came shortly after Ọbasanjo vacated office as military head of state.



FIGURE 2 Adepọju: the poet in his studio

prominent poet who chants [At all seasons] (*Ikú Awólówò*). Signing off has to do with the occasion, and the strategy helps in no small way to authorize the diverse tendencies in his work. This then creates a link between the subject and the form of identity he asserts. Drawing on a multiplicity of identities enables the poet to exhibit the diverse identities that he constructs for himself and to assert his prominence within the circle of Yoruba poets.²¹

LANREWAJU ADEPOJU AND THE *EWI* TRADITION

It is necessary to situate Adepọju's work in the wider context of the making of *ewi* in the last half a century. While Faleti, who started producing *ewi* earlier, acknowledges his debt to both Yoruba and English traditions of poetry in terms of the ideas and conventions that inspired his work (Faleti 2006), Tubọsun Ọladapọ, with whom critics naturally compare Adepọju, draws attention to the immersion of his work in social events. Adepọju, on the other hand, constantly strives to assign social value to both poet and poetry. Thus, while the extension of the possibilities of *ewi* in the works of Faleti and Ọladapọ is mainly formal, it is largely functional in Adepọju's. Adepọju's work enjoys visibility due to its political posture and the poet's assertive nature. These combine constantly to link

²¹Many *ewi* practitioners have since adopted the strategy.

him with his output and publicize his political and religious concerns. He gave practical expression to the primacy of function in his work by eliminating musical accompaniment from his *ewì* right from *Tani ñ bínú* [Who is angry?], produced in 1997, on the basis that it impedes the discursive import of his poetry:

Fifetísí, fifarabalè lewì àsikò yù ñ fẹ́
Ó kojá a ñ lùlù sí
N ò tiẹ̀ lùlù séwì mọ̀ rárá
Ó tó kó yé wa péti ò gbéjì
Eni tó fẹ́ maa gbólù
Kó rebi ilù. . .
Ìlù maa gbélé, n ò nijó jó
Ká retí fi gbọ́ nasia

(*Tani ñ bínú?*)

[The *ewì* of the moment
 Demands attentiveness and patience
 And does not invite dance
 I will henceforth stop drumming
 Because nobody can enjoy the two at once
 Those bent on dancing
 Should seek where it is done. . .
 Away with drumming; I am not keen on dancing
 So we can attentively listen to an important message]

Estimating the imprint of Lanrewaju Adepọju on modern Yoruba poetry necessitates looking into and beyond his work to discover the ways in which his unique concepts and practice of poetry have influenced the tradition. Apart from the fact that he has produced *ewì* in all the media so far adopted for it, Adepọju is one of its most visible contemporary practitioners.²² But his claim to professionalizing *ewì* carries a lot of implications, not least of which is the corrupting influence of commercialization. Adepọju will justify producing *Ìjọba Tinúbú* [Tinubu's administration] and *Àwọn Alágbárí* [The smart ones], which publicize the activities and achievements of Bọla Tinubu and Gbenga Daniels as governors of Lagos and Ogun States respectively, on the basis that they document verifiable achievements of their administrations.²³

Adepọju must take credit for popularizing a vision of *ewì* that assigns it definite social value, especially in that it is capable of correcting, instructing and influencing conduct. Thus, his work consistently adopts relevant images in representing it. For example, *ewì* is '*pàsán*' [whip], '*iwàásù*' [sermon/admonition], and '*òrọ̀ ọgbón*' [word of wisdom] in *Tani ñ bínú?* [Who is angry?]. It is also '*orin*

²²There is considerable consensus that Adepọju and Ọladapọ are the two leading promoters of the genre.

²³Bọla Tinubu was governor of Lagos State between 1999 and 2003 while Gbenga Daniels assumed office as governor of the neighbouring Ogun State in 2003. The two, though belonging to different parties (Action Congress and People's Democratic Party) are represented as Awoists in Adepọju's work and their tenures as governors and policies constitute subjects of the commissioned *ewì* he produced.

ogbón' [song of wisdom] in *Àṣàyàn Òrò* (2009). This outlook on *ewi* implies that Adepòju assigns the poet considerable social significance. The poet in *Awon Alágbàrí* is '*agbenuso fun gbogbo aráyé*' [advocate of humanity]. He places the poet on an elevated moral platform that enables him to inform, correct and educate others, the very element that Olatunji finds objectionable in the works of many practitioners of *ewi* and the basis on which he places Faleti's work in a special category. The fact that Adepòju maintains this vision largely accounts for the passion with which he decries opposition to his work and the antics of his critics. Thus, he dismisses those alleged to be peddling rumours about him as '*aṣiwèrè*' [mad people] in *Àṣàyàn Òrò*.

Adepòju pioneered the use of daring and direct verbal assaults in *ewi*, even though Kunle Ologundudu, a younger practitioner, has since made this the defining feature of his poetry. While the inspiration for this derives from the immunity that Yoruba poets enjoy in correcting erring members of the community, it is also possible to argue that the passion with which he executes it in part derives impetus from the style of sermonizing that his form of Islam sustains. For instance, he dismisses Prophet Temitope Joshua, founder of the Lagos-based Synagogue Church of All Nations as '*oníwàyó igbàlódé*' [modern day fraudster] and calls Olowoporoku, a self-styled Islamic cleric in Ibadan, '*alágbàrí iró, aṣiwèrè*' [dubious one, madman] in *Tani n binú?*

It is significant that consciousness of his audience in Adepòju's work has evolved with the broadening of his focus from an initial concern with his ethnic formation to an engagement with broader national issues. The consequence is that his audience now shifts constantly between his ethnic base and the entire Nigerian nation. He addresses the *Òrò Iṣáájú* [Foreword] to his 1972 collection to '*Èyin Omọ Yorúbá*', a category that evokes the totality of Yoruba people, and thereby invents an audience which coincides with a cultural group. This is probably the earliest pointer to the intense political orientation of his poetry on disc and audio tapes. The strategy of addressing an audience is an index of the public orientation of Adepòju's work. His concern at every point dictates those he makes his primary audience. While *Nibo là n ló?* [Where are we heading?], which blames the Babangida junta for the inflationary trend that trailed the Structural Adjustment Programme in the late 1980s, is addressed to the same administration, *Ikú Awólówò* [The Death of Awólówò] identifies the Yoruba as his main audience. The ease with which he invokes a pan-Yoruba consciousness in order to draw attention to issues bearing on the political fortunes of his immediate cultural community reveals his capacity for inspiring ethnic solidarity. But if the Yoruba constitute a cultural unit in *Ìrònú Akéwì*, much of his later work that also addresses developments to do with their political fortunes – such as the aspiration of Ọbafẹmi Awólówò and Moshood Abiọla, two Yoruba politicians, to the Nigerian presidency – envisions the same people as a political formation. It is no surprise that *Èyin Omọ Nigeria* [Dear Nigerians], which promotes the political project of Atiku Abubakar in the face of perceived political persecution from Olusegun Ọbasanjó,²⁴ indicates a considerable widening of his audience consciousness.

²⁴This particular audio performance is significant because it offered the poet an opportunity to defend the political interest of a politician of Fulani extraction who was allegedly being persecuted by a Yoruba politician.

Ideological shifts do not seem to have had any significant influence on the genres that Adepoju employs. The two major forms on which his early poetry²⁵ drew – *oriki* and satirical songs – remain his favourites. Thus, *Oriki Ójó* [The attributes of Ojo], *Diè Ninú Oriki Šàngó*, and *Kiniùn Olólà Ijù* [Lion – surgeon of the wild] fall back on the *oriki* tradition while *Àwọn Oninààkúnàà*, *Ọ̀rọ̀ Obinrin*, *Ìwà Ọ̀kúnrin*, *Má móbùn saya* and *Àwọn Aláhesọ* are didactically critical. His later poetry seems to thrive on the laudatory and the critical – the main passions that sustain his poetry. The *oriki* convention experiences remarkable extension in *Oriki Olódùmarè*, which expounds his theistic vision. The two genres that dominate Adepoju's practice, in spite of their superficial divergences, ultimately rely on hyperbole, imbuing his work with an uncommon persuasive force. For instance, in a bid to draw attention to the legacy of the Tinubu administration in Lagos State, he says: '*Ìjọba Tinúbù/Ti šètò itójú ojù fún àìmòye èdá*' [Tinubu's administration/Has provided eye-care service to countless people] in *Ìjọba Tinubu*. And in graphically depicting the hardship that people faced under the Babangida regime in *Nibo là ñ lọ?* [Where are we heading?] he says: '*Eyín tó ñ tí ñ jeran lójọ síl Wọn tí ñ jeegun eran*' [Those that could afford meat for meal in the past/Are now only able to afford meatless bones].

It is no surprise that Adepoju sums up his significance as a poet by making a claim to modernizing and professionalizing *ewi*. A way to appreciate this is to compare it with how contemporary Yoruba cultural producers, while competing for the attention of their audience, draw attention to what they consider unique about their work to demonstrate their inventiveness. This is particularly the case with musicians in the genres of *Jùjú*, *Fújì* and *Wákà*, who make claims to inventing variants of the genres. While Adepoju's oeuvre testifies to his significance, the project of modernizing *ewi* is still in progress – and so other poets, too, can draw attention to the ways in which they have extended the tradition. Adepoju's more controversial claim has to do with professionalizing *ewi*. While not many will contest this, knowing that he founded *Egbé Akéwì Yorúbá* [Association of Yoruba Poets], the implications that professionalizing the practice hold for the integrity of *ewi* may make this a liability and not an asset – because the idea of professionalizing *ewi* is likely to imply commercialization.

CONCLUSION

All told, Adepoju remains an influential figure in the making of modern Yoruba poetry, and his ideas about *ewi* are as important as his work. His poetry reveals an initial liberal and secular orientation, since overshadowed by an increasing appropriation of issues of public importance as legitimate subjects for poetic engagement. To explore his work over the past few decades is to gain insight into the vicissitudes of Nigerian public life that it has been exploring. Adepoju's talent is not in doubt, neither is his courage to challenge repressive regimes and ridicule erring leaders. He has suffered more harassment, interrogation and intimidation at the hands of different administrations in Nigeria than any other Yoruba poet. Adepoju's growing association with public office holders, while testifying to *ewi*'s

²⁵The poems under reference are all in his first and only collection of poems, *Ìrònú Akéwì*.

popularity, may also portend danger for his objectivity. The work of Kunle Ologundudu,²⁶ the *ewì* practitioner most indebted to Adepòju's politically charged poetry, exemplifies the damage that submitting the poetic imagination to the transient dictates of political expediency²⁷ can do to the social standing of a poet and the integrity of his art. The best of Adepòju's work²⁸ is devoid of partisan agitation, has enduring value, and articulates the shared expectations of his audience. Though mediated by his discursive affiliations and subjectivity, his *ewì* remain an indispensable source of information for many people in the Yoruba-speaking part of Nigeria. The eagerness with which this category of his audience awaits his responses to major events testifies to the power of his *ewì* and accounts for the influence he continues to have on younger poets.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research on which this study is based was conducted with a British Academy Visiting Fellowship at the Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham between October 2006 and January 2007. An earlier version of the article was presented at the Afrikanistisches Forschungskolloquium of the University of Bayreuth, Germany, on 9 June 2009. The author gratefully appreciates the helpful comments of the anonymous *Africa* reviewers and the assistance of Soji Bisade-Phillips, Babatunde Ekundayo, Daniel Abiodun, Šola Ajibade and Steve Ogunḍipe at various stages of preparing the article.

Appendix

ÌLÚ LE: A SAMPLE ADEPOJU POEM

Lanrewaju Adepòju performed and recorded *Ìlú Le* [Hard times], the text of which follows, in 1980, even though it reacted to experiences in Nigeria in the dying days of the military administration of Oluşegun Ọbaşanjò. Ọbaşanjò handed over to the elected government of Shehu Shagari in 1979, but the nation felt the impact of the economic policies of his administration beyond his tenure. This explains why it could still provoke an angry response from Adepòju many months after another government had assumed office. Ọbaşanjò emerged as military head of state after the death of Murtala Muhammed in a coup on 13 February 1976. He was until then the deputy of the assassinated leader. Though his administration endeavoured to build infrastructure, the economic prosperity of the period also ushered in inflation. In spite of the prosperity brought by the oil boom, there was a brief period of recession from 1978 to 1979, although the economy recovered in 1981. Restrictions that the Ọbaşanjò regime placed on imports, mentioned in the poem, directly affected economic activities and the lives of ordinary people – and Adepòju's concern here is to articulate the plight of the masses.

Ìlú Le represents Adepòju's work in many ways. For him, the poet's ability to respond promptly and boldly to the plight of the masses is an index of his worth

²⁶Ologundudu seems to have carried unrestrained verbal assaults and partisan political agitations to an extreme. *Ìrínkerindò òşèlú* [Political adventures], *Şé ẹ dāwọn mọ?* [Do you recognize them?] and *Ìkú alágbára* [The death of the mighty] are typical of his work.

²⁷This, ironically, is becoming more and more apparent in his poetry.

²⁸This does not necessarily refer to a particular phase in his work.

and ability. Apart from being topical, the poem also relies on caustic verbal assault, exaggeration and repetition. Contrary to the trend in his later works, the poet avoids direct reference to the political actors behind the events that he is reflecting on in *Ìlú Le*. Overt references such as we encounter in *Níbo là ñ lẹ?*, a reaction to the inflationary trends under the Babangida regime in 1987, are absent here. But *Ìlú Le* nevertheless creates the impression that the Oḅasanjọ regime was not acting in the best interests of the populace. This readiness to demonize Nigerian public office holders has endeared Adepoju's work to his audience.

As in every case of translation from 'deep Yoruba', the English translation of the poem, even though it is the work of the poet, is at best a shadow of the original. Apart from the sense that the lines convey, tonality, which plays an important role in Yoruba and injects a great deal of poetic value into most genres of Yoruba poetry, is lost in the process of translation. Yoruba is a tonal language and many genres of Yoruba poetry consequently strive to achieve the harmony of sense and sound. This disappears in the process of translating Yoruba poetry into English. As Niyi Oṣundare (2000: 15), a poet of Yoruba extraction using the medium of English, notes,

while English is a stress-timed language, Yoruba is a syllable-timed one operating through a complex system of tones and glides. In this language, prosody mellows into melody. Sounding is meaning, meaning is sounding. The music, which emanates from the soul of words is an inalienable part of the beauty of the tongue. Tone is the power-point, the enabling element in any Yoruba communicative event.

What the English rendering of the poem retains is the raw anger of the poet and the passion with which he articulates the suffering of the masses. Even though Adepoju originally transcribed and translated the poem, I had to intervene each time it became necessary to make certain expressions reasonably intelligible to people who cannot access the texts in Yoruba. To this extent, some measure of collaboration between the poet and the present researcher facilitated the presentation of the texts of Adepoju's poetry in translation in the print and online versions of the article. The fact that most of the lines of the translated version of *Tinúbú Fọmọyọ*, in particular, are cast in passive sentences is testimony to his effort at approximating the syntactic structure of the poem in the original version.

ÌLÚ LE¹

Ìlú le!
Ó wáá dàbí oró didá
Gbogbo aráyé wọ gude

HARD TIMES!

Hard times!
As if by a deluge of evil
Everyone is in trouble

¹This literally translates as 'the land/town is hard/tough'. It is a standard way of expressing all kinds of difficulty, ranging from hardship that individuals experience to shared discomfort, as expressed in this instance. The poem is topical and this is the case with most of Adepoju's recorded performances. Titles of Adepoju's poems always stir the curiosity of his fans, who always look forward to his reactions to major developments in the country. The title of each audio production normally hints at the discursive bias of the poet.

Èdá mọ nàín!	And everyone now cherishes common ninepence! ²	
Ogun owó mǎráyé, ayé figbe ta!	Humanity groans under financial crisis!	
Èlùbọ Náírà kan ijósí wá di Náírà méfà!	The yam flour measure once sold for one Naira now sells for six! ³	
Nnkan mà dé o! Òrọ tá a ẹbí yòò bágbò ló béwúré	This is real crisis! The problem intended for the ram now affects the goat	
Ayé kan gógó Gbogbo 'lu gbẹkan! Ó rú wa lójú, ẹ wobi táyé dorí kọ	Life has indeed turned sour The whole land is in discomfort! We are confused. See which way the world has turned	10
Àşògbon tí wọn n da nígbà kan re e Tí gbogbo ará ilú ò tètè mọ.	So this is the trick being hatched sometime ago Which the people never took notice of.	
Èké é wọn, wọn tilẹkùn mǎjé Ará ilú ò rówó ná	The deceivers locked up money And the populace is cash- strapped	
Ibii wọn fẹẹ gbé e gbà, Yoo sojú u wa; Àwọn ẹni-ibi tó kówóo wa je	We shall at last discover their intent; Evil men who embezzled our money	
Tí wọn múlé ayé le Àwọn ẹni àbùkù n kowée sí, Ti wọn o si rábùkù.	And made life unbearable Are preparing the ground for their shame And would end up disgracefully.	20
Àwọn jaguda ọgá ni wọn gbimọ pọ Wọn pínwó mowó Wọn ẹ Naira lófò dé góngó	The rogues conspired And shared money Doing incalculable harm to the Naira	
Wọn kó kálukú dà sínú isà Àwọn ẹbọra, jẹgúdu jẹrá gbogbo À ní wọn dorí àpò kòdí tán Kí wọn o to kúrò níbẹ!	And cast everyone into a pit Those monsters, parasites all Upturned state coffers ⁴ Before leaving! ⁵	
Bámú-bámú ni wọn yó Àwọn kò bikítà pébi n pèmi-ìrẹ;	Fully fed They are not bothered that you and I are starving;	30
Àgunlá ni gbogbo wọn n dá, Báráyé tí n lọgun;	They do not care Even as the masses groan in want;	

²This suggests a period of extreme hardship.

³The Naira is the Nigerian currency. Yoruba use the cost of essential food items as index of abundance or hardship within any dispensation.

⁴This is a euphemism for looting, the emptying of the public treasury.

⁵Vacating office.

Àwọn wòn bílíkí, oníbàjé èdà	The gluttonous, evil creatures in power
Wọn kówó jẹ tán	Emptied the treasury
Ìlú kànjàngbòn!	And the whole land is in trouble!
Ìlú le!	Hard times!
Gbogbo èyàn ló n sàròyé	Everyone is complaining
Ará ilú kò lówó lówó	The people are starved of money
Ení lélùbò kò lè rẹran	Those who have yam flour lack meat ⁶
Olówó ní n jẹja	Only the rich can afford to buy fish
Èyàn pàtàkì ló n jẹ timòtì!	Only VIPs can have access to tomatoes!
Nnkan mà n kán o!	Terrible things are happening!
Òpòlòpò ì sòwò ló ti kógbá àróbò sílé	Many traders have gone out of petty business
Ení láṣọ méjì n tàkan jẹun!	Those with two dresses are selling one for food!
Ayé wá nira tó jẹ pé	And life has become so difficult that
Ká máa dáále ni	It is hard to describe
Gbogbo ojà ló gbówó lérí	Prices of all goods have skyrocketed
Owó ò pilẹ sí lówó bí ẹ tilẹ rọjà ọpọ.	And there is even no money to buy whatever is available.
Wọn ti sa èyí tó pọn jẹ lààrin ọgèdè	The ripe bananas have been eaten
Pàpàndúdú ni wọn sèkù sílẹ fàráyé!	Only unripe ones are left for the people!
Wọn kówó jẹ tán	Having embezzled all the money
Wọn sòfin inira	They then passed unbearable legislation
Káyé ó le máa le!	So as to make life very hard!
Àwọn èyàn tó yẹ kó ríjää Sàngó	Those who should have been struck dead by Sango's lightning ⁷
Tí a jọ tún n gbénú ilú pò!	Still live with us in cities!
Àwọn èyàn tó yẹ ká tà ká ràtùpà	Those who should be auctioned to purchase a lamp

⁶Yam flour is used to make *àmàlà*, a thick paste that is the staple of the Yoruba, especially in the Oyo area. Eating *àmàlà* without stew suggests an extreme state of desperation. Eating a normal meal without meat in this context suggests poverty.

⁷Sango, originally a king in the Old Oyo Empire, is the Yoruba god of thunder. He is believed to have the power to afflict the unjust with thunder in executing vengeance.

Tí wọn tún n tanná wò lògànjò;	Are still being admired in the thick of night; ⁸	
Ọmọ aráyé ẹ ò régbìn tó nípon Àwọn tí wọn jẹran gidi tán	Have you ever seen such insult Those who having consumed the real meat	
Tí wọn fún wa léegun ẹran!	Left only the bones for us to eat!	60
Tarẹnijẹ Ọyinbó la rí là n wí	We once complained about European exploiters	
Tí wọn tún ga 'Walai-talai!' Àwọn a-gbà-lòwọ-ọ-mèèrì	<i>Walai-talai</i> ⁹ theirs is worse! Those who heartlessly extort the poor	
Wọbià tó gbóná Aláinítijú lásán Wọn kówó jẹ tán Ìlú kò fara rọ ayé kẹran! Àrùn àilówó n sáyé bí àarẹ!	Reckless gluttons Shameless and mean people Their embezzlement has left the land in agony! Poverty like a sickness afflicts the people!	
À á tí i şerú èyíí sí o o o? Gbogbo èyàn ló n kígbé	How do we manage this crisis? All the people everywhere are grumbling	70
Pé nkan kò dán mórán Iléyá dé, ẹnu ọbẹ sélé lẹ sù u!	That all is not well At Eid-el-Kabir ¹⁰ there were no rams to slaughter!	
Ìgbàgbọ ẹ Kérésì láirówó ná	Christians celebrated Christmas in lack	
A dọdún tuntun kò sí `yàtò!	And the New Year dawned with no remarkable change!	
Ìlú le! Gbogbo ojà tó ti n wólú	Hard times! All imports that once flowed in <i>en masse</i>	
Wọn ní ki wọn ó má wólú mó Káyé ó lè báa túbọ le	have since been banned So that life would be much harder	
Ayé wáa le! Wọn kò bèşù-bẹgbà Wọn gbégi dínà ọlà fàráyé	And so life became very tough! They rarely care	80
Olówó kò rọjà rà.	Placing hurdles in people's economic paths	
Gbogbo ojà tí wọn sọ pé wọn fòfin dè wònyíí	Even the rich could find no goods to buy.	
Dájúdájú gbogbo wọn ló ti bẹbùrú wólú	All the banned imported goods Find their way in illegally	

⁸This Yoruba expression refers to worthless people who overestimate their significance. Its use here indicates indignation at the quality of Nigerian leaders.

⁹This is an exclamation derived from Arabic affirming that what is about to be said is true.

¹⁰The feast at which Muslims re-enact the sacrifice of a ram by Abraham. In the world of the poem, it represents a major Islamic obligation that the state of the nation did not allow Muslims to discharge.

Aṣọ tí wọn fòfin dè layaa wọn ñ ró kiri	Their wives go about flaunting the very clothes that are banned from importation	
Gbogbo ilú ló doní-fàyàwọ	Turning the masses into desperate smugglers	
Wọn kọ wọn lólè jìjà!	They were taught robbery!	
Wọn ti kilọ fún gbogbo ‘báńki’	They warned all banks	
Wí pé kí wọn o ma yáńiyan lówó mó	Not to grant loans anymore	
Káyé ó lè báa túbọ̀ lẹ	To make life much tougher	90
Ayé tún lẹ!	Life indeed became tougher!	
Ọba Ọkè ló yẹ ká tẹwọ̀ àdúà sí	We can only plead with the king above ¹¹	
Kó bá wa sọ̀lú dẹ̀rẹ̀.	To help us ease the situation.	
Ọ̀pọ̀ nínú alágbàṣe igbàlódé ló ńṣiṣẹ̀	Many contractors	
Tí kò rọ̀wó ńṣẹ̀ gbà lówọ̀ ijọba	Have not been paid for jobs done for government	
Owó wọn gan-an ni	Money is really scarce	
Èké araa wọn	These deceivers	
Wọn sọ̀pọ̀lọ̀pọ̀ èyàn tó lówó di mọ̀kúnnù.	Have turned many who were rich into paupers.	
Ìlú lẹ!	Hard times!	
Wọn bọ̀nà jẹ̀ fún gbogbo onítítà-rírà pátá	They frustrated traders in general	100
Wọn gbégi dínà ẹ̀nu ọ̀mọ̀ aráyé pọ̀!	And hindered all from sustaining themselves!	
Ááyá ti bẹ̀ sí' lẹ̀ ó ti bẹ̀ aré	The monkey has landed and immediately sped off! ¹²	
È jẹ̀ ká gbàdúà!	Let's all pray in earnest!	
Wọn kówó jẹ̀ lórílẹ̀ èdè yí o!	Indeed people have embezzled in this country!	
A fi jàgùdà sílẹ̀ owó	We made a rogue our treasurer	
A ní kò ní í kówó ná;	And assumed he would not squander money; ¹³	
A há ñ wí ní?	What exactly are we saying?	
Ìlú kò ti ṣe ní i lẹ?	Why won't there be hardship in the land?	
Àwo kò mọ̀ pọ̀ọ̀ jata	The cooking pot never dreamt of tasting pepper	
Àwo dọ̀rí iná àwo ñ saró sìn!	Little wonder it emits hot sweats when on fire!	110
Owó tọ̀mọ̀ ẹ̀lòmí ọ̀ lè rí lọ̀dún	What many do not earn in a year	

¹¹Yoruba traditional rulers are called *Oba*. ‘*Oba òkè*’, that is, ‘the king that is above’, is a reference to God who is spatially located above earthly kings and dominions and is also superior to them. He can overrule on any matter on which earthly rulers have given their judgement. The appeal to God in this case is a way of ridiculing the erring Nigerian leaders.

¹²This is a Yoruba saying that indicates that something was done with despatch.

¹³The military did not need the consent of the people to come to power and retained power by force.

Un ni wọn n gbà lóòjò	Is what they take on a single day	
Wọn n gbénuḷé tó dàbí ààfin	They live in palatial mansions	
Ohun tí wọn bá pe kò ẹ̀ ló n ẹ̀	Whatever they decree is law	
Àwọn ẹ̀jẹun ire	They eat good food	
Wọn pòkọ̀ iyà fàráyẹ	But offer the masses meals of agony ¹⁴	
Wọn ní ká má bá kádàrà jà.	Asking us to be content with our destiny.	
Wọn wò sùn-ùn sùn-ùn níjòsì	The best they could think of the other time	
Wọn la títi kò níí pé ẹ̀ hú	Was to construct bad roads	
Bí wọn sanwó fàlágbaṣe	And as they paid contractors their legitimate due	120
Wọn a si pínwó lógboṣogba	They would still share the money in equal proportions	
Ìgbà tówó alágbàṣe ò bá tó	And when the contractors are not paid in full	
Wọn a la títi lájàmbàkù.	They make substandard roads.	
Bíi ká wò sùn-ùn sùn-ùn	They often in their wickedness	
Bíi ká kòlẹ̀ tẹnikan ò níí gbẹ̀	Construct houses that are unfit for habitation	
Kówó kíkójẹ ò lè baà rọgbo	So as to ease embezzlement	
Wọn ti nàwó epo gbẹ̀	They had squandered Petrodollars	
Kó tó o di pé a fura	Before we woke up from slumber	
Àsé wọn ò yàtò sòlè tí n fi mọtò dánà !	They are indeed not different from highway robbers!	130
Àwa kò tètè mọ̀ pé wọn o yàn wá ẹ̀ ni	We least expected they would cheat us ¹⁵	
Gbogbo mẹ̀kúnnù wáá gbórí kalẹ̀	So all the poor offered their heads as anvils	
Wọn n pàgbọn lóríi wa	Upon which they then smashed coconuts ¹⁶	
Wọn n kówó wa ẹ̀	They were busy stealing our money	
Wọn n kí wọn pé: 'È seun'!	And people were thanking them for it!	
Àsé bó bá di nígbèyin-gbéyin	Not knowing that in the end	
Omọ̀ tálákà ní ó jiyà ọ̀rọ̀.	Children of the poor would suffer for it.	

¹⁴This is at best a rough rendering of the original – *ẹ̀kọ̀ iyà*. *Ẹ̀kọ̀* is a staple meal made from maize. *Ẹ̀kọ̀ iyà* (literally, meal of agony) simply suggests cruel punishment. The basis for the expression is probably the fact that the verb that goes with consuming a meal (*je*, eat) is also what goes with taking a punishment in Yoruba (*je iyà* – ‘eat’ punishment). The poet seems to suggest that the military regime at this time was deliberately dispensing hardship to the people.

¹⁵The poet does not separate his voice from the collective voice of the violated masses. This is one reason why his work is popular.

¹⁶This is often taken as an expression of folly and lack of discernment.

Ílú ti wáá bèrè sí í le	Things had started to get unbearable	
Ká tóo mọ̀ 'yàtò nínú-un kījipá ati awọ̀ ẹran	Before we realized khaki's difference from leather	
Gbẹgẹde ti gbiná tán	The inferno had already got out of hand	
Ká tó máa wómi kiri	Before we started searching for water	140
Àgùtàn sì ti jògì tán	And the sheep had eaten the maize flour	
Ká tóo máa ké kái mágùtàn!	Before we started scaring the sheep! ¹⁷	
Ìgbà tí mo fi kéwí bí ikilò níjòsì òkò?	What with my past poem, depicting the situation?	
È ráyé àbẹ̀ ò ráyé?	Do you now see what has happened?	
Ṣóhun tó délẹ̀ yìi kò kan gbogboo wa?	Are we not all affected?	
Wọ̀n já takọ̀-tabo sọ̀lọ̀pọ̀n	They betrayed the confidence of both male and female	
Ojú dá poo!	We are now helpless!	
Ìkamùdù kú sínú ilé òòrùn	The black ant having died, left behind a pungent odour	
Ó wá dişẹ̀ àdúà!	Prayer remains the only antidote!	
Sùgbọ̀n a mọ̀niyàn diẹ̀ nínú-un wọ̀n	But we do know of some among them	150
Tí kò ní màdàrú lówó	Who hate fraudulent practices	
Wọ̀n dúró ti naira	They were in charge of the Naira	
Wọ̀n kò kó o jẹ	But refused to steal	
Bí wọ̀n pariwo ó léwu fún wọ̀n	It was risky for them to raise any alarm	
Ènu-un wọ̀n kò gbọ̀rọ̀	They dared not speak at meetings	
Wọ̀n kéré níye púpọ̀ nínú ìgbìmọ̀.	They were the minority in the council.	
Ohun ọ̀rẹ̀è mi bá kúkú n jẹ	'Whatever my friend is eating I will eat with him'	
Máa bá a jẹ̀ ẹ̀	Does not apply in the case of debts	
Ọ̀rọ̀ gbèsè kọ̀		
Ká fojú silẹ̀ ká wòran ló dára	Our best bet is to silently watch events	160
Àwọ̀n èyàn tó şayé báyií	Those responsible for this state of affairs	
Wọ̀n rugì oyin	Will be in trouble! ¹⁸	

¹⁷This metaphorical rendering of the experience is apt and is a form of collective self-indictment.

¹⁸This does not carry the graphic value of the Yoruba rendering which suggests carrying a tree covered by bees on the head.

Wọn dáràn mọ̀ràn!	They have committed many crimes!	
Ilẹ̀ ó kúkú ga jù wọn lọ nígbà tó bá yá	Nemesis will at last catch up with them	
Ó tọ́ kí wọn ó jọ̀ bàtà ẹ̀san	They're all due for a dance of vengeance ¹⁹	
Káyé ó fi wọn ọ̀hun táyẹ̀ bá ń firúú wọn ẹ̀	So people can deal with them as with their likes	
Bíná jọ̀ lóko, Màjàlà ọ̀ṣòfófó	Whenever a bushfire does occur The grass-soot quite readily betrays it	
È jẹ́ ká mú sùúrù.	Let's just be patient.	
Ojúú wọn o ja a Àbùkù tó nípon ní ó kàn wọn	They'll all live to regret it And suffer unmanageable disgrace	170
Wọn ti tọ̀ sílẹ̀ àna poo!	As they have messed up before their in-law! ²⁰	
Wọn ti forí kómí ajá lebe-lebe!	They've smeared their heads with dog faeces!	
Wọn ti tọ̀rọ̀ àbùkù lẹ̀wọ̀ ará ilú	They've asked for insult from the masses	
Wọn fẹ̀sẹ̀ kómí Èṣù!	Soiling their feet with devil's dung!	
A gbọ̀ pé wọn fi bàlùú kówó lọ sẹ̀yin-odi	We hear they airlifted money abroad	
Àṣírí wáá tú Wọn ẹ̀ bárá ilú kò mọ̀hun tí ń lọ̀ ní	And the secret burst open They thought the people were ignorant of events	
È máa dà á rú	You may continue to destabilize the land	
Ọ̀ba lókè ó fààtò tò ó	The Almighty would restore it at last	180
Ọ̀jò kúkú ń bọ̀ lònà.	The rain of vengeance is threatening.	
È kò mọ̀ pọ̀mọ̀ ilẹ̀ iwé tó lóyún	Don't you know that the secret of a pregnant school girl	
Tó ń gba bẹ̀lítì mọ̀nú	Who conceals her state beneath the belt	
Bó pé bó yá: Ìkùn gbọ̀dọ̀ taari aṣọ̀ Ọ̀rọ̀ tí ọ̀ gbàkánjù á gba sùúrù.	Will soon be revealed: The stomach must protrude A matter not that urgent demands patience.	
Èyin wọ̀bià tó kówó ná	You gluttons who siphoned our money	
È má ọ̀fíra!	Make haste!	
È ọ̀yíí tán	You did this much	

¹⁹This is not a voluntary act but a way of paying for their wrongs.

²⁰The Yoruba believe that this is one of the worst experiences one can have because people naturally tend to want to impress their in-laws.

È ẹ̀ ẹ̀ bọ̀wọ̀ kò ní i tẹ̀ yín?	Thinking you would not be caught?	190
Bí ẹ̀ bá jí	When you wake up in the morning	
È le wẹ̀ nínú àgbo	You may have a ritual bath	
Bóyá ọ̀ṣẹ̀ yímíyímí ẹ̀ é fọ̀ṣọ̀	Perhaps it's possible to wash clothes with beetle's foam	
Bóyá ẹ̀ mọ̀niyàn tó fọ̀dó àkókó gúnyán	Or perhaps you know of one that pounds yam in woodpecker's mortar	
Tó tún tapo alákan sọ̀bẹ̀.	And uses crab-oil to cook his soup.	
A gbọ̀ ná	We do hear	
A gbọ̀ ná	And hear properly	
Ọ̀rọ̀ ní kókó o	Every issue has its cause	
Ọ̀rọ̀ tí n ẹ̀ nílẹ̀ yí kò ẹ̀ é dákẹ̀ sí	The issue on hand is not one to be silent about	
Ará gbẹ̀ ilú kò rọ̀gbọ̀	People have been financially stressed, and the country is not at peace	200
Aráyé n pariwo, ó ká wọ̀n lára	They are crying out, they feel concerned	
Ọ̀tọ̀kùlú ẹ̀ gbọ̀rọ̀ yí yẹ̀wò.	You elders and wise ones, deliberate over this issue.	
Ìjọba iwòyí ní ká kẹ̀ gbàjarè sí létí	We call on the government	
Kí wọ̀n ó má gbàgbé ilú	Not to forget the citizenry at large;	
Kí s̄is̄ẹ̀-s̄is̄ẹ̀ ó yé e rí bí ọ̀lẹ̀;	So that diligent workers don't live like idlers;	
Àbí gbogbo ọ̀s̄is̄ẹ̀ tí wọ̀n n dà silẹ̀ yí ñkọ̀?	Or what about those workers now being retrenched?	
Sé 'rúu wọ̀n kò ní i bọ̀kèlẹ̀?	Should they live in hunger?	
Ìjọba Àpapọ̀, ó yá, ẹ̀ kówó síta!	Federal Government, release money! ²¹	
Ilú n kẹ̀, ẹ̀ má jọ̀rọ̀ ó yíwọ̀	People are crying, do not allow things to get out of hand	
Bó bá fi n pẹ̀ jù bẹ̀ẹ̀ lọ	Further delay may mean a worse situation	210
Ohun tó léwu ní	It portends grave danger.	
Ọ̀jà tí ẹ̀ kúkú fòfin dè wọ̀nyí le kóbá Nàìjíríà.	The ban on imports may adversely affect Nigeria.	
Àní e fagi lérí òfin ikà	Repeal inconsiderate decrees	
Kí ẹ̀ jẹ̀ kọ̀jà ó wọ̀lú	That imports may flow into the country	
Níbií títà rírà layé tí í jẹ̀un	People earn their living by buying and selling	

²¹The poet adopts the language of the common people who constitute his audience. The insinuation here is that government can cause money to circulate to ease problems.

Òṣìkà ní í gbégi dánà òlà fàráyé	Only the callous debar people from making wealth	
È ṣìnà fọjà.	So unban the importation of goods.	
Ọba tó je, tílúú rójú ọba ni;	We identify a king by the character of his reign;	
Bòmọ èyàn kan tún ọba, tílúú kò rójú, ọba náà ni	Be it peace or anguish	
Ìtàn-an wọn ní í yapa;	Only their respective histories would differ;	210
Gbogbo àrà tí kálukú bá filú è dá	Whatever one makes of one's country	
Dandan ni pé kó wòwé itàn.	Cannot escape the attention of history.	
Níbo la dé dúró, ẹ wí fún wa?	Where exactly are we now? Let us know	
È tètè ṣètò	You had better make very urgent arrangements	
Kí ẹ jẹ kí naira ó wòlú	And allow the Naira to flow freely	
Báyé ti wà yíi ò lọ	Life at present is unbearable	
Gbogbo ọmọ aráyé lará kan	All the people are touchy	
Èyàn tó bá gòkè,	Whoever finds his way to the top	
Kó rántí mẹkúnnù.	Should remember the poor.	
Nijọọ mẹkúnnù bá fàrigá	The very day the poor decide to revolt	220
Olówò ò gbádùn mọ;	The rich will cease to enjoy;	
È má jẹ á dákà wọn kọ	We can't be aloof	
È tójuu wọn káyé ó lè dára	Meet their needs so that life will be pleasant	
È tètè ṣètò	Make haste to	
Káyé ó máa dán fún mẹkúnnù.	Work out a plan to make life bearable for the masses. ²²	

NOTE

Supplementary material accompanies this paper on the Journal's website (<http://journals.cambridge.org/afr>).

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²²This sums up the poet's concern.

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ABSTRACT

This essay presents Lanrewaju Adepoju, whose work and ideas have been very influential on contemporary Yoruba poetry, as a local intellectual. In estimating his contribution to modernising *ewi*, an open poetic form that inhabits the interface between the oral and the written, the essay draws on biographical information, an extensive personal interview and relevant textual illustration. It correlates Adepoju's vision of poetry with the development of his creative

consciousness and draws attention to aspects of his poetics and politically implicated poetry that deserve closer engagement. The article also offers a translation of a sample poem by Adepọju, while the online version of the essay offers more of his poems as well as an interview.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet essai présente Lanrewaju Adepọju, dont les travaux et les idées en tant qu'intellectuel local ont considérablement influencé la poésie yoruba contemporaine. S'appuyant sur des données biographiques, sur un long entretien individuel et sur des illustrations de texte pertinentes, il évalue sa contribution à la modernisation de l'*ewi*, une forme poétique ouverte à l'interface entre l'oral et l'écrit. Il fait une corrélation entre la vision qu'avait Adepọju de la poésie et le développement de sa conscience créative, et attire l'attention sur certains aspects de sa poétique et de sa poésie politiquement engagée qui mériteraient un intérêt plus profond. L'article offre également la traduction d'un des poèmes d'Adepọju à titre d'exemple, tandis que la version en ligne de l'essai propose d'autres de ses poèmes, ainsi qu'un entretien.